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A Second Language Gives Toddlers an Edge

Toddlers who learn a second language from infancy have an edge over their unilingual peers, according to a new study from Concordia University and York University in Canada and the Université de Provence in France. As reported in the Journal of Experimental Child Psychology, the research team tested the understanding of English and French words among 24-month-olds to see if bilingual toddlers had acquired comparable vocabulary in each language.

"By 24 months, we found bilingual children had already acquired a vocabulary in each of their two languages and gained some experience in switching between English or French," says senior researcher Diane Poulin-Dubois, a psychology professor at Concordia University and associate director of the Centre for Research in Human Development. "We found the cognitive benefits of bilingualism come much earlier than reported in previous studies."

As part of the investigation, 63 toddlers were divided into groups of unilingual and bilingual infants. To assess levels of bilingualism, parents completed a language exposure interview and vocabulary checklists, while children completed five basic language and cognitive tests.

"Bilingual children outperformed their unilingual counterparts on tasks where they were distracted," says

Dr. Poulin-Dubois. "The small bilingual advantage that we observed in our 24-month-old bilinguals is probably due to a combination of infants' experience listening to and using their two languages."

These new findings have practical implications for educators and parents, says Dr. Poulin-Dubois. "Exposing toddlers to a second language early in their development provides a bilingual advantage that enhances attention control."

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