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GUEST BLOG: Bilingualism is Good Brain Exercise for Kids (and Adults)

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Babies are whizzes at taking in new information, especially when it comes to languages. At the University of Washington's Institute for Learning & Brain Sciences, we're studying how infant's brain activity in response to language relates to their later speaking ability.

The research goes beyond learning languages though. We're interested in what makes young brains so capable of absorbing new information, which could reveal how to maintain learning throughout life. Our most recent studies investigate the brains of babies being raised in bilingual households. In these situations, babies' brains have a lot to take in – how do they make sense of the new words in two languages?



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Here are some of our findings so far:

1. Brains of bilingual babies remain open to language learning.

In our latest study, we found that the brains of the bilingual infants seemed to remain "open" to learning for a longer period of time compared to monolingual infants. Because we now know that the early brain wiring appears to be different for monolinguals and bilinguals within the first year of life, it emphasizes just how important it is to have high quality interactions and input from the start. In fact, we also found that the more the children heard in that language as infants, the larger their vocabulary was later.

2. Bilinguals show more flexible thinking.

There are specific cognitive advantages that bilinguals have over monolinguals. Bilinguals don't necessarily have stronger overall IQ, memory, or academic aptitude. But, because they are more accustomed to switching between two languages, bilinguals also tend to be faster than monolinguals at



switching between sets of rules in other situations.

On average, bilingual children (and adults) show some cognitive advantages compared to their monolingual peers. These skills translate into real-world situations that are related to self-control, problem solving and decision-making.

It appears that getting "practice" with switching through bilingualism seems to be good brain exercise for lots of other useful skills besides language. This is exciting to us, because it is more evidence showing how we can keep our brains sharp as we get older.

Based on our studies, we have this advice for educators and families who are raising bilingual children:

- Make sure infants and young children experience lots of the native language of their loved ones during everyday activities like playing, eating and reading.
- Take time every day to share books, rhymes, word games and songs in your native language with children. Repeated fun with books strengthens language and vocabulary development. These skills will help prepare children to learn to read and to converse in any language.
- Use lots of different words in talking with children.
- Young children can learn multiple languages without delay, as long as they hear native speakers and have adequate experience with both languages.
- When children start to "mix" both languages in the same sentence, they are not confused. Rather, this is normal, and means the child is developing strong language skills.

Patricia Kuhl is a professor of early childhood learning and a co-director of the Institute for Learning & Brain Sciences at the University of Washington.

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