



FACT SHEET

Understanding and supporting bilingual language development in children under 5



Many young children hear and use more than one language as they grow. Bilingual children may develop languages differently from children who use only one language (monolingual). These differences are typical and are not, on their own, a sign of a language delay.

Milestones develop at similar ages

Bilingual children generally reach early language milestones (babbling, first words, combining words) around the same time as children who speak one language. They may use fewer words in each language, but their total vocabulary across both is often equal or larger. These timelines are approximate as children vary widely and this is normal.

0-12 month olds:

Responds to both languages; babbles with patterns from each.

12-18 month olds:

First words may appear in either or both languages; smaller per-language vocabulary is normal.

18-30 month olds:

Vocabulary expands; code-switching begins. Total combined vocabulary is comparable to monolingual peers.

3-5 yrs

Growing awareness of who speaks which language; can switch language based on context and listener.

Vocabulary and language use:

Because exposure is divided between two languages, bilingual children might know certain words in one language but not the other. Consistent exposure to both languages over time encouraging natural conversation encourages vocabulary in both languages to grow depending on how often and where each is used.

Mixing language is typical:

It is common for bilingual children to mix words from both languages in one sentence (known as code-switching). This shows that children are using all their language knowledge to communicate effectively it shows understanding not confusion.

Cognitive and learning benefits:

Research shows that bilingual children may develop stronger skills in problem-solving, attention, and flexibility. Learning two languages supports brain development and can make it easier for children to learn additional languages later.

The learning environment matters:

Children thrive when both their languages are valued and encouraged. Adults can support this by:

- Using key words or phrases from children's home languages in the learning environment.
- Reading bilingual books or including music, songs, and labels in both languages.
- Introducing bilingual resources, such as visuals and visual routines in home languages.
- Invite family members to share songs, stories, and greetings in their home language.
- Encouraging families to continue speaking their home language at home.

Creating a sense of belonging:

Making every child feel seen, valued, and included.

- Display a "Where are we from?" world map with pins, photos, or name cards from each family's country of origin.
- Label everyday items around the room (door, chair, window, toilet) in all languages spoken by children at the centre.
- Post greetings and welcome signs in every family's home language near the entrance.

Not every early learning centre will have children from multilingual families — and that is okay.

Every centre in Australia, regardless of its demographic, sits on Country that has its own living language. This is an extraordinary opportunity.

Connecting with Elders and community:

- Invite an Elder or community language holder to visit and share words, songs, and stories with children.
- Ask for guidance on protocols — some words or stories may be sacred; always follow community direction.
- Build an ongoing relationship rather than a one-off visit; language and cultural connection grow over time.

Weaving language into daily life at the centre

- Use the local word for Country in your daily Acknowledgement of Country with children.
- Learn a greeting, a counting song, or a lullaby in the local language and use it in group time.
- Create a display showing the name of the Country you are on and the language/s that belong to it.
- Share books and resources created by local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors and illustrators.

When children see their language and culture reflected in the physical space of their learning environments, they feel seen, valued, and safe. Small changes to the environment send a powerful message: **you belong here.**