

What is multilingualism and when are you actually considered a multilingual?

Are you multilingual only when you have perfect proficiency of two or several languages, or even when you know a few words in another language?

There is not a single answer to these questions: there are several different definitions of multilingualism. The most widespread opinion considers those speakers, who regularly use two (or more) languages in daily life, as multilingual, regardless of whether or not they have perfect proficiency in their languages and regardless of the age in which they started learning them.

Unlike adults, children acquire language(s) effortlessly, without any kind of formal teaching, or instructions, if they have enough opportunities to listen and use a language.

What is developmental language disorder?

We talk about a developmental language disorder when a child's language performance is not appropriate for his or her age.

Developmental language disorder is a congenital disorder and is not caused by hearing problems, intellectual difficulties or neurological disorders.

Developmental language disorder can manifest itself in different ways. While some children have speech deficits, others show reduced vocabulary or grammatical difficulty. These problems can occur in isolation or combined with each other and may occur in both production and language comprehension.



How can I best support my child in his/ her (multilingual) language acquisition?

- Talk to your child in the language you speak best and with which you feel most comfortable.
- It is not a problem when the parents use two different languages with the child. It is not confusing for children to hear and speak two or more languages at home!
- Give your child sufficient and repeated opportunities to experience his/her languages. If you do not know the language of the environment in which you live, your child can still acquire this language proficiently through regular contact in e.g. a day care centre or recreational programmes.
- **ATTENTION:** Watching television is not enough to learn language(s)! Children learn language(s) through interaction, e.g. when playing together, eating, getting dressed etc.
- Read books with your child: use the pictures to interact in a creative way, ask questions about what they can see in the pictures and what is happening. That way, reading out loud turns into a fun and (inter)active dialogue
- Follow your child's interests and use them to initiate interaction/communication: Tell your child what you're about to do or comment on what he/she just did. Speak to your child using simple and short sentences.
- If your child has problems with language acquisition, you can support him/her through your behaviour without having him/her notice. Set yourself up as a linguistic model for your child. So, when he/she uses e.g. an incorrect phrase, simply repeat it in corrected form. This behaviour is also called „corrective feedback“.
- If your child has been diagnosed with developmental language disorder, there is no need to limit his/her exposure to the number of languages to just one in order to “facilitate” language acquisition. That way you would only limit the options your child has to express him-/herself.

A collaboration between the University of Konstanz, the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt and IRCCS E.Medea.



MULTILINGUALISM & DEVELOPMENTAL LANGUAGE DISORDER

What is it? How can I recognise it? What can I do?

Developmental language disorder affects
7% of all children.



Multilingualism is **NOT** a cause for
developmental language disorder.

But a reliable diagnosis of developmental
language disorder in multilingual
children is not easy.

Early detection is key.
Speech and language therapy helps!



Can multilingualism cause developmental language disorder?

»NO!« Both monolingual and multilingual children are equally affected by developmental language disorder.

Language acquisition is not hindered by multilingualism! However, the difficulty lies in the correct recognition of a language development disorder in multilingual children.

How does developmental language disorder manifest in multilingual children?

Developmental language disorder always affects all languages of a child. However, the symptoms in the two languages may differ. Even typically developing multilingual children often show imbalances between the abilities in the languages that they have acquired: the mastery of a language, in multilingual children, depends on how much contact they have had with it (if, for example, they have been exposed to both languages since birth, or if the second language has been added later on during their development) and how intense this exposure has been.

If a child does not have sufficient opportunities to listen to or speak a language, we cannot expect that he or she is able to master it perfectly.

For these reasons it is not easy to identify developmental language disorder in multilingual children and thus these children are sometimes falsely identified as language impaired, even if they are not and their language performance corresponds perfectly to their exposure pattern and the amount of learning possibilities they've had.

However, more often it happens that a developmental language disorder is not recognized in multilingual children because the deviations from the typical course of language development are mistakenly traced back to their multilingualism.

How to diagnose developmental language disorder in multilingual children?

If your speech and language therapist/pathologist (SLT/SLP) can speak all the languages of your child, it is certainly an advantage, but unfortunately this rarely is the case. Additionally, there are only a few diagnostic tools currently available (for a few languages) that allow for an examination of all children's language skills in all of their languages. Therefore, usually not all languages a child speaks can be evaluated. However, if speech and language therapists and parents work together, the diagnosis and therapy of developmental language disorder in multilingual children can be successful.

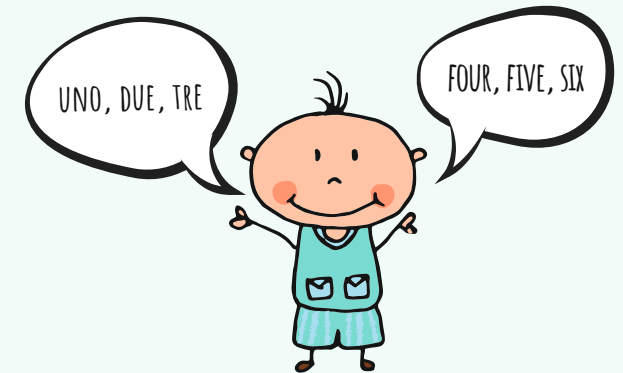
What can I do if I am worried that my child has a developmental language disorder?

In the course of language acquisition, all children follow the same sequence of developmental milestones. They do so if they learn one, two or even more languages at the same time. Within the first year of life, the first words are acquired. Towards the end of their second year of life, children should be able to produce at least 50 words and be able to combine them to two-word utterances. Within the third year, children learn many new words and their vocabulary grows "explosively" and becomes more and more elaborated. At the same time, they begin to compose the first sentences, even if they are not perfect at first. Some children go through these stages of development more quickly, while others may take a little longer. This variability is quite normal in language acquisition. However, children with developmental language disorder deviate from the average language development on a larger scale.



Potential symptoms of developmental language disorder:

- The child starts talking very late.
- He/ she is difficult to understand.
- The child has problems learning new words (even after the second year of life the vocabulary grows only slowly)
- The child has difficulties understanding and following instructions.
- The child has difficulties producing complete sentences.



Where can I get help?

Developmental language disorder does not disappear on its own: Unfortunately, the belief that all linguistic difficulties will disappear with time, once the child is mature enough, is still very common. Although the symptoms of developmental language disorder may change in the course of development, they remain. For example, a child who at the age of four shows deficiencies in vocabulary, may have difficulties with grammar at the age of five, and at the age of six years old he/she may have problems with learning how to read and write correctly. Any suspected developmental language disorder should be clarified quickly by qualified speech and language therapists. So that in the case of language impairment, early and age appropriate intervention can be initiated as soon as possible.

**»EARLY DETECTION IS KEY.
SPEECH & LANGUAGE THERAPY HELPS.«**