Is Bilingualism detrimental for Children With Autism?

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Autism is a difficult developmental condition to understand for people who are not inflicted in that way. Donna Williams, a prominent educator about autism and herself a sufferer from the condition, once called it the I-am-not-from-this-planet Syndrome. This captures the current understanding of autism very well.

Autism and the senses

It is generally believed that concurrent with autistic behaviour is a severe lack of understanding of what is going on. Why are people smiling? What have the noises people make got to do with what I see? Why do people touch me? It hurts my skin! Why does mum play the guitar? It hurts my ears! Why is the vacuum cleaner sometimes really quiet and sometimes really loud? It scares me! Why do I have to wear these socks? They are hurting my feet! Why do I have to eat this food? It is hurting my stomach! What are these noises? Are these arms and hands that constantly come with me mine? What is going to happen next? What am I supposed to do? Why are there noises coming out of me? How come I can't do it again? What do I have to do to make the same noise as mummy? Why can't I say this word? Who is that person in the mirror?

Professionals specialising in autism increasingly believe that autism brings with it sensory confusion caused by neurological or biochemical irregularities in the person's brain. Some senses are unreasonably heightened, others are dulled. The information that gets to the brain may not be synchronised. Imagine how unsettling it would be if what you see and what people say does not fit. Much like in a badly dubbed movie, maybe.

The development of thinking, that is, cognitive development, is based on the senses. We see, feel, hear, taste, and receive feedback from our body about where we are in space, where our arms and legs are and what our tongue and lips are doing when we make noises. These sensory experiences are interrelated. If babies are hungry, they cry and mum comes and puts something into their mouths so they feel better. They make this connection very quickly. In fact babies these days learn that once they hear the microwave noises, they can stop fussing because food is immanent. Once sensory occurrences are predictable for the child, s/he can plan her actions around these predictabilities and experience success. From this orderly world she can try something new, which once figured out will be orderly and predictable and the base for the next step of learning

For children with autism, and indeed adults with autism, very little makes sense. Because of the variability of their senses, their overload or their understimulation, it is hard for people with autism to figure out the order in which events happen, the reasons for why they happen and how to manipulate them. People with autism have to work very hard on learning language, how to interact, how to do what others around them expect of them.

I use the following experience, which I had many years ago when I first travelled to Mexico, in order to try and understand what sensory overload may feel like. I remember that I walked through a local market about an hour after I had entered Mexico in search for some food. Everybody yelled in Spanish, every step produced different smells - some quite sweet, some stingy, some faint but nice and I wished I knew where they were coming from, and some just totally awful and I wanted to get away from them. It was terribly hot, I felt hungry and I had no idea where I could get anything to eat in this market. I had a weird fluttery feeling inside myself. Asking someone for help seemed insurmountable - in spite of having successfully used my survival Spanish before. I took flight to the next supermarket and spent the rest of the evening in the safety of the room I hade rented. Thus, I shut out the world because my senses could not cope. We call that culture shock.

Being autistic may have some of that, except that it goes on and on. Much of the aberrant behaviours of people with autism can be explained as ways of trying to shut the world out in order to calm the anxiety and regain some balance for the senses, a balance that is necessary for survival,

Autism and learning

When people with autism have learned what to expect, how to behave and what to say in one situation, they may not understand how this applies to the next situation. Thus a child with autism may have learned to take turns at kindergarten because every day all the children line up in a certain place and in a certain way and he knows that this leads to his turn coming up eventually, but he does not understand the rules for taking turns in his own backyard because he is not able to predict when it will be his turn under the changed conditions at home. Professionals describe this as a lack of generalisation. It is conceivable that this lack of generalisation is intricately related to the unreliability of the senses among people with autism.

The lack of generalisation makes learning very arduous and slow. Many things have to be learned anew in each situation. In fact, how skills acquired in one situation can be applied to another has to be taught, learned and practiced explicitly as well.

