

BABY SIGNS IN BILINGUAL SETTINGS

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Q: I want to encourage my baby to use signs. However, we are already using two spoken languages in our home. Will my baby get confused if we add signs to the mix?

When children first start learning about language, they make one-to-one correspondences between words and the objects (or actions) they represent. For example, a baby in an English-only environment makes the connection,

the white stuff in my bottle = ‘milk’

However, babies in bilingual environments will have two labels from which to choose. For example, infants from a Spanish/English setting can use either ‘milk’ or ‘leche.’ However, because of their developmental need to establish a one-to-one correspondence, these babies will initially choose either ‘milk’ OR ‘leche,’ but usually not both – at least not at first.

the white stuff in my bottle = ‘milk’ OR ‘leche’

As babies grow into toddlers and acquire larger vocabularies, they start to figure out that there can be two totally different words that share the same meaning. In other words, through exposure to both languages, children eventually conclude that

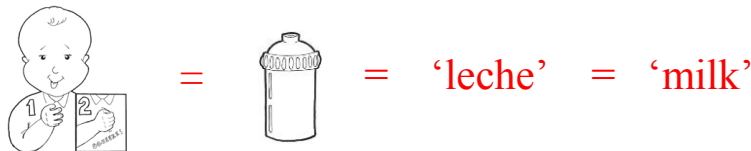
‘milk’ = ‘leche’

So in addition to learning what words *mean*, bilingual babies are doing the work of separating out the words, assigning each one to a particular language set (Spanish or English), and then linking the meanings of the corresponding words to each other.

<u>Spanish</u>		<u>English</u>
‘leche’	=	‘milk’
‘mas’	=	‘more’
‘libro’	=	‘book’

This process can take a while, especially if a child is hearing a mixture of English and Spanish words within the same sentence. Research shows that there are many, many advantages to learning two languages, but it is important to understand that bilingual babies have a lot of figuring out to do – even before they start talking!

This is where using signs can help. By giving infants the same visual symbol (sign) for both ‘leche’ and ‘milk,’ you make the job of connecting the object with the meanings of both words MUCH easier for babies. When the baby hears the Spanish word “leche” and sees it paired with the same sign used when he hears the English word “milk,” the result is “Aha! These words mean the same thing!” Simply put, the sign speeds up recognition of the equivalence between the two words. Result? Less confusion and easier learning!



Rather than confusing your bilingual child, Baby Signs will help smooth the road to understanding and speaking *both* languages.