Bridge Brief

Challenges for Parents of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder Living in Bilingual Environments

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PURPOSE

This brief summarizes the current literature regarding the benefits and disadvantages of bilingualism for children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The goal of this brief is to evaluate the implications of recent research for practitioners as well as parents of children with ASD, with particular focus on how this research can guide parents in deciding whether to raise their children in a bilingual or monolingual environment.

SUMMARY

Parents of children with ASD are often hesitant to raise their children in a bilingual home environment, for fear that dual language exposure may hinder their children's language abilities and cognitive development. The result is that the linguistic exposure of children with ASD is often limited to the dominant language in their environment (typically English in the United States), preventing them from acquiring fluency in their family's heritage language. The featured review explores the factors that influence parental decisions about the language environment of their children with ASD. Additionally, it highlights the need for more empirical research regarding the exposure of individuals with ASD to bilingualism.

IMPLICATIONS

Given the growing prevalence of bilingualism in the United States, it is essential that all individuals who work with and/or support children with ASD (including professionals and parents) are informed about the possible effects of including or excluding multiple languages from children's home environments.

INTRODUCTION

Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder with highly diverse symptoms and degrees of severity (Valicenti-McDermott et al., 2012). It is characterized by significant deficits in communication, socialization, and behavior (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2021). The CDC's Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network reported that approximately one in 54 children in the United States has been diagnosed with ASD (CDC, 2021). Given this large population, families and educators are likely to interact with individuals with ASD.

ASD and Language

Language and communication are essential developmental skills which are often disrupted for children with neurodevelopmental disorders. Language delay is a common indicator of ASD and is often the first sign prompting families to seek a professional diagnosis (Uljarevićet al., 2016). Language deficits and communication issues in children with ASD range from problems with articulation (including the formation of clear and distinct sounds in speech) to challenges with pragmatic language use (which describes what we say and how we say it, including non-verbal communication and situational appropriateness of interactions [Uljarević et al., 2016]). Children with ASD as young as 18 months exhibit more delays in language than typically developing (TD) children (CDC, 2021), including stalled vocabulary acquisition, significantly decreased expressive language (ability to communicate with words, gestures, and signs/symbols), and a lower level of receptive language (understanding information provided through sounds, words, movements, gestures, and signs/symbols) (Wallace, 2021). These language delays are often of primary concern to parents, due to the various challenges in expression, communication, and socialization resulting from lack of language development (Yu, 2015).

Bilingualism

Bilingualism is defined as the use of two or more languages. It is prevalent worldwide and is becoming increasingly common in the United States (Hampton et al., 2017). Bilingual individuals may be exposed to multiple languages from birth, or they may acquire knowledge of additional languages after becoming fluent in their primary language (Lund et al., 2017). A child who is exposed to two or more languages will receive less exposure in each of the individual languages compared to peers who are exposed to just one language, but will gain the same or more collective language input (Uljarević et al., 2016). A growing body of research points to significant cognitive benefits resulting from early exposure to bilingual environments in TD populations. Moreover, exposure to bilingual environments does not appear to have any negative impacts on cognitive functioning or the acquisition of language skills (Hampton et al., 2017). Unfortunately, this research is not well-known to the public. Parents and professionals continue to express concerns that bilingual environments will delay their TD child's speech and language skill developments (Hampton et al., 2017).

Bilingualism and ASD

There has been little research on the effects of bilingualism on the language abilities of children with ASD (Petersen et al., 2011). There are consequently no clear guidelines for professionals and parents struggling to decide whether a bilingual or monolingual environment is more suitable for their child with ASD (Valicenti-McDermott et al., 2012). Many minority-language parents are hesitant to communicate with their children in their heritage languages, out of concern that a bilingual environment would be confusing for or even detrimental to their child with ASD (Yu, 2012). This belief may be shared or encouraged by professionals. It is therefore common for these families to decide upon a monolingual environment for their child with ASD, with parents typically selecting the predominant language of their child's environment (most commonly English in the U.S.); as a result, their children with ASD never gain fluency in their family's heritage language (Yu, 2015).

FEATURED REVIEW

As mentioned above, there has been minimal research on the direct experiences of children with ASD raised in bilingual families. However, one noteworthy study by Hampton et al., in 2017, explores the various factors that influence parents' decisions about language practices for their children with ASD, as well as how these considerations differ from those expressed by parents of TD children. The authors also address how parents from both groups perceive the outcomes of their decisions. This study conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews with bilingual parents of 17 children with ASD and 18 children without ASD. The study concluded that parents in both groups had similar experiences, both positive and negative, with raising their children in bilingual homes. Some of the positive experiences shared by both groups included a greater openness to different cultures and perspectives, increased cultural and linguistic awareness, and an enlarged appreciation for diversity. Additionally, parents felt that bilingualism would increase job prospects for their children. Both groups of parents also expressed concern that bilingualism would delay their child's language development and cited a lack of motivation for their children to pursue both languages when presented with the opportunity. Parents of children with ASD differed in that they also feared bilingualism would be difficult for the family to teach as well as harmful to their children, resulting in further language delays for children already experiencing communication challenges. In terms of outcomes, families who decided to raise their child in a bilingual environment reported that the child was able to acquire skills in both languages and that it was beneficial to them, regardless of whether the child was diagnosed with ASD. For parents of children with ASD, parent-child bonding was often cited as the primary reason for maintaining use of the family heritage language.

It is important to note there are limitations when it comes to evaluating the outcomes of bilingualism for TD children and children with ASD. The parents' overall education and language proficiency (in each language), the presence of other caregivers, attitudes towards bilingualism, and parents' relationships with their children may all be confounding variables in this examination. When it came to deciding between a bilingual or monolingual environment for their child, both parent groups identified various reasons for their decisions: the child's verbal abilities, advice given by professionals, the importance of bilingualism and the minority language in the family and societal contexts, and the parents' level of comfort and skill in each language. It is imperative that both the linguistic and social ramifications of choosing certain language environments be taken into consideration when providing guidance to families.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Further research investigating the experiences and language abilities of bilingual children with ASD versus those who are monolingual in a bilingual family may help provide parents and professionals with better insight when it comes to making an informed decision concerning the child's specific language environment (Uljarević et al., 2016). Selection of a language environment can have social and emotional implications for the ability of an individual with ASD to interact, develop, and maintain relationships with their parents, extended family, and peers, as well as their ability to function in an educational and/or work environment (Yu, 2015). Understanding these implications for children with ASD who are raised bilingually may lessen parents' fears about bilingual environments and improve social experiences for bilingual families that include children with ASD (Yu, 2015).

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