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Multilingualism and speech-language competence in early childhood: Impact on academic and social-emotional outcomes at school

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Highlights

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Academic and social-emotional outcomes were examined for a population sample of 4983 children followed from 4–5 years to 8–9 years.

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Multilingualism was not found to contribute to poorer educational and social-emotional outcomes at school.

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The main predictor of academic difficulties at school was concern about 4- to 5-year-old children’s speech and language (regardless of whether they spoke English-only or were multilingual).

Abstract

This large-scale longitudinal population study provided a rare opportunity to consider the interface between multilingualism and speech-language competence on children’s academic and social-emotional outcomes and to determine whether differences between groups at 4–5 years persist, deepen, or disappear with time and schooling. Four distinct groups were identified from the Kindergarten cohort of the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) (1) English-only + typical speech and language (*n* = 2012); (2) multilingual + typical speech and language (*n* = 476); (3) English-only + speech and language concern (*n* = 643); and (4) multilingual + speech and language concern (*n* = 109). Two analytic approaches were used to compare these groups. First, a matched case-control design was used to randomly match multilingual children with speech and language concern (group 4, *n* = 109) to children in groups 1–3 on gender, age, and family socio-economic position in a cross-sectional comparison of vocabulary, school readiness, and behavioral adjustment. Next, analyses were applied to the whole sample to determine longitudinal effects of group membership on teachers' ratings of literacy, numeracy, and behavioral adjustment at ages 6–7 and 8–9 years. At 4–5 years, multilingual children with speech and language concern did equally well or better than English-only children (with or without speech and language concern) on school readiness tests but performed more poorly on measures of English vocabulary and behavior. At ages 6–7 and 8–9, the early gap between English-only and multilingual children had closed. Multilingualism was not found to contribute to differences in literacy and numeracy outcomes at school; instead, outcomes were more related to concerns about children’s speech and language in early childhood. There were no group differences for socio-emotional outcomes. Early evidence for the combined risks of multilingualism plus speech and language concern was not upheld into the school years.

Keywords

* Bilingual;
* Multilingual;
* Dual language learner (DLL);
* Educational outcomes;
* Social-emotional outcomes;
* Speech;
* Language;
* Communication;
* Literacy;
* Reading;
* Numeracy;
* Mathematics

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