Autism and language

Talking involves using a limited rule system for combining words for an indefinite number of sentences. Very similar sentences are used for an indefinite number of situations, and adjustments are made to these sentences on the basis of what else is perceived in a particular situation. On the basis of what is heard, said and experienced in interaction with other people, we decide on what to say next and how to interpret what people are saying to us. Thus, very sophisticated generalisation skills are used when we ialk in a manner that is appropriate in our society. For people with autism, making the generalisations necessary for communicating may be extraordinarily difficult, depending on the particular way in which their sensory processing is affected. Every step of the interaction may have to be taught explicitly - in every situation.

Autism and two languages

Bilingualism is easy for children without autism because they can readily generalise between situations and just need to learn new words and new grammatical regularities to fit in with what they already know and can do, ie. connect what they hear to what is happing around them. They can as easily generalise across languages and language environments as they can generalise within one language environment. Because children with autism find it particularly difficult to generalise what they have learned to new situations, it is often recommended that parents do not further burden their child with having to learn a language other than English at home. On the surface this makes a lot of sense, and for many families this may be the best way to go.

However, there is more to that picture. Given everything that has been said previously about sensory difficulties, how unsettling may it be if the parents suddenly decide only to speak English with the child? How will the child interpret the fact that the parents speak English with him but another language to each other or possibly other children in the family? How much do children with autism miss out on if they only understand their parents when they happen to speak English to them, but don't understand the rest of the interaction that goes on around them in the parents' other language? Are the parents actually able to speak English with their child, or do they feel limited when they can't speak their own language? May the parents' discomfort with speaking English to their child give mixed messages and further impact on the sensory processing of the child?

There is no research evidence to suggest that hearing more than one language makes the symptoms of autism worse or that the English-only advice improves the abilities of children with autism - language-wise, conceptual or social.

Anecdotally we know that the English-only advice causes difficulties for families. Adults report that it is impossible for them to change the language they have always spoken with their spouse. Hence it is unrealistic of professionals to expect that parents would do that. There is evidence that once parents start speaking English with one child, the home language is quickly lost

for all the children. There is also evidence that parents in such a situation frequently mix English and the home language, and that overall the language environment may become less stimulating. There are many effects of the English-only advice that we may not even be able to imagine.

Anecdotally, we also know that many children with autism learn to understand more than one language. One of my clients, a 12 year old boy with Cantonese-speaking parents, who always speak English with him, was very distracted during our session when he could overhear his parents arguing in an adjoining room To my question whether he understood his parents he typed: “I have heard it all my life." Of course. What are we professionals thinking? Another of my clients. a non-verbal three-year-old recently diagnosed with autism, hears Dutch from her father and English from her mother. For the time being it is remarkable that she understands her father as much as her mother in spite of the much lesser exposure to her father's language.

What to do?

The focus of "family-centred practice" is the well-being of the whole family. "Family-centred practice" applies to families with children with autism as much as to any other family. We need to help families to do what feels right to them in addition to teaching them skills that specifically meet the needs of their child with autism.

As with other developmental conditions, autism affects all languages of a bilingual child in the same way. Most people with autism are very visual learners, because what they see is more stable than what they hear, in particular with respect to pictures. Professionals have devised an array of visual strategies to teach children with autism what their peers learn by listening. The visual aids we use with children with autism can form bridges between the languages as well.

If skills need to be re-taught in a range of environments, that re-teaching can easily involve using words and sentences in more than one language. This is not as superfluous as it may seem to the monolingual professional. Children with autism from bilingual families have whole sections of their personal world which further contribute to both languages.

If a child has minor input in another language, like the little girl I wrote about above, that child will either learn some of that language or the parents will sooner or later not expect her to progress. There is no need for professionals to interfere with the family's language choice and potentially threaten the chance for her little brother to become bilingual as well.

Many people with autism are dyspraxic, that is, they have a movement disorder which makes it difficult for them to actually *say* words, even if they know them. These children battle with producing the sound sequences in words in addition to all their other difficulties. Having access to easy words from more than one language can be a resource both for the child and the therapist in the early stages of teaching the child some functional language.

This article was not meant to educate about autism, but to integrate what we know about autism with what we know about bilingualism in families in Australia. I hope it has done just that and that I have provided a reasonably comprehensible explanation for why advising families to switch to English only may not necessarily be the best for all families and their children with autism.