



LATINO INFANT INITIATIVE:

Are Babies Confused When They Grow Up with Two Languages?

Rafaela and Tomás are the parents of Adela, a newborn girl. As she sleeps, they marvel at her features, smiling as her tiny fingers move. As they continue watching, they wonder: *Will we confuse our child by speaking both Spanish and English to her?*

They worry that using both languages around Adela will confuse and possibly delay her development, causing her to do poorly in school. Fortunately, a large body of research evidence enables ECE (early childhood education) program staff to address this concern clearly and confidently.

Two Languages: Are Babies Confused?

This question can be understood in different ways. On the one hand, it is a legitimate concern of Adela's parents, who love their daughter, place a high value on her education, and sincerely want to do what's best.

On the other hand, there is a historical legacy of language suppression in the United States. The idea that children are confused by more than one language was a key element of that agenda. People advocating "English only" often argued that children like Adela do not have the capacity to develop two languages and become "confused" if they grow up with more than one. As a result of this legacy, some Hispanic grandparents warn their adult children not to speak Spanish to their infants. The assumption is that children need to "focus" on English to do well in school.

Photograph courtesy of UnidosUS Affiliate East Coast Migrant Head Start Project.



An additional part of this legacy was that many Latino children were punished (physically and psychologically) for speaking Spanish in school settings. The message was clear: languages other than English were not welcome. While physical punishment now seems to be rare, the “English only” message is still being communicated to Latino children and their parents in some school settings.¹

What Does the Research Tell Us?

There are several research findings that are critically important for Latino infants and their families. The first highlights the importance of early language development for later reading achievement.

In 1998, the National Research Council published *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*.² The report reviewed the research evidence on early literacy, establishing that the knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes children develop during the birth-to-five period are fundamental to their future reading success. In other words, long before children go to school, they make important progress in developing literacy skills. The report also noted the importance of a child’s home language, advocating for early reading instruction in the home language if possible.

The second finding emphasizes the importance of the continued development of a child’s home language(s). In 2017, the National Academies of Sciences released a report summarizing the evidence on dual language development.³ Two points were emphasized: first, young children **have** the capacity to learn

two languages; second, children should **not** give up their home language to learn English. The report stressed the importance of supporting children’s development of both languages from infancy:

“All ECE teachers of dual language learners can learn and implement strategies that systematically introduce English during the infant, toddler, and preschool years while simultaneously promoting maintenance of the home language—an important principle.”⁴

The most recent research indicates that infants have the capacity to develop and thrive in two languages, employing specialized strategies to support their successful development.

First, newborn babies have been found to distinguish between multiple languages.⁵ Infants are not “confused” by two languages since they are capable of recognizing that the two are different.

Second, research demonstrates that infants use conscious strategies to develop two languages. For example, children as young as 20 months are reported to be able to monitor their own comprehension while interacting with adults.⁶ In other words, from infancy, children demonstrate the capability to monitor *both of their languages* for efficient comprehension, using language-control mechanisms to preferentially activate the currently heard language during listening. The authors concluded: Infants growing up in bilingual homes learn two languages simultaneously without apparent confusion or delay.

Third, the research is clear that *children do not need to give up their home language to do well in school*. Miller and colleagues reported a positive association between Spanish oral language proficiency and standardized test scores of reading in English.⁷ In other words, both Spanish and English oral language skills contributed to reading within and across languages. The two languages were not confusing to children but complemented each other.

Prevo and colleagues reached the same conclusion by combining data from more than 80 separate studies.⁸ The authors reported that continued development of home language proficiency did *not* develop at the expense of learning the second language. They concluded: “Stimulating oral language proficiency *in both languages* can be a key factor in improving the school outcomes of bilingual children.”⁹

Supporting Infant Dual Language Learners

*Research data from prenatal and pre-verbal infants demonstrates that they have **innate capacities** that allow them to learn two languages without significant costs to the development of either language provided that they receive consistent and adequate exposure to both languages on a continuous basis.¹⁰*

Programs serving Latino infants can use these research messages to inform classroom practices and integrate the messages into their family engagement work. Program staff can do a great deal to support infants like Adela, an emergent bilingual with the potential to develop strong skills in two languages, and her parents, Rafaela and Tomás.

- First, staff can plan and implement active and welcoming learning environments, in which children are engaged across all developmental domains: physical movement; active exploration; support for social-emotional development; and opportunities to observe and use both of their languages.
- Second, staff can promote the idea that even very young children can successfully develop two languages. Research demonstrates that infants have the capabilities to process the sounds, grammar, and vocabulary of two languages without negative consequences. Staff can communicate this idea in daily conversations and during more formal family engagement activities.
- Third, staff can refer to the positive association (correlation) between a child's home language proficiency and their school achievement in a second language. The idea that a child's development of Spanish is a barrier to learning English or being successful in school is false and should be intentionally rejected. Instead, parents and family members should be encouraged to promote their infant's development by providing frequent interactions that include lots of language(s).

Staff in programs working with infants and toddlers can be proactive and intentional as they engage families of dual language learners. A child's earliest language development is of the utmost importance; it is not only powerful and rapid but also matters a great deal to their later reading achievement. Staff can make use of the research findings to inform parents that infants have the capability to develop more than one language without harming their readiness for school. Rafaela and Tomás do not need to fear using their heritage language with Adela or minimize her time with friends and family members who speak Spanish. Instead, they can look forward to planning many enjoyable experiences with her to build her skills, knowledge, and abilities in both Spanish and English.

Endnotes

- 1 Nieto, S. (2017). *Language, Culture, and Teaching: Critical Perspectives*. (3rd edition). New York: Routledge.
- 2 National Research Council. (1998). *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/6023>.
- 3 National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2017). *Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.
- 4 *ibid.*
- 5 Byers Heinlein, K., Burns, T. C., & Werker, J. F. (2010). "The Roots of Bilingualism in Newborns." *Psychological Science*, 21, 343-348.
- 6 Byers-Heinlein, Krista, Elizabeth Morin-Lessard, and Casey Lew-Williams. (2017). "Bilingual Infants Control Their Languages as They Listen." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 114, no. 34: 9032-037. Accessed July 20, 2021. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26487287>.
- 7 Miller, J. F., Heilmann, J., Nockerts, A., Iglesias, A., Fabiano, L., & Francis, D. J. (2006). Oral language and reading in bilingual children. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, 21, 30-43.
- 8 Prevoo, M. J. L., Malda, M., Mesman, J., & van IJzendoorn, M. H. (2016). Within- and Cross-Language Relations between Oral Language Proficiency and School Outcomes in Bilingual Children with an Immigrant Background: A Meta-Analytical Study. *Review of Educational Research* 86 (1): 237-276. <https://doi.org/10.3102/O034654315584685>.
- 9 *ibid.*
- 10 Paradis, J., Genesee, F., & Crago, M. B. (2011). *Dual Language Development and Disorders: A Handbook on Bilingualism and Second Language Learning*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes.



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UnidosUS
Raul Yzaguirre Building
1126 16th Street NW, Suite 600
Washington, DC 20036-4845
(202) 785-1670
unidosus.org

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