

Building Baby Brains with Two Languages

By Karen Nemeth, Ed.M.

Learning to talk is one of the biggest jobs a baby has to do – so wouldn't learning two languages be confusing? The answer is: No!

According to the latest research, babies' brains are so well prepared to analyze, absorb, and make sense of language, that learning in two languages simply comes naturally. Through their research, Dr. Patricia Kuhl of Washington University and her colleagues have found that infants who grow up bilingual maintain brain plasticity for a longer period of time as they develop two distinct yet connected languages. We also know from York University's Dr. Ellen Bialystok's research that this early experience helps children get to school with more advantageous self-regulation skills and can benefit brain function even until old age. That's why growing numbers of parents and childcare programs are endeavoring to raise children who are bilingual right from the start.

With this trend in mind, I wrote the book *Many Languages, Building Connections: Supporting Infants and Toddlers who are Dual Language Learners* (2012). Whether you are a parent or a childcare provider, you need ideas and resources to help you meet your bilingual goal with your children. The best ideas for building early language and literacy with bilingual babies begin with books.

When babies are younger than 6 months, they enjoy sitting on your lap and patting or turning the book while you talk about it.

It is important to stick with one language at a time. Even if the book is written in two languages, pick one language at each sitting to read and talk about the story.

Infants may understand real photos in books before they can understand illustrations. For the young infant, look for books with easy-to-recognize, uncluttered photos to help them learn the language in the story. As they grow, introduce books with beautiful illustrations to your daily reading activities.

Stories carry so much more than vocabulary. Look for books in the child's home language and the new language that provide wonderful rhymes, rhythms, and interesting words.

Stories and books are also important tools for understanding and celebrating culture and traditions. Look for books that authentically represent the culture with the language. These traditions become part of the child's understanding of who he is and where he fits in the world around him – even at a very young age.

Most 1-year-olds can understand about 50 words – often before they've clearly said any words at all. By the age of 18 months, many children understand 300 or more words. So, infants and toddlers really do understand more than you may realize. When they are growing up with two languages, they may know some words in one language and some words in another language. In the first couple of years, bilingual children don't always know how to translate from one language to the other. It is a good idea to practice clear, strong speaking habits to help them make sense of all the language they hear.

We know that hearing stories and having conversations with loving, responsive adults helps make this amazing vocabulary development possible. We also know that children under the age of two learn little, if any, vocabulary from watching videos or listening to recordings. Apparently, the give-and-take relationship between child and adult is absolutely necessary for good language development.

I recommend that you make the most of that interactive relationship by following the child's lead, responding to his interests, and sharing discoveries together. If you open a book and begin to read a story, but the child wants to keep focusing on the last page, go with it! That's the difference between your presence and just playing a recorded version of the story. You are right there to capture the child's interests and to build on them for a powerful language learning experience. Here are some other good ideas to try:

Use the pictures in a book to show the child what you are talking about.

Gestures like pointing, touching, and patting the right picture help the child to be sure that the image is connected to the words you are saying.

When the baby learns those gestures, he can clearly show you that he understands when you say, "pat the bunny," or "touchez le chat."

Use props to add to the meaning of words in the story. If it's a story about cooking, bring over some measuring spoons, pots, or ingredients to show the connection between the real object and the items in the story.

Picking stories with repetition, participation, and rhythm can really engage a child and make it easier for him to learn and to understand the words. That's one reason why traditional tales have been so effective throughout history. Children are familiar with the story already, and they know when the next page will have the wolf saying, "I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow your house down!" or "Son para verte major, querida!"

Language is the foundation for so many connections, and you can lay this foundation with a cozy cuddle of a child on your lap. Let stories in different languages help you get closer to your child; let them open windows to the world of languages!

Karen Nemeth, Ed.M. is a nationally-known speaker and consultant from the Philadelphia area, who has published several articles and books about supporting early development in first and second languages. Learn more about her work, including her new bilingual iPhone/iPad app "20 Welcome Words" at her website www.languagecastle.com.

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