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Multilingualism

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Multilingualism is something very common since there are more than 5000 languages but only 200 states in the world. In early childhood children all over the world learn more than one language without developing speech or language problems. They can learn languages either simultaneously ("doppelter Erstspracherwerb") or they start learning a second language as soon as they enter kindergarten ("früher Zweitspracherwerb"). There is no evidence that bilingual children learn to speak later. Bilingual speech development shows the same steps as monolingual speech development.

Researchers of the project "the Multilingual Brain" (University of Basel, coordinated by Prof. Cordula Nitsch) could show by fMRI investigations that people who learned more than one language in the early childhood develop different speech-processing strategies compared to those who learn more languages later in their life. These specific speech-processing strategies are activated when an adult person is learning new languages.

What consequences can be drawn out of that for the therapy of hearing-impaired children with multilingual surrounding? 1. Because development of spoken language depends on acoustic stimulation hearing loss has to be diagnosed and treated properly as soon as possible! 2. Parents and caregivers should use their most comfortable language to talk to the child. 3. Speech therapy in the language of the therapist makes sense, if the child uses this language frequently. Otherwise the therapist should instruct and support parents and caregivers in the process of learning and speech development according to Natural Auditory Oral Education.

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