

Speaking a Second Language May Give Low-Income Kids a Boost

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Children growing up in low-income homes score lower than their wealthier peers on cognitive tests and other measures of scholastic success, study after study has found. Now mounting evidence suggests a way to mitigate this disadvantage: learning another language.

In an analysis published online in January in *Child Development*, Singapore Management University researchers probed demographic data and intellectual assessments from a subset of more than 18,000 kindergartners and first graders in the U.S. As expected, they found children from families with low socioeconomic status (based on factors such as household income and parents' occupation and education level) scored lower on cognitive tests. But within this group, kids whose families spoke a second language at home scored better than monolinguals.

Evidence for a “bilingual advantage”—the idea that speaking more than one language improves mental skills such as attention control or ability to switch between tasks—has been mixed. Most studies have had only a few dozen participants from mid- to high-socioeconomic-status backgrounds perform laboratory-based tasks.