

the  
INFORMED SLP

# Is my code-switching hurting my child's development?

The truth about code-switching and language development in emergent bilinguals.

Is my friend's judgmental *primo* right? Am I somehow damaging my children's language development by mixing English and Spanish while speaking to them?

Even as a trained bilingual speech-language pathologist who *knows* that **code-switching is a completely natural thing for bilingual individuals** and certainly is [not an indicator of DLD](#), this worry *still* gets in my head. Also, no matter how "knowledgeable" I may feel on this subject, at the end of the day, I'm still a parent. Therefore, it appears that society at large will continue to judge my choices all day long. *Sigh...*

Given my own obvious insecurities on the subject, it's no surprise that I read this pair of studies from researchers in the Netherlands as if they were the latest Rebecca Yarros novel. Both studies looked at the effects of language mixing by parents on their children's language outcomes. The first study, aptly titled "[To mix or not to mix?](#)" by [Verhoeven and colleagues](#), included 56 typically developing bilingual children ages 3–6.

The second study by [Witteloostuijn & Blom](#) included 30 multilingual children ages 3–7 with DLD. In both studies, the language of the community was Dutch. In the first study, typically developing children were Polish-Dutch or Turkish-Dutch bilingual, and in the second study, children with DLD came from homes with a wide range of home languages, including Turkish, Polish, Spanish, English, and Arabic.

## The good news

In both studies, researchers found that **parental language mixing was *not* correlated with any language outcomes** when testing in the majority language (in this case, Dutch). That goes for children with DLD, too. Researchers tested both groups of children on measures of receptive and expressive vocabulary and sentence repetition in Dutch, and the level of code-switching at home had no relation to children's performance on these tasks.

That being said, the researchers in the Verhoeven study of typically developing bilingual children did find one downside. In this study, additional measures were taken in children's home language of Polish or Turkish, and it was found that **parental language mixing was negatively related to expressive vocabulary in the minority language**. It was *not*, however, related to *receptive vocabulary* in that language.

### Why might this be the case?

Well, children hear the majority language outside the home all the time, but they're only hearing the minority language at home. So the impact of code-switching at home makes a difference in the overall language exposure to the minority language, but it doesn't have much of an impact on overall language exposure to the majority language.

Also, most typically developing kids only need to hear a word a few times in order to understand it (receptive knowledge). However, in order for that same child to learn the word deeply enough to turn around and use it themselves (expressive knowledge), they will need more exposure. Increased code-switching in the home may have led to reduced exposure to certain words to the degree that it impacted kids' expressive knowledge, but not their receptive knowledge.

The [Witteloostuijn & Blom](#) study did *not* specifically test language outcomes in the home languages of children with DLD. That being said, if expressive vocabulary outcomes were lower for typically developing children from homes with frequent code-switching, the same is *likely* true for children with DLD.

### Should parents be worried that they're hurting their kids by code-switching?

No! There's no evidence here that code-switching leads to "language confusion," a slowing of language development, or all the other concerns we hear on the street. **This is true for kids with and without DLD.**

*"This suggests that language mixing in the input may not pose a problem for multilingual language learners, including those with DLD."*

— Witteloostuijn & Blom, 2025

### What does this mean for SLPs?

Well, we're the language experts, so it's not a matter of *if* a parent is going to ask for your advice on how to support bilingual language development at home; it's *when*. How can an informed SLP respond?

First, provide evidence-based information clearly and concisely:

- There's no evidence that code-switching causes language delays.
- There's no evidence that code-switching leads to confusion, even for kids with DLD.
- There is some evidence that doing less code-switching at home can help kids develop stronger expressive vocabulary skills in the minority language.

Then, given this knowledge, encourage parents to make the best choice for their family, based on their priorities. If they choose to focus their efforts on reducing code-switching and providing the strongest possible model of the minority language at home, fantastic! Their kids' expressive vocabulary skills will be that much stronger.

For other parents and families, that choice won't make sense for any number of reasons. For many of the families I worked with in Texas, a fluid combination of English and Spanish with plenty of code-switching *was* the language of the community. So, encouraging parents to speak a "purer" form of Spanish (or English) might actually feel pretty inauthentic for them.

For me, operating in my second language often takes some mental strength at the end of the day that I just don't have. As I sit here in my local café, listening to all the code-switching happening around me, I am reminded of how much I appreciate the beautiful mix of languages my kids are hearing and learning from in our home and community.

## References

[van Witteloostuijn, M., & Blom, E. \(2025\). Parental language mixing and its association with language outcomes of children with \(a suspicion of\) Developmental Language Disorder. \*Journal of Communication Disorders\*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcomdis.2025.106557> \[open access\]](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcomdis.2025.106557)

[Verhoeven, E., van Witteloostuijn, M., Oudgenoeg-Paz, O., & Blom, E. \(2025\). To mix or not to mix? The relation between parental language mixing and bilingual children's language outcomes. \*Bilingualism: Language and Cognition\*. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1366728925100175> \[open access\]](https://doi.org/10.1017/s1366728925100175)

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