



being bilingual :

learning two languages

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Introduction

This article is about learning to speak two languages. It is for whānau and caregivers of children who are learning two or more. We will look at who speaks more than one language, how it affects the brain, and its benefits for children, whānau and Aotearoa.

Around the world, being fluent in two or more languages is far more common than speaking just one and over half of the people in the world speak two languages – or are **bilingual**.¹

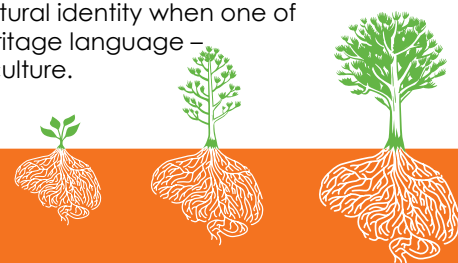
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In Aotearoa, the Growing Up in New Zealand study has found that at two years of age 40% of children understand two or more languages, while some children (7%) understand three or more.²

To set the scene, here are some facts about language in Aotearoa:

- The children of New Zealand use 168 languages.³
- While English is the most commonly used language in New Zealand, te reo Māori and New Zealand Sign Language are official languages.
- Te reo Māori has been under threat for many years. Te reo Māori is now seen as valuable and enriching with many people wanting to learn it.

We're going to see that being bilingual supports good learning and good relationships. Being bilingual is also good for a stronger cultural identity when one of your languages is a heritage language – the language of your culture.



Babies are influenced by their family's languages even before they are born

While this article is for families learning any languages, te reo Māori is important in Aotearoa, so let's take a quick look.

Te reo Māori

In Aotearoa, we are interested in te reo Māori because it is this country's indigenous language and one of our official languages. Young speakers are needed for it to survive⁴ and we have a thriving network of kōhanga and kura kaupapa to support its growth.

Most whānau who speak te reo Māori with their children are 'new speakers' and are working towards fluency themselves.⁵

Ko taku reo taku ohooho, ko taku reo taku māpihi maurea
My language is the window to my soul

This effort is important because the future of any heritage language depends on people using it in homes during the early years of life, as well as other places like early childhood centres and schools. New Zealand's recognition of te reo Māori as a treasure is crucial to its survival.⁶

Let's have a look at language learning in general.

Where does it all begin?

Babies are influenced by their family's languages even before they are born. Studies have shown that their first cries reflect the language they experienced while in the womb.⁷

Amazingly, babies are born able to make out all the sounds in all the world's languages, so they are ready and able to learn any language in the world.⁸ Over their first year or so, babies specialise in the sounds of the language(s) spoken with them.

One study found that newborn babies whose mothers only speak English during pregnancy, really like hearing English. On the other hand, babies whose mothers regularly speak both English and another language, are attracted to both languages equally. This suggests that learning languages begins in the womb, so if a baby hears two languages, they're well prepared to learn both of them.⁹

Bilingualism and the brain

Some studies have looked at bilingualism and its possible effects on the brain. Let's have a look at what they found.

Monolingual babies' brains are sensitive to their language, while bilingual babies' brains are sensitive to both their languages from the beginning of their lives.¹⁰ This suggests that "bilingual language experience changes the brain very early in development."¹¹

The effects of bilingualism on the brain can also be seen



in teenagers. Teens who speak more than one language tend to have a bigger surface area of their brain than teenagers who speak just one language, especially among teens facing disadvantage. This is important because it suggests that being bilingual could help protect young people against some of the risks associated with social and economic disadvantages.¹²

Bilingual whānau are amazing

Learning two languages has many benefits.

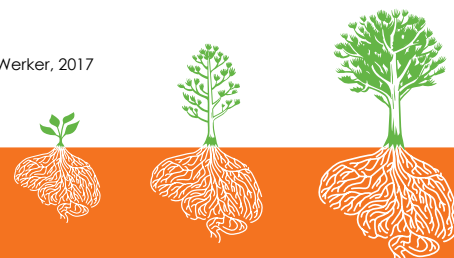
It used to be thought that knowing and using more than one language was a negative thing,¹³ but modern studies clearly show that this isn't true.

