

BILINGUAL KIDS · AGES 2-8

My Child Mixes English and Bengali — Is That Normal?

PRINTABLE ARTICLE

"Ma, I want more jol." A sentence like that — English grammar, an English sentence structure, with a Bengali word slotted right into the middle — is one of the most common things parents bring to me, usually sounding a little worried. The short answer: this is one of the most well-documented, normal parts of raising a bilingual child.

What's actually happening when kids mix languages

This is called code-switching, and it happens for a very ordinary reason: your child is pulling whichever word arrives first, in whichever language, to say what they mean as quickly as possible. Bilingual children as young as two show clear patterns in how and when they switch, which tells us it's a structured skill, not random noise.

Adult bilinguals do exactly the same thing, constantly, usually without noticing.

Why this doesn't mean "confusion"

A common worry is that mixing means a child hasn't fully separated the two languages in their head. Research on bilingual development doesn't support this. Children as young as one year old can distinguish between their languages and adjust which one they use depending on who they're speaking to.

What to actually do about it

- **Model the English word back, gently.** "Oh, you want more water? Here you go" — supplying the word naturally, without correcting.
- **Don't interrupt mid-sentence to correct.** Let them finish the thought. Correcting mid-flow teaches hesitation, not fluency.
- **Keep both languages present, not separated into rigid zones.** Strict "English only" rules add stress without speeding anything up.
- **Expect it to reduce with more single-language exposure.** As vocabulary grows in both languages, mixing typically decreases on its own.

Mixing usually peaks in the toddler and early preschool years and gradually decreases as vocabulary in each language grows. A five- or six-year-old still mixing occasionally is well within normal range.

When it's worth a closer look

Code-switching itself is not a red flag. What's worth paying attention to is a broader language delay showing up in both languages at once — for example, a child well past three who has very few words in either language, or who struggles to be understood by family in either language. That's a different question from mixing, and worth mentioning to a pediatrician or speech-language professional if it's a genuine, ongoing concern.