

## How pediatricians can promote language development in bilingual children

September 17, 2021

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Article type: [AAP National Conference & Exhibition](#)

Topics: [Cognition/Language/Learning Disorders](#), [Diversity, equity and inclusion](#), [Immigration](#)

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**Editor's note:** For more coverage of the 2021 AAP National Conference & Exhibition, visit <https://www.aappublications.org/news/2021/08/18/nationalconference2021>.

For years, Mariana Glusman, M.D., FAAP, has been fascinated by how people learn different languages.

A native of Mexico, she came to the U.S. when she was 11 and learned English as a second language. Her passion for language development grew while she was in college.

“I actually did my honors thesis in child development on bilingualism,” she said. “Then, I went to medical school and kind of left that little spark of passion behind.”

It wasn't long, however, before Dr. Glusman's interest in bilingualism was rekindled. After becoming a pediatrician, she began working at Lurie Children's Hospital's Uptown Clinic in Chicago, where patients speak more than 50 languages.

Dr. Glusman, who has been at the clinic more than 25 years, often gets questions from pediatricians and parents regarding raising a bilingual child: Does learning two languages cause language delays? Is it a problem if a child switches between languages? How can you spot delays in children who speak more than one language? Which language should parents who are not native English speakers use at home?

She answers those and other questions during an on-demand session “Is More Better? Promoting Optimal Language Development of Children in Multilingual Homes” (OD0186).

About 22% of people older than 5 years speak a language other than English at home, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

“Regardless of where you work, you're going to come across people that are dual language learners,” said Dr. Glusman, a member of the AAP Council on Early Childhood Executive Committee and Section on Minority Health, Equity and Inclusion.

During the session, she explains bilingual language development and how learning two languages simultaneously will take longer than learning one. She offers advice on how to tease apart whether a bilingual child has a language delay and when to refer for therapy or language enrichment.

Dr. Glusman also discusses the benefits of parents speaking their native language at home and the importance of exposing children to native English speakers.

“Pediatricians really are in a unique position to be able to dispel myths about bilingualism and urge parents to speak in their native language,” she said.

Literacy promotion is another one of her passions. Chair of Reach Out and Read Illinois' Advisory Board, she said it's important for bilingual parents to read books in their native language to expose children to a rich vocabulary. They also can talk about the pictures in a book written in English and ask the child questions.

This “serve and return” interaction creates synapses in the brain, which will help the child develop language and learn to read, said Dr. Glusman, associate professor of pediatrics at Northwestern University Feinberg

School of Medicine in Chicago.

“Children are not sponges. They don't just absorb language from their environment,” she said. “They have to be active participants in their learning.”

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