

NEWS

Cognition and behavior: Bilingualism aids people with autism

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A gesture life: Bilingual children are better at nonverbal communication than are those who speak only one language.

Being fluent in both English and Spanish may boost the use of communicative gestures in children with autism, according to a study published 1 August in the *Journal of Child Neurology*¹.

It's well established that bilingualism has many cognitive benefits. Even among children with autism, two studies published last year showed that those who are bilingual **score similarly on language and vocabulary tests** to those who speak only one language.

Still, because language difficulties often accompany autism, some clinicians hold that bilingualism is **not advisable** for children with the disorder.

In the new study, researchers looked at the medical records of children under 3 years of age with autism who attended the Children's Evaluation and Rehabilitation Center, which is affiliated with the Albert Einstein Medical Center in New York. The children were diagnosed based on criteria outlined in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, the Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule and the Childhood Autism Rating Scale.

The 40 children who know both Spanish and English spoke and understood language as well as

did the 40 children who only speak English, the study found.

Studies have shown that toddlers with autism are less likely than controls **to use gestures** when communicating. Researchers consider gestures such as pointing to be a component of joint attention, which is the ability to engage or follow others' attention. Teaching joint attention skills to children with autism has been shown to **improve their language ability** later in life.

In the new study, about half of the bilingual children with autism communicated using gestures, compared with one-quarter of the monolingual children. The bilingual children were also more likely than the monolingual children to lead their caregiver to an object and to make vocalizations, such as cooing, the researchers found.

The results echo those from studies of typical children showing that speaking more than one language can boost the use of gestures².

References:

1: Valicenti-McDermott M. *et al. J. Child. Neurol.* Epub ahead of print (2012) [PubMed](#)

2: Nicoladis E. *et al. J. Psycholinguist. Res.* **38**, 573-585 (2009) [PubMed](#)