

DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNING OR SPEECH DELAY?



When a child in your program is taking longer than expected to speak English, or when a child is non-verbal even in their home language, it's natural to feel concerned. Referring a child for help may be necessary, but before you do so there are some important things to keep in mind, and some strategies you can try.

THERE ARE MANY REASONS SPEECH MAY BE DELAYED IN NEWCOMER CHILDREN.

The stress of entering a new culture can lead to culture shock, which may result in children “blocking” the new language. When this happens, the child’s curiosity and interest in their peers can be diminished, leaving them with little motivation to understand. Stress levels may also affect the child’s ability to listen to and absorb new language, as can their anxiety upon separating from their parents.

Sometimes a child may go through a silent period—a time when they do not speak even if a caregiver speaks the child’s language. Regression in the first language and in skill level is also common and normal (**which makes newcomer children vulnerable to being assessed as delayed**). Furthermore, if others don’t seem to understand the child’s speech, children can soon lose interest in trying to communicate.

CHILDREN LEARN LANGUAGE DIFFERENTLY.

Children learn a second language best through peers, through real situations and through play. Before the age of 6, children absorb the first and second language in the same location in the brain. Young children learn to think and process information simultaneously in both languages.

Every day there are new discoveries about the advantages of being bilingual/multilingual! Early second-language-learning has many advantages including increased plasticity of the brain, better capacity for language learning and improved cultural understanding.

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HERE ARE SOME STRATEGIES YOU CAN USE TO ENCOURAGE SPEECH:

- Reduce children's stress by practising gradual separation. (For more information, see [A Parent's Guide to Gradual Separation](#).)
- When possible, match a new child to a caregiver who speaks the child's first language.
- Encourage parents to continue using their native language at home. Children learn English faster when the first language is maintained and strengthened.
- Learn key phrases in the child's first language (e.g., "Mommy's coming soon.")
- Add animation to your voice and use gestures.
- Use simple words. Speak more slowly.
- Label the child's actions (e.g., "You put the cow inside. Bye-bye, cow.").

BEFORE REFERRING A CHILD FOR A SPEECH DELAY:

- Find out about the child's ability in their first language.
- Find out about changes to the child's ability in their first or second language.
- Find out about changes to language use at home. For example, has the family recently switched to speaking only English?
- Make sure that any speech and language referral makes note of the child's first language use.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, SEE:

[*Early Identification of Special Needs is Important!*](#)

[*How to Talk to Parents When a Child Needs Extra Support*](#)

[*How to Connect Families with Special Needs Support*](#)

Visit cmascanada.ca for more resources to support your work with newcomer families



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