



Supporting Multilingual Clients in Speech-Language Pathology

May is National Speech-Language-Hearing Month—a time to raise awareness about communication health and celebrate the diversity of the patients we serve. One of the most common myths we encounter as speech-language pathologists (SLPs) is the idea that bilingualism causes language delays or confusion. In truth, being bilingual is not a disorder!

Bilingualism Does Not Cause Delays

Children learning two or more languages may show different language patterns compared to monolingual peers, but these differences are not delays. In fact, multilingual children often develop different strengths in each language, depending on how much they hear and use each one. The quantity and quality of input in each language significantly influences how quickly each language develops.

Monolingualism is not a cure for speech or language disorders. Research shows that multilingual children with communication needs achieve outcomes similar to their monolingual peers, both academically and socially. SLPs are trained to distinguish between a true language disorder and a typical feature of bilingual language acquisition.

Benefits of Bilingualism

The home environment plays a crucial role in supporting language development—especially in the home language. Supporting a child's home language builds a strong foundation for all communication. Compared to their non-dual language learner (DLL) peers, multilingual children have shown higher abilities in cognitive, socio-emotional, and physical skills.

Speaking multiple languages has many cognitive and social benefits. Bilingual individuals often demonstrate:

- Stronger attention control
- Greater mental flexibility
- Advanced rule-learning abilities
- A delay in the onset of dementia, when compared to monolingual individuals

Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Care

SLPs working with bilingual clients must consider the full language profile of the individual. This means assessing all spoken languages, recognizing cultural influences on communication, and, when possible, conducting evaluations in both languages or using trained interpreters. It's important that treatment supports both the dominant language and the home or heritage language, especially when it plays a role in family life and self-identity.

When we support children's competencies in both their home language(s) and the dominant language, we are also supporting their cultural identity and sense of self. This dual-language approach strengthens family bonds and builds confidence in both school and community settings.

When planning therapy for bilingual or multilingual clients, SLPs focus on strengthening core communication skills that can transfer across languages. For example, improving vocabulary organization or narrative skills in one language often supports similar abilities in the other. Family involvement is essential—SLPs often coach caregivers on how to support language development naturally at home in any language spoken.

Tips for Families

- Speak the language you are most comfortable with at home. Strong first language development supports second language learning.
- Don't avoid using your native language if your child receives speech therapy in English. Rich communication matters more than the language used.
- Ask your SLP about ways to support both languages during daily routines and play.

This National Speech-Language-Hearing Month, let's celebrate the power of multilingual voices and continue working toward equitable, inclusive speech-language services for all.