Perhaps you have family stories of elders being discouraged from speaking a heritage language. In Aotearoa, speaking te reo Māori was actively discouraged until recently. This has made it more difficult for many whānau to learn where there have been gaps in knowledge that may span generations. Outdated research contributed to parents thinking it was best to limit their families to just one language.¹⁴ Fortunately, research in the 1960s began to understand the benefits of bilingualism.¹⁵

One of the concerns during this earlier time was 'mental confusion.'¹⁶ However, the idea that children would become confused by hearing two languages at the same time is not supported by modern research.¹⁷

Babies are good at telling the difference between one language and another, and if exposed to two languages, they develop two separate language systems.¹⁸ By the time they're around two years old, they can match their

1. Grosjean, 2010, cited by Bialystok & Werker, 2017; Kuhl & Ramirez, 2016
2. Morton et al., 2014
3. King & Cunningham, 2017
4. King & Cunningham, 2017
5. King & Cunningham, 2017
6. Growing Up in New Zealand, 2015
7. Mampe et al., 2009, cited by Bruderer et al., 2015
8. Ramirez et al., 2017
9. Byers-Heinlein et al., 2010
10. Ramirez et al., 2017
11. Ferjan et al., 2017, cited by Ramirez-Esparza et al., 2017, p. 1216
12. Brito & Noble, 2018
13. May et al., 2004
14. Bialystok & Werker, 2017
15. May et al., 2004
16. Saer, 1923, cited by Bialystok & Werker, 2017
17. Hoff & Core, 2015
18. Hoff & Core, 2015





language to the one used by the person they're talking to.¹⁹

As it turns out, if a bilingual child is doing poorly, it isn't because they're using two languages, is because of other factors in their life.

Language starts at home

A lot of research with monolingual children shows that the quality and quantity of experience with a child's home language is important for their development.²⁰ In just the same way, the quantity and quality of speech bilingual children experience in each of their languages influences how well they develop in each of their languages.²¹

For this reason, it's important to remember that using the language we're most comfortable with is really good for our children's overall development. If children are learning two languages, a strong foundation in their first language will mean they are better placed to learn their second language well. This is particularly important if you're encouraging children to learn English when English isn't what's used at home. Your family's most common language will transfer important concepts to the child's second language.²²

Parents are being most helpful when they speak with their children mainly in the language they are most comfortable with.²³ For example, if a parent is more fluent in Tongan than English, the child will have richer language experiences when that parent speaks to them in Tongan, even though the dominant language in Aotearoa is English.

Building language with bilingual children is helped by reading books, as well as telling stories and singing songs in both languages.²⁴ Of course, these activities are great language experiences for all children.

It's important to remember that it's by having back and forth conversations that children best learn language. Very little language is learned from background conversations or TV programmes, or even language-learning programmes that do not respond to a child's words.²⁵

Reading and Bilingual children

Reading with children has lots of benefits. It's a good way to share time, pass on stories and at the same time, help with their language learning.

Books often use language that is different to the language we use in daily conversations.²⁶ There are social and emotional benefits from sharing books too, as children get to experience a variety of situations that they may not come across in their daily life.²⁷

Parents who read with their children benefit from quality time together, and for bilingual children, the exposure to their heritage language through books increases their literacy in that language.²⁸ Children need to see how a language is written to be able to learn to read and write it.²⁹

Without reading, bilingual children might develop strong speaking skills, but have limited reading and writing skills.³⁰ This is particularly true once they start school, when the amount of time spent on heritage language reading at home can drop.³¹ For this reason, it's good to keep children supplied with books in their heritage language at home.³²

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When one language is stronger than the other

A bilingual child can seem 'behind' children who are learning one language, because they are 'filled up' with the information of two languages. It soon changes though, and after a while, bilingual children can end up with more language knowledge than children with just one language. This is because they've had a richer, early language experience as they learn two languages.

And like everyone else, bilingual children learn at different rates. How quickly they pick up on their languages depends on things like mum's fluency, the child's use of a language in the home, and the amount of time spent around speakers of that language.³³

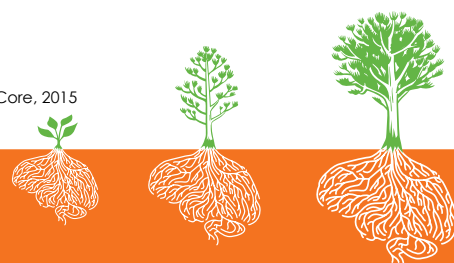
Keep in mind that children are more likely to use the language they know best, and they make faster progress in the language they use most.³⁴ This is an important point, so let's take a closer look.

