



Bilingual Families

What does it mean to be bilingual?

Bilingualism is the ability to speak and understand two languages. Speaking more than one language is normal for most people around the world. Before residential schools, it was common for First Nations people to speak several languages — their own language and the languages of neighbouring nations.

Why does being bilingual matter for First Nations in B.C.?

Language holds knowledge about history, science, traditions and culture. Speaking and understanding your language connects you to your

culture, history, spirituality and community. Raising your children to speak their language will help give them a healthy identity.

It is possible to learn to speak another language at any age, but language learning is easiest and most effective in early childhood. Myths about being bilingual often keep First Nations parents from exposing their children to their language, such as the idea that speaking only one language is better, or that children will experience language delays when learning more than one language. However, research has proven many advantages to bilingualism. Learning your First Nations language supports a healthy

“Recent research has repeatedly demonstrated that having two or more languages will help children’s academic and social success throughout their lifetime.”

- First Peoples’ Cultural Council (2014)

identity by teaching the cultural worldviews and beliefs that are connected to the language. Moreover, it will raise the status of the language and show that it is a valued and important part of a community’s cultural identity.



Witsuwit'en language apprentice and family

MYTHS & FACTS ABOUT BILINGUALISM

Myth: *Speaking only one language is better.*

Fact: Being bilingual actually helps the brain and often leads to more advanced communication and social skills.

Myth: *Children become confused when learning and speaking two languages at once.*

Fact: Research shows that bilingual children can distinguish between their two languages and show no confusion.

Myth: *When children use two languages in the same sentence, it is a sign that they are confused.*

Fact: The use of two languages in the same sentence (called “code switching”) is a sign of skill in both languages.

Myth: *Learning two languages causes language delays.*

Fact: Research suggests that monolingual and bilingual children develop their language skills at similar times.

Increasing the number of language speakers will create more opportunities for language use within the community and ensure that the language will be passed on to future generations.

What can I do?

Raising young children to be First Nations language speakers is crucial for language revitalization efforts to be successful. If parents and caregivers are proficient in speaking their language, it is important that they speak the language to their children. Don't be afraid to begin learning your language or to use it if you know it! If you are a parent, look for language programs for your child and begin using the language that you know with your family in the home.

Look for community language classes or support your own language learning through immersion programs, such as the FPCC's Mentor-Apprentice program. Expose your children to

BILINGUALISM: WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS

- Many children around the world learn two or more languages and grow up speaking both languages proficiently.
- Bilingual children have more highly developed language skills.
- Bilingual children often show an improvement in memory and problem solving.
- Learning two or more languages does not cause language disorders or delays, and with consistent exposure to and interaction in both languages, bilingual children will excel at both languages.
- Parents do not need to be fluent speakers to raise a bilingual child!

the language as much as possible by using the language in everyday activities. This includes using the language at home, visiting family members who speak the language, and attending community events and ceremonies where the language is spoken. Do not let myths about bilingualism keep you and your children from learning your First Nations language!

KEY TERMS

- **Bilingual:** the ability to speak two languages.
- **Monolingual:** the ability to speak only one language.
- **Mentor-Apprentice:** one language mentor and one language apprentice spend time in immersion together in a natural setting to gain or increase language proficiency.

WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE?

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