

APPEAL TO PRACTITIONERS*

9th DECEMBER 2021

Bilingualism is the norm, although it is connected not only with benefits but also with challenges

We reach out to all individuals whose professional work involves contact with bilingual children.

We are aware that the functioning of bilingual children in educational and social contexts has its own specificity and these children may require different support than monolingual children. The assessment of the linguistic development of bilingual and multilingual children for various purposes, such as a potential diagnosis, poses a **huge challenge** for practitioners. Therefore, **we appeal** to all those working in education and health services to promote in their professional activities attitudes towards bilingualism and multilingualism **that are based on the results of reliable scientific research**. Our appeal is directed to people who support children in the acquisition of Polish as one of their languages. Primarily we turn to speech and language therapists, teachers, educators and psychologists.

Presented below are facts on which researchers around the world agree.

- 1 Bi- and multilingualism is the norm.** People in the world who speak two or more languages outnumber those who speak only one.
- 2 Bilingual and multilingual development is not identical to monolingual development.** Therefore, multilingual children cannot be expected to always achieve exactly the same results as their monolingual peers.

** English translation. The original Polish version published on 9th December 2021 is available here: http://psych.strony.uw.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/sites/98/2021/12/APEL_5stron.pdf*

- 3** It is natural **that the contact with each of the acquired languages (including Polish) is generally lower in multilingual than in monolingual children.** This is one of the factors that determine the specificity of bilingual and multilingual development and it is a phenomenon typical of multilingualism.
- 4** **Monolingualism should therefore not be used as a benchmark and reference point** for assessing the linguistic development of both bilingual and multilingual children.
- 5** Importantly, bilingualism and multilingualism **does NOT cause a delay** in language development. When assessing language development in bilingual and multilingual children, all of the child's languages should be taken into account. We understand that it is often very difficult, e.g. due to the lack of appropriate diagnostic tools. However, it is important to be aware that when only one language is considered, one may get a wrong impression of a developmental delay.
- 6** Bi- and multilingualism **is NEVER a cause of disorders** in language development. The percentage of children with developmental language disorders is the same in monolingual, bi- and multilingual children. However, bilingual and multilingual children are more likely than monolinguals to receive misdiagnosis, either positive or negative.
- 7** In case of developmental concerns, **support for bilingual and multilingual children SHOULD NOT be confined to one language only.** If support in all languages with the direct involvement of a professional is not possible, parents or close relatives can be involved to ensure that the child receives support in all the languages they learn.
- 8** **There is no scientific rationale for abandoning bi- or multilingualism in children with neurodevelopmental disorders** (i.e. autism, intellectual disabilities, developmental language disorder), in particular when the language to be abandoned is the language used within the closest family.

9

Children are provided with the best and the richest possible linguistic environment when parents (or guardians) are using the language they know best and with which they are most closely related to (e.g. the language they consider to be their native language). Using this language is the most natural solution in any context (both monolingual, bilingual or multilingual). Therefore, parents **SHOULD BE ENCOURAGED**, not discouraged, to use their native language when communicating with their children, even if it is a language that the child does not use at school and / or it is not spoken by the wider community in which the family lives.

10

Although we argue that bilingualism is the norm, we do not suggest that parents - motivated by the desire to enrich the child's linguistic environment - should communicate with them in languages other than the native one. There is no scientific evidence that the deliberate introduction of an additional language in family communication, which is not the native language of the parents, brings significant developmental benefits to the child.

The role of researchers in the field of social sciences and humanities is to conduct reliable empirical research and, on its basis, provide guidelines that can be helpful in making individual decisions. We encourage practitioners to perceive their role in a similar way, i.e. **to support families** in raising children, including making decisions about language policy in the family, **guided by the current state of scientific knowledge.**

The support for multilingual families and the recommendations they get should always be based on reliable research. When such research is lacking, we should refrain from suggesting solutions whose consequences have not been sufficiently studied. Both scientists and practitioners should therefore separate the conclusions of scientific studies from their personal attitudes and beliefs.

We are convinced that **only close cooperation between researchers and practitioners can help in breaking down barriers**, debunking the myths surrounding the phenomenon of multilingualism and providing practitioners with good access to current research results. This, in turn, may support families in making decisions that are justified by state-of-the-art knowledge.

WE ENCOURAGE BOTH RESEARCHERS AND PRACTITIONERS TO SUCH COOPERATION!

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