Do bilingual children develop their language slower than monolingual children?

**Bilingualism is defined as the ability to learn and use two languages in everyday living.**

Children who are bilingual, in general, are under referred to Speech Pathologists due to general opinion that they lag behind their monolingual peers in their acquisition of English. Many of these children are not flagged as having a specific language delay, autism etc due to the assumptions that because they are juggling two languages they are not equivalent in their language development to monolingual children, and that their acquisition of the languages will catch up in time.

The evidence indicates that bilingual children have a smaller vocabulary in both languages than you would find in normally developing monolingual children. Bilingual children also take a little longer to reach the same level as monolingual children in the area of grammar development. The amount of exposure these children receive to both languages effects the rate of development in those languages. Typically developing 2;5-year-old children who are bilingual in English and an additional language and who are exposed to English 60% of the time, perform equally to their naturally developing monolingual peers. It has however been found that the bilingual children are ahead in their meta-linguistic awareness and executive functioning skills.

The observations of child language development showed that there is no difference between monolingual and bilingual children in the rate of early language development and critical milestones, for example ‘babbling’, first words, and word combinations. Bilingual children who are normally developing and from similar backgrounds to their monolinguisitc peers produce their first words, develop a core vocabulary, and combine their first words / phrases at a similar time. This means that bilingual children, despite their exposure to different languages, should develop at the same pace as each other in the language they are most exposed to. Therefore, the child should be assessed on the stronger language. If the child is not developing age appropriately in their stronger language, then this would indicate a need for intervention.

**Reference:**

*Child healthcare nurses believe that bilingual children show slower language development, simplify screening procedures and delay referrals.* Laleh Nayeb, Thomas Wallby, Monica Westerlund, Eva-Kristina Salameh, Anna Sarkadi, 20 October 2014.