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Babies raised in bilingual environment have 'better learning, memory skills'



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SINGAPORE — Being brought up in an environment where two languages are spoken has advantages: These babies have been found to show better learning and memory skills, said a study.

The study, which tracked 114 Chinese, Malay and Indian babies as part of a larger long-term study called GUSTO, found that six-month-old infants who were bilingual recognised familiar images faster than those brought up in monolingual homes.

They also paid more attention to novel images than infants who were monolingual.

Previous studies have shown that babies who were quicker to become familiar with, and subsequently bored of, a picture performed better as children in the areas of cognition and language. Research has also shown a preference for novelty is linked to improved performance in IQ and vocabulary tests during the pre-school and school-going years.

A bilingual baby is acquiring two languages while learning to tell the difference between them. "It is possible that, since learning two languages at once requires more information-processing efficiency, the infants have a chance to rise to this challenge by developing skills to cope with it," the researchers theorised.

For this study, bilingual babies were defined as those who had at least 25 per cent exposure to a second language, while monolingual infants were defined as those who had at least 90 per cent exposure to a first language, namely English. There were no differences in education and income levels between the mothers or in household income between the monolingual and bilingual groups.

The findings were shared in a joint statement issued yesterday by the Agency for Science, Technology and Research (A*STAR), the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine at the National University of Singapore (NUS), the National University Health System and KK Women's and Children's Hospital (KKH). The results were also published online in scientific journal *Child Development* on July 30.

NUS Associate Professor Leher Singh, who is the lead author of the study, said: "As adults, learning a second language can be painstaking and laborious ... However, a large number of studies have shown that babies are uniquely well positioned to take on the challenges of bilingual acquisition and, in fact, may benefit from this journey."

GUSTO, or Growing Up in Singapore Towards Healthy Outcomes, is a long-term study on pregnant Singaporean mothers and their offspring from birth until nine years of age. A joint effort by A*STAR's Singapore Institute for Clinical Sciences, KKH and the National University Hospital, it was launched in 2009 and aims to study how environmental factors affect the development of diseases such as diabetes.

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