



## Language Acquisition

As language nests are all about children learning language, it is valuable to know the basic principles of language acquisition and language learning. Much of the research in this field has focused on learning English as a first and second language, but the principles are the same for all other languages as well.

### What Is Language Acquisition?

“Language acquisition” refers to the natural and subconscious way that children acquire (or learn to speak) their first language. This process is different from *learning* a language as it is taught in school. The goal of language nests is to provide an environment where children can acquire the language naturally. We know that infants acquire their first language by listening to the language around them and interacting with their parents and others in that language. Language nests aim to provide the same environment for interaction in the language so children are given the opportunity to acquire their languages while they are young.

### What Do We Know about Language Acquisition?

1. In order to acquire language, children need to have the opportunity to engage with the language. This means they need many chances to hear and use the language in a variety of meaningful contexts.
2. When children learn languages, they speak in ways an adult may not. These do not need to be viewed as errors and are not necessarily negative. When children are learning, they do not need to be corrected or instructed in the correct form. Instead, they need *positive reinforcement* and *modelling*. In other words, encourage their efforts at communication and provide many examples of correct speech.
3. All humans acquire a first language naturally but learning a second language can often feel like a daunting task – especially if it is very different from the first language. Some people believe that First Nations languages are especially difficult to learn and that children can't learn them properly for this reason. However, First Nations languages are no harder for children to learn than any other language. The younger children start learning the language, the easier it will be for them.
4. Children should be given the opportunity to have one-on-one time with a proficient speaker of the language as well as play time with their peers in the language. Social interaction is very important for language learning. We use language as a way to communicate, so it is important to give children lots of opportunity to use their language in social settings.



5. Language and culture are connected. By acquiring language, children also acquire culture. Languages express the beliefs and values of a culture. When a child learns a language, they also learn how speakers of the language view the world.
6. Every child is unique. Acquiring language happens at different rates and in different ways. Given time and opportunity, each child's language acquisition will progress. Remember that not every child develops in the same way.
7. Comprehension develops faster than production. This means young children often understand far more than they can say. Sometimes when children are not able to say something, it is important to check if they understand. If they understand, give them opportunities to practise using the language so they can begin producing the language.
8. Newborn babies are fully capable of learning any language they come in contact with, but within a year they begin to specialize in the language(s) that are used around them most frequently. For this reason, a child who has had regular exposure to and interaction in more than one language from birth will speak each language with mother-tongue proficiency, but an adult who has learned one language at birth and other languages later may not speak them all fluently. This is why it is important to expose children to their First Nations language as early as possible and as often as possible.

### Developmental Stages

From Chief Atahm's *First Nations Language Nests: Your Guide to Operating a Successful Language Immersion Program for the Very Young*, 2009

This link provides more information about the developmental stages of language (see p. 16). It is important to note that the stages of language development begin at birth. If your child is beginning to learn their language at age three, they may not understand the same amount as a child who has heard the language since birth, but given time and practice, they can catch up.

## **How Does Bilingualism Affect Children?**

The term "bilingual" is used to describe people who speak two languages. There are many common myths about bilingualism in young children that often make parents concerned about their child's language development, including the following:

**Myth 1: Speaking only one language is better for children.** Being bilingual is a common occurrence throughout the world. In fact, there are more people who are multilingual (speaking multiple languages) in the world than people who are monolingual (speaking only one language). Speaking two or more languages is normal and healthy for children. Research has shown that speaking more than one language provides social and cognitive advantages in many areas.



**Myth 2: Hearing and speaking two or more languages will be confusing for the child.** The fact that so many children in the world grow up speaking more than one language is a good indicator that this is a myth. Many children learn at least two languages, and they are not confused but instead grow up speaking both.

**Myth 3: Children using two languages at once is a sign of confusion.** Children who use two languages in the same sentence are not confused. Using more than one language in a sentence is called “codeswitching” and demonstrates highly developed language skills. Advanced speakers do this all the time for social purposes or because one language explains something better than the other. When children use both languages in the same sentence, they are actually following the grammatical rules for each language. It takes a great deal of linguistic skill to be able to switch between languages this way.

**Myth 4: Learning two languages causes language delays.** Children acquiring two languages at the same time may take longer to develop each individual language than a monolingual child. However, the delays are not significant nor long-lasting; with consistent exposure to and interaction in both languages, bilingual children will come to excel at both languages, often to a higher skill level than that of monolingual children.

## Additional Readings

### [Bilingual Kids Rock](#)

Bilingual Kids Rock is a website that offers useful tips and strategies for raising bilingual children. Articles include information on the benefits of bilingualism, the challenges involved and strategies to overcome these challenges. Overall, this website provides a strong support system for parents who wish to raise their children as bilingual speakers.

### **Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL)**

The CAL “Digests” page includes many articles regarding language acquisition. Listed below are a few especially informative and accessible articles that may be of particular interest to those running a language nest.

- [Two or More Languages in Early Childhood: Some General Points and Practical Recommendations](#)  
Annick De Houwer, 1999
- [What Early Childhood Teachers Need to Know About Language](#)  
ERIC Digest, 2000
- [A Global Perspective on Bilingualism and Bilingual Education](#)  
G. Richard Tucker, 1999



- [Fostering Second Language Development in Young Children](#)  
National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning, 1995
- [Raising Bilingual Children: Common Parental Concerns and Current Research](#)  
Kendall King and Lyn Fogle, 2006

#### Other Articles

- [Language Immersion and School Success: What Can I Expect for My Child?](#)  
Lindsay Morcom, (n.d.)
- [Identity and the Language of the Classroom: Investigating the Impact of Heritage Language Instruction on Personal and Collective Self-Esteem](#)  
Stephen C. Wright and Donald M. Taylor, 1995
- [First Nations Languages and Improving Student Outcomes](#)  
Shirley Fontaine, 2012
- [The Acquisition of K'iche' \(Maya\)](#)  
Clifton Pye, 1991

#### Handbooks, Manuals and Books

- [Fostering Language Acquisition in Daycare Settings: What Does the Research Tell Us?](#)  
Simone Beller, 2008
- [Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition](#)  
Stephen D. Krashen, 1982

Also see the [Published Resources](#) section of this toolkit.