

Research Summary

Do Older Siblings have an Influence on Language Development of Toddlers?

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Overview

The aim of both of the studies featured in this article was to examine the influence of older siblings on language use in bilingual homes in the United States and on the English and/or heritage language acquisition of young toddlers in those homes. Among bilingual children in the U.S., English is clearly the language of peer interaction among school-aged children and children may extend this preference to language use with their siblings at home. In addition, the speech older children address to toddlers differs from the mothers' child-directed speech in ways that suggest siblings' influences are also worth examining.

Research methods

Study 1: The researchers asked 60 parents (58 mothers, 2 fathers) questions about their children's relative use of the home language versus English using a version of the MacArthur–Bates Communicative Development Inventory. 60 toddler-aged children (36 boys, 24 girls) from various ethnicities and various L1 backgrounds were the target population of the study.

Study 2: The researchers asked native Spanish-speaking mothers questions about their children's relative use of the home language versus English using a combination of survey data and interview questions in both English and Spanish. The 27 children who were raised in these Spanish–English bilingual homes were the target population of the study, as 14 of the children had older siblings and 13 did not.

Results

Study 1: Toddlers with siblings used English about 7% more than toddlers without siblings in terms of overall home language use. However, interestingly, toddlers with siblings were using English about 75% of the time in their interactions. Comparing both groups, the toddlers with siblings scored about 10% higher on the English vocabulary percentile score.

Study 2: The overall percentage of English spoken in the household, as well as the mother's English usage, increased 40-50% due to the influence of an older sibling in the house. Vocabulary usage and grammatical complexity using English among the toddlers increased with an older sibling present, while Spanish vocabulary usage and grammatical complexity in Spanish tended to increase much faster without a sibling present.

Practical Significance

The toddlers with older, school-aged siblings heard more English than the toddlers without school-aged siblings due to 1) the school-aged siblings using English more than the mothers did, and 2) the mothers who had school-aged children using English more than mothers in households with no school-aged children. The effect of older siblings was on the balance of English and Spanish in the children's development, but not on the overall rate of development. The findings also confirm the informal observation that 1) heritage language use in the home is less likely to be maintained as children enter school and bring their English experience home, and 2) for all the school-aged siblings in these studies, English was the language of instruction in school, and the findings of other research suggest that English would have been the almost exclusive language of peer interaction for these older children.

Original Text: Bridges, K. & Hoff, E. (2014)- *Older sibling influences on the language environment and language development of toddlers in bilingual homes*. Applied Psycholinguistics. 35 (2), 225–241.