

## Bonus material 6.1. Myths associated with bilingualism

Based on an article “Raising a bilingual child: The top five myths” by Roxana A. Soto (<http://bit.ly/1nZ42bg>)

Many people do not realise that the majority of the world’s population is multilingual. Despite this, there is no one way to define the concept of bilingualism, although in general it refers to those children who have been able to speak and understand two or more languages since birth or early childhood. A second language can, of course, be acquired later in life, but in this theme we will refer to bilingualism as a concept which has been introduced in the home environment and at a young age. Below are a number of commonly held myths related to bilingualism.

### Having to deal with a number of languages confuses children

This is the first myth we will tackle, mainly because it is the most common. As recently as the 1960s, experts on this subject were telling parents that bilingualism confuses children and that to raise them with more than one language would be detrimental to their growth. This simply isn’t true. In fact, almost immediately after birth children are able to differentiate between languages. These outdated studies concluded that exposure to more than one language put children at an early disadvantage. As a result, parents were encouraged by professionals they trusted, such as teachers and educators, to disregard their own language and instead expose their children only to the majority language.

### Bilingualism will automatically lead to speech delays

While this has been confirmed as a myth, it is true that in bilingual environments children can take slightly longer to begin talking but they also have wider vocabulary to learn. However, this is merely temporary and experts agree this is absolutely not a general rule, but rather that it is specific to each individual. In fact, research has shown that children who encounter language delays would probably encounter them in both multilingual households and monolingual households and there is no difference in how quickly children will learn language between these two groups.

### Our child will always mix languages

There is absolutely nothing wrong with mixing languages. However, this can be misconstrued by those not familiar with multilingualism, and is often mistakenly used to prove that children are unable to distinguish between them. Indeed, most bilingual children end up mixing languages as they attempt to differentiate between the languages and come to terms with them.

One language, usually the community one, often becomes dominant – at least for a while. Again, this is normal and can be balanced out by placing more emphasis on the minority language.

Children with a smaller vocabulary may even favour the community language from time to time, but experts have all agreed that the mixing of languages is temporary and disappears as a child develops both languages. In this case, reading to your child as much as possible is an excellent tool to extend and separate the vocabulary of both languages.

## We didn't do it right from the beginning, now it is too late!

It is never too late to introduce a second language to your child, although the earlier the better. And you can always fix the language strategy chosen if that is not working for you. The best time to implicate a second language is between birth and three years old, or, in other words, as they are learning their first language. The reason for this is that they are so open to learning at that age and therefore another language is not deemed too difficult. Following that, between four and seven years children are still able to process multiple languages at the same time. However, if your child reaches seven and you haven't introduced them to a second language it is not too late, as between this age and puberty they can still become proficient enough in that language to be considered bilingual.

It has been proven that new languages are stored in a separate part of the brain following puberty, which means that the learner has to translate or go through their native language in order to discover a way to the other language. Therefore, the cognitive benefits are lessened and more effort is needed on the part of the parents the later the language is introduced.

## Bilingualism comes naturally and requires no work

Exposure to a second language will absolutely aid a child's learning process, but to think it will happen without any effort is incorrect. Children need to be exposed to their minority language for at least four hours every day in order to master it, although this number should not scare parents. Acquiring a second language does not need to be painful and even just conversing with your child or reading a book to them in your own language counts towards the magic number. However, there is a need to have some kind of strategy, plan and structure in place, such as regular alone time or learning periods with the native speaker of the non-community language, and you must be consistent with them. For example, if the minority language speaker does not speak Finnish to the child, then they should avoid doing so as the child needs to know when to use the language and with whom. Ultimately, the idea is to expose them to language learning in a meaningful and interesting manner connected to their lives, rather than treating it as a subject that must be learnt.