



UNIT 4 — Advantages of multilingualism

INFO SHEET 4: Advantages of multilingualism

What is 'multilingualism'?

The ability to use, or be fluent in more than one language.

What are the advantages of multilingualism for children?

>> Multilingual kids are able to switch from one language to another, but in doing so, their brains are busy choosing the right word while blocking the same term from another language. This forces the brain to resolve internal conflict, giving the brain a good workout.

>> A number of studies suggest that being multilingual improves the brain's executive function – the executive control is a command system in the brain that directs the attention processes that we use for planning, solving problems and performing a variety of mentally demanding tasks. Multilinguals probably use this executive function more because they are routinely practicing switching between two languages, and this makes it more efficient. This benefit can be seen in babies as early as 11 months old.

Source – 'Bilingualism and the Development of Executive Function: The Role of Attention', Ellen Bialystok, 2015.

>> The physical brains of multilinguals adapt to the demand of juggling between two languages by restructuring itself. The brains of multilinguals, are found to have thickness of the myelin – known as "myelination" – compared to monolinguals (people who speak one language). This thickness makes the transfer of information faster and with fewer losses.

>> Multilingual kids are better at focusing attention on relevant information and ignoring unnecessary distractions, making the process of learning new rules much faster. Their brains are active and flexible, meaning multilinguals understand math concepts and solve word problems more easily.

>> 'Research has shown that bilingualism is beneficial for children's development and their future. Children exposed to different languages become more aware of different cultures, other people and other points of view. But they also tend to be better than monolinguals at 'multitasking' and focusing attention. They are often more precocious readers, and generally find it easier to learn other languages. Bilingualism gives children much more than two languages!'

Source – 'Bilingualism Matters is a Centre at the University of Edinburgh', founded by Prof. Antonella Sorace.