Language & Culture

*"Preservation of indigenous languages is vital for the sustenance of indigenous cultures"*³⁵

Being fluent in more than one language is particularly important if one of those languages supports a culture's

19. Byers-Heinelein et al., 2017
 20. Paradis & Jia, 2017
 21. Brito & Noble, 2018; Kuhl & Ramirez, 2016; Ramirez-Esparza et al., 2017
 22. Cummins & Schechter, 2003, cited by Murphy, 2014
 23. Hoff & Ribot, 2017
 24. Song et al., 2012, cited by Ramirez-Esparza et al., 2017
 25. Zauche et al., 2016
 26. Montag et al., 2015
 27. Stine-Morrow et al., 2015
 28. Zhang & Koda, 2011
 29. Gathercole, 2018
 30. Hsu, 2015
 31. Hsu, 2015
 32. Zhang & Koda, 2011
 33. Paradis & Jia, 2017
 34. Pearson, 2007, cited by Hoff & Core, 2015
 35. Reese et al., 2017, p. 4



wellbeing, such as Māori, Samoan or Tongan. While people are bilingual for many reasons, there are a growing number of people who want to bring their children up bilingually to know their culture.³⁶ For example in Aotearoa, we have 460 Kōhanga Reo – language nests where Māori is favoured over English - to support the growth of te reo and other aspects of Māori culture.³⁷

Language is part of our cultural heritage, and people who use their heritage language are more likely to have good family relationships and a stronger cultural identity. These things support other positive outcomes, such as school achievement³⁸ and increased wellbeing.³⁹

Children learn a lot from knowing two or more languages.

What else supports bilingualism?

Mostly, children benefit from parents and other adults speaking the language(s) they are most comfortable using, even when this is not the most common language of the country they live in.

Something that supports good heritage language ability is the number of speakers of that language that a child interacts with.⁴⁰ This is probably because different people speak in different ways, and so a child gets exposed to a greater variety of language use: things like different accents, grammar and words. These things broaden the ways we hear a language used, and so we get more creative with using it ourselves.⁴¹

Conclusions

What have we learnt?

- It doesn't matter whether a child is learning one, two, three or more languages. They do best when they spend lots of time talking with their parents, whānau and others.
- Mostly, children benefit from parents and other adults speaking the language(s) they are most comfortable using, even when this is not the most common language of the country they live in. Speaking to bilingual children in the language the adult is most comfortable with will enrich children's overall language development.
- Children learn a lot from knowing two or more languages. It supports their development in many ways. Learning two languages at the same time may slow you down in the very early years, but not only do we catch up, we can do better. We are not confused by using two languages.
- We are all responsible for our bilingual children. New Zealand's attitude to the value of Māori culture and the recognition of te reo Māori as a treasure is crucial for language survival, and all the good things that go with being able to speak it.

If you enjoyed this article, here are a few others that may be of interest:

Feeding your baby's brain

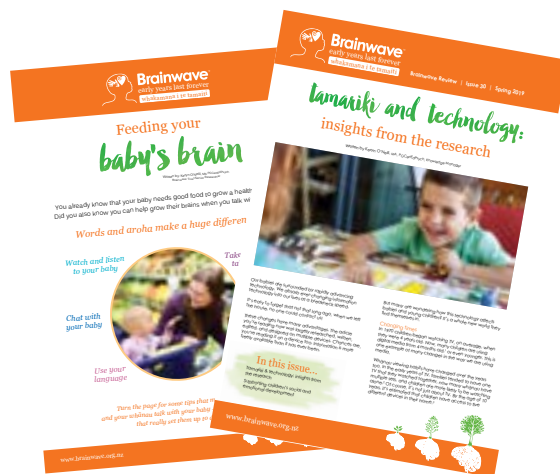
<https://brainwave.org.nz/article/feeding-your-babys-brain/>

Tamariki & technology: insights from the research

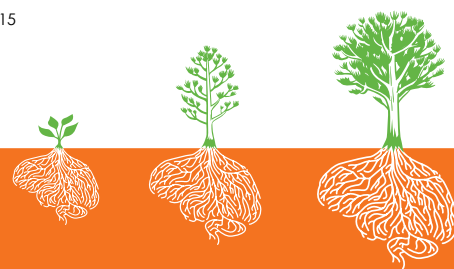
<https://brainwave.org.nz/article/tamariki-technology-insights-from-the-research/>

Resilient Rangatahi

<https://brainwave.org.nz/article/resilient-rangatahi/>



36. Growing Up in New Zealand, 2015
 37. Te Kōhanga Reo National Trust
 38. Hoff & Core, 2015
 39. Tava'i et al., 2018
 40. Gollan et al., 2015
 41. Gollan et al., 2015



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