

STUTTERING

AND THE BILINGUAL CHILD

How Does Bilingualism/Second-Language Learning Affect Fluency? In young children who are bilingual or second-language learners, stuttering may be noticed when:

- The child is mixing vocabulary (code mixing) from both languages in one sentence. This is a normal process that helps the child increase his skills in the weaker language, but may trigger a temporary increase in disfluency.
- The child is having difficulty finding the correct word to express his/her ideas resulting in an increase in normal speech disfluency.
- The child is having difficulty using grammatically complex sentences in one or both languages as compared to other children of the same age. Also, the child may make grammatical mistakes. Developing proficiency in both languages may be gradual, so development may be uneven between the two languages.
- Adding a second or third language between the ages of three and five years of age may cause stuttering to become more severe. However, this may be the case only when: (1) the child is experiencing difficulties in her first language, (2) one language is used more than the other or, (3) the child resists speaking the additional language.

Recommendations for Parents No evidence has been found to suggest that speaking two languages in the home since birth causes stuttering. In fact, this may be the best time and the best way to input a second language. If your child is bilingual and he or she begins to stutter, we recommend the following:

- Monitor the stuttering in the child's strongest language; that is generally where more stuttering will be noted.
- Follow the recommendations for stuttering prevention outlined in other Stuttering Foundation publications, which can be found at www.stutteringhelp.org.
- If stuttering persists for more than six months, see a speech pathologist specializing in stuttering.
- Avoid mixing vocabulary words from both languages when speaking to the child. In other words, speak one language at a time to the child.
- Allow the child to mix vocabulary in both languages, but then model the word in the primary language. Don't ask the child to repeat your model.

There is no indication that teaching your child another language causes stuttering. Additional languages are often introduced around age four, which can be a critical age for both language learning and stuttering. However, if your child's language is not developing appropriately for his/her age or you notice the beginning signs of stuttering, you may want to hold off on the introduction of an additional language until after age six. The literature suggests that introducing a second language as late as or even after grade six can result in proficiency.

If your child is a second-language learner or a bilingual second-language learner and he or she begins to stutter, we recommend the following:

- Help your child with new/difficult words by prompting the word when you know what it is. For example, you can prompt your child by giving the first sound of the word, or by providing a cue about the word's meaning.
- When talking with your child, avoid mixing words from both languages in the same sentence or sentences.
- Allow your child to use words from both languages when he is speaking.
- When you notice your child having difficulty with grammar or vocabulary in the stronger language, it is important to repeat what the child is saying in a simpler form. Continue until the child is able to formulate longer sentences easily.

7 TIPS FOR TALKING WITH YOUR CHILD

1. Speak with your child in an unhurried way, pausing frequently. Wait a few seconds after your child finishes before you begin to speak. Your own easy relaxed speech will be far more effective than any advice such as “slow down” or “try it again slowly.” For some children, it is also helpful to introduce a more relaxed pace of life for awhile.
2. Try to increase those times that you give your child your undivided attention and are really listening. This does not mean dropping everything every time she speaks.
3. Asking questions is a normal part of life – but try to resist asking one after the other. Sometimes it is more helpful to comment on what your child has said and wait.
4. Help all members of the family take turns talking and listening. Children find it much easier to talk when there are fewer interruptions.
5. Use descriptive praise to build confidence. An example would be “I like the way you picked up your toys. You’re so helpful,” instead of “That’s great.” Praise strengths unrelated to talking as well, such as athletic skills, being organized, independent, or careful.
6. Set aside a few minutes at a regular time each day when you can give your undivided attention to your child. This quiet, calm time — no TV, iPad or phones — can be a confidence builder for young children. As little as five minutes a day can make a difference.
7. Discipline the child who stutters just as you do your other children and just as you would if he didn’t stutter.



TIPS FOR SPEECH THERAPISTS

1. Carefully determine the nature of disfluency to determine whether the child is stuttering or merely struggling with linguistic development in two languages. A good place to start would be in taking a language sample to differentiate between normal speech disfluencies (NSDs) which may characterize second-language learning rather than stuttering.
2. Compare the types and frequency of disfluency between the two languages spoken to see if the disfluencies noted are seen in both languages. If a high percentage of NSD occurs in only one language, this may be a result of limited proficiency in the language rather than from stuttering.
3. If you initiate direct treatment for stuttering, treat the child in his/her stronger language and monitor the weaker language(s) to determine whether the treatment effects carry over when the second language becomes more complex.
4. When the child is resisting speaking a second-language, try to find out the reason why. Often the child may have been asked to perform in the second-language and this may be the cause of the resistance. Never force, as this puts additional pressure on the child to speak.