

# Bilingual kids not slowed by second tongue...in fact, the earlier the better!

Learning a second language does not slow language development in children, according to a study presented to an American neuroscience conference.

In fact, the earlier and more intensively the languages are introduced, the better.

The study, by researchers at the Department of Psychological and Brain Science at Dartmouth College, in the USA, looked at children who had been exposed to different combinations of languages at different ages and in different environmental settings.

“We found that if children are exposed to two languages from a very early age, they will essentially grow as if there were two mono-linguals housed in one brain,” Professor Laura-Ann Petitto told delegates. “This will occur without any of the dreaded ‘language contamination’ often attributed to early bilingual exposure.”

Scientists have long debated whether a child’s language ability is hindered by learning two languages at the same time from an early age. Some experts argue that a second language should only be introduced after the child has a full grasp of a primary language.

Professor Petitto’s findings, produced with graduate student Ioulia Kovelman, were presented at the Society for Neuroscience’s annual meeting held in Orlando, Florida this week.

The researchers looked at 15 bilingual children exposed to two languages from varying ages. Each age group of young bilinguals was at a different stage in child brain development.

The researchers split the children into four groups depending on when intensive exposure to the second language began: at birth, between the ages of two to three, four to six years, and seven to nine years.

This meant the researchers were able to match the time of bilingual language exposure to key stages of brain development. “We anchor[ed] our findings in the biology of the way the brain grows,” she said.

The children spoke various combinations of languages, including Spanish and French, French and English, Russian and French and sign language and French.

To obtain a wider cross section, the researchers used children who had been exposed to their

second language in different places – at home, a new language community, or in an instructional classroom setting.

“We wanted to study how all of the children’s basic knowledge of their two languages developed over time and thus, in our attempt to be as comprehensive as possible, we examined children across multiple languages, ages and contexts,” she said.

The results found something many school students struggling with French could tell you: late exposure to a second language, coupled with restricted input – such as in a classroom – may never allow a child full mastery in that language.

But don’t panic if you want to introduce your child to a second language later, she said: all they need is extensive exposure to both languages.

[www.abc.net.au/science/news/stories/s720173.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/science/news/stories/s720173.htm)

For more information on early language learning, visit [www.languagestars.com](http://www.languagestars.com).

