

Twelve Common Myths And Misconceptions About Bilingual Children

MYTHS OR MISCONCEPTION	WHAT WE ACTUALLY KNOW
1. Bilingual children start to speak later than monolinguals.	There is no scientific evidence supporting this. Bilinguals and monolinguals share the same wide window for normal development.
2. Bilinguals start out school behind monolinguals and they never catch up.	In fact, bilingual children tend to have faster growth curves than monolingual children.
3. Young children soak up languages like sponges.	Children seem to have an easier time learning languages than adults, but we should not underestimate the effort it takes and should not expect them to learn perfectly from the beginning.
4. Bilinguals are just like two monolinguals in one person.	There are special capabilities that bilinguals have that monolinguals do not. Bilinguals very often have one (dominant) language that is comparable to that of a monolingual and another, weaker one, which they use less often. In any conversation, bilinguals choose whether to operate in a monolingual mode or a bilingual mode
5. You have to be gifted in languages in order to learn two languages at once.	Early language learning is not like a talent and does not require a special gift. It's part of being human, like walking or seeing with two eyes.
6. If bilinguals score lower on standardized language tests, it shows they have lower aptitude than the average monolingual child.	Standardized tests examine just a part of a bilingual's language aptitude (<i>i.e.</i> , just one language) and compare it to a monolingual's entire language aptitude. Average scores for bilinguals do not take into account different patterns of language dominance. There are, as of this writing, no standardized tests that are appropriate for use with bilingual children.
7. Latino immigrants in the U.S. resist learning English and want everyone to learn to speak Spanish.	Very few Latino immigrants do not speak English; there are not enough programs that teach English to accommodate the demand for them. Programs that use Spanish as well as English do so in part because it helps children learn English faster and better.
8. Some languages are more primitive than others and are	There is no such thing as a primitive language or a language without

therefore easier to learn. The reason so many people can speak English is that English has less grammar than other languages.	“grammar.” All languages are infinitely complex and yet learnable.
9. Speaking a second language is its own reward.	This might be true, but we cannot expect children to see it that way. We must make it meaningful for them to know the language by providing contact with interesting people doing fascinating things in the second language.
10. Parents who do not speak a language perfectly will pass their errors and their accent on to their children.	This might be true only if the child never heard any other speakers, which is unlikely to happen with parents who are nonnative speakers of either a majority or a minority language.
11. If a bilingual child experiences any language problems in one or both languages, dropping one of the languages will fix the situation.	There is no evidence that this is so. Children who have problems with two languages generally also have them with one.
12. There’s only one right way to raise a bilingual child.	Parents are the experts in this field. The only wrong way to raise a bilingual child is not to do it. if you haven’t already, now is the time to start.

From: *Raising a Bilingual Child*, by Barbara Zurer Pearson, PhD., p300. Also appeared in the Sept/Oct issue of *Multilingual Living Magazine*.