

Multilingualism and communication disorders

Australia is a multilingual society. Around one-quarter of Australian households speak a language other than English.

Multilingual children are just as likely to experience communication disorders as monolingual children.

Parents, relatives, teachers and speech pathologists should be able to identify communication disorders in multilingual children as well, so these children can be supported as early as possible.

About communication disorders

Communication disorders include developmental language disorders and speech–sound disorders.

They also encompass communication difficulties associated with autism, hearing loss, cleft palate and other issues.

These disorders and difficulties are just as prevalent among multilingual children as they are among monolingual children.

If a communication disorder is truly present, it will affect all the child's languages.

If the child has a communication difficulty in only one of their languages, this is probably due to a lack of exposure or proficiency in that language, rather than a true communication disorder.

How communication disorders affect multilingual children

Multilingualism does not cause communication disorders.

In the past, there was a common myth that learning multiple languages might be too difficult for children and thus cause communication disorders.

Decades of research shows this is not true.

Communication disorders are just as common in monolingual children as they are in multilingual children.

Switching to English or dropping the home language is not a helpful solution

Many parents of multilingual children with communication disorders have been advised to drop their home language and just focus on English.

This will not fix a communication disorder.

In fact, we now know that dropping the home language can do more harm than good. This is because it prevents access to important skills the child may have already developed in their home language.

It can also cut children off from their culture, identity and their relationships with family who only speak the home language.

Multilingualism still has many benefits for children even if they have communication disorders

Multilingual autistic children have many advantages compared with monolingual autistic children.

This includes how they understand what other people are thinking, nonverbal intelligence quotient, adaptive functioning, and expressive vocabulary.

How we can support multilingual children with communication disorders

Give children a rich multilingual language environment.

The best way to support language growth is to give children lots of exposure to all of their languages through talking, playing, reading, singing and listening.

Use lots of different language forms to support communication.

As well as speaking to children in multiple languages, you can use books, sign language, visual aids and other modes of communication.

This helps children use all the tools available to them to share their thoughts, feelings and needs.

Pay attention to language development

Multilingual children develop differently to monolingual children, learning different skills at different times.

This means they may not always meet the milestones developed for monolingual children.

However, this does not mean they have a communication disorder.

Notice if challenges are occurring in all languages or just one.

If the difficulties are occurring in all languages, then it's time to see a speech pathologist.

How a speech pathologist can help

Speech pathologists play an important role in diagnosing and treating multilingual children with communication disorders.

This tool can help you find a speech pathologist who speaks the same languages as you:

<https://speechpathologyaustralia.org.au/find>

If your speech pathologist does not speak your language, they can collaborate with an interpreter to support sharing of information, assessment and intervention.

Research shows that all of a child's languages need to be assessed in order to accurately identify a child's communication needs.

Intervention also works best if it is provided in all of the child's language, not just English.

Parents play an important role in speech therapy because they are the experts on their own culture and language environment. They also have the skills to support the home language as well as English.

Multilingualism is a gift that can offer a child with communication disorders many benefits and social connections.

It is important that children are supported to maintain their languages even if they are diagnosed with a communication disorder.

Speech pathologists can work with families to support positive outcomes for multilingual children with communication disorders.

Find out more

Here are some useful resources for supporting multilingual children with communication disorders:

The Talking Children Podcast – Multilingualism in Children: <https://spotifyanchor-web.app.link/e/2ZVg8yanVvb>

International Expert Panel on Multilingual Speech Position Paper: <https://www.csu.edu.au/research/multilingual-speech/position-paper>

VietSpeech book – while this book focuses on Vietnamese, the information is relevant to all families trying to maintain their home language: <https://www.csu.edu.au/research/vietspeech/info>