Bilingualism in children with autism

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Bilingualism in children with autism: detrimental or beneficial? 
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Introduction
• Autism is associated with language and communication difficulties including delay in language onset in early childhood [1].
• The very limited body of existing literature suggests no harmful linguistic effects of bilingualism for children with autism [2].
• Despite this, parents can have concerns that bilingualism would amplify existing language delays [3].
• However, several areas have been identified as challenging for those with autism yet potentially enhanced amongst bilinguals, including skills such as theory of mind and executive functioning [4].
• Bilingualism has also been associated with the facilitation of community integration, family coherence and well-being [5].
• Research into the implications of bilingualism for those with autism, however, is scarce, meaning families and practitioners have little information to assist them in their decision making.

Objectives
• To examine whether there is evidence for an (increased) language delay as a consequence of bilingualism for children with autism.
• To explore how bilingual parents in the UK decide on what language practices to adopt for their child with ASD.

Method
In study one:
• Data from baseline assessments taken during a recent randomised controlled trial were re-analysed.
• We compared a sample of children (mean age = 4.2 years) with autism raised in bilingual households (n=15) with a monolingual group (n=15), matched on age, gender, ADOS scores and SES.
• Parent-reported language and communication skills (as measured by the CSBS, MSEL and MCDI) of the two groups were compared.

In study two:
• Semi-structured interviews concerning the experience of raising a child in a bilingual household were conducted with bilingual parents with a child with autism (n=18), and a group of bilingual parents with a typically developing child (n=18).
• Groups were matched on a number of variables including: age and gender of the child, as well as parent’s ethnicity, length of time in the UK and educational level. Parents spoke a wide variety of languages.

Results
Table 1: Means (SDs) for scores on the CSBS, MSEL and MCDI for each group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>MSEL:</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Visual</td>
<td>Fine</td>
<td>Motor</td>
<td>Words</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Recep-</td>
<td>Phrases</td>
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<td>tion</td>
<td>Words</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bilingual</td>
<td>26.67</td>
<td>33.40</td>
<td>5.89</td>
<td>19.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monolingual</td>
<td>25.80</td>
<td>31.17</td>
<td>4.55</td>
<td>19.32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All comparisons non-significant, including all sub-scales.

• For study one, T-tests and Mann-Whitney tests revealed no significant group differences in any aspect of the CSBS, MSEL or MCDI (scores shown in table 1).
• For study two, parents of children without autism were more likely to raise their child bilingually than parents of children with autism (see figure 1).
• Inductive, thematic analysis of the interview data revealed shared areas of overlap between parents of children with and without autism, including issues surrounding child characteristics, family dynamics, and preserving heritage.
• However some topics were specific to parents of children with autism. First, parents felt that a bilingual environment would hinder their child’s linguistic development, causing confusion and exacerbating delays. This concern was most prominent for parents of children of lower language ability.
• Second, parents felt bilingualism would be very challenging for the family. A lack of availability of resources for early years support in multiple languages contributed to this.
• Third, some parents were advised by professionals to speak only one language and some were advised to speak both languages. Parents’ views were sometimes in conflict with he advice given.
• Fourth, parents identified a number of ways in which they felt bilingualism could provide social and cognitive benefits, particularly in flexible thinking and communication skills.
• Finally, parents felt less linguistically restricted when interacting in their native language and felt that this language facilitated a strong emotional bond with their child.

Discussion
• Our findings recapitulate the limited existing literature on bilingualism and autism, demonstrating no evidence of a detrimental consequence of being raised in a bilingual household, while showing that parents continue to have concerns.
• It is essential to build an evidence base to enhance family decision-making in this area.
• Important directions for future research include: the exploration of a greater variety of aspects of linguistic development and employing innovative designs to address potential cognitive advantages of bilingualism for those with autism.
• Our findings point to the importance of considering not just cognitive consequences of bilingualism, but also family coherence and community integration, in future research in this field.

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References

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