

Study concludes parents mixing languages has no impact on children's language development

June 12 2015, by Laura Ours

Many adults speak more than one language, and often "mix" those languages when speaking to their children, a practice called "code-switching." An eye-opening study by researchers in the Department of Hearing and Speech Sciences at the University of Maryland has found that this "code-switching" has no impact on children's language development in their home. The study, "Look at the gato! Code-switching in speech to toddlers" appears in the *Journal of Child Language*.

Professor Rochelle S. Newman, chair of the department, and then-graduate students Amelie Bail and Giovanna Morini studied 24 parents and 24 [children](#) aged 18 months during a 15-minute play session.

Key Findings:

- Every parent in the study switched languages at least once during a play session with their child; more than 80 percent of parents did so in the middle of a sentence.
- An average of 4 percent of parents' individual sentences included more than one language.
- The children of parents who switched languages more often than average, or had more mixed-language sentences did not have poorer language skills.
- The researchers found no indication that the mixing of languages

by the parents resulted in poorer language learning by the children.

"Parents tend to use very short sentences when talking to children this young—yet despite this, they often switched languages in the middle of [sentences](#), saying things like, 'el otro fishy' or 'can I have the beso?' We were surprised that so many parents would use two languages in the same sentence when speaking to such young children," Newman said.

The study was conducted in part to address parental concerns.

"A lot of parents worry that using more than one language in the same sentence might cause confusion for a young child. So it is reassuring to know that children whose parents mixed their languages more often didn't show any poorer language skills," Newman said.

More information: "Look at the gato! Code-switching in speech to toddlers." *Journal of Child Language* [DOI: 10.1017/S0305000914000695](#)

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