

# Speaking Multiple Languages Can Influence Children's Emotional Development

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On the classic TV show *I Love Lucy*, Ricky Ricardo was known for switching over to rapid-fire Spanish whenever he was upset, despite the fact Lucy had no idea what her Cuban husband was saying. These scenes were comedy gold, but they also provided a relatable portrayal of the linguistic phenomenon of code-switching.

This kind of code-switching, or switching back and forth between different languages, happens all the time in multilingual environments, and often in emotional situations. In a new article in the July issue of [Perspectives on Psychological Science](#), a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#), psychological scientists Stephen Chen and Qing Zhou of the University of California, Berkeley and Morgan Kennedy of Bard College delve deeper into this linguistic phenomenon.

Drawing on research from psychology and linguistics, the researchers seek to better understand how using different languages to discuss and express emotions in a multilingual family might play an important role in children's emotional development. They propose that the particular language parents choose to use when discussing and expressing emotion can have significant impacts on children's emotional understanding, experience, and regulation.

"Over the past few years, there's been a steadily growing interest in the languages multilingual individuals use to express emotions," says Chen. "We were interested in the potential clinical and developmental implications of emotion-related language shifts, particularly within the context of the family."

Existing research from psychological science underscores the fact that language plays a key role in emotion because it allows the speakers to articulate, conceal, or discuss feelings. When parents verbally *express* their emotions, they contribute to their children's emotional development by providing them a model of how emotions can be articulated and regulated.

When parents *discuss* emotion, they help their children to accurately label and consequently understand their own emotions. This explicit instruction can further help children to better regulate their emotions.

Additionally, research from linguistics suggests that when bilingual individuals switch languages, the way they experience emotions changes as well. Bilingual parents may use a specific language to express an emotional concept because they feel that language provides a better cultural context for expressing the emotion. For example, a native Finnish speaker may be more likely to use English to tell her children that she loves them because it is uncommon to explicitly express emotions in Finnish.

Thus, the language that a parent chooses to express a particular concept can help to provide cues that reveal his or her emotional state. Language choice may also influence how children experience emotion,

such expressions can potentially elicit a greater emotional response when spoken in the child's native language. Shifting from one language to another may help children to regulate their emotional response by using a less emotional, non-native language as a way to decrease negative arousal, or to help model culture specific emotional regulation.

Overall, the authors argue that research from psychological science and linguistics suggests that a child's emotional competence is fundamentally shaped by a multilingual environment. These findings may be particularly useful in the development of intervention programs for immigrant families, helping intervention staff to be aware of how the use of different languages in various contexts can have an emotional impact.

"Our aim in writing this review was to highlight what we see as a rich new area of cross-disciplinary research," says Chen. "We're especially excited to see how the implications of emotion-related language switching can be explored beyond the parent-child dyad – for example, in marital interactions, or in the context of therapy and other interventions."