


Chapter 17


Enhancing Development in Bilingual Children With Autism: The Intersection of Occupational Therapy, Mental Health, and Education

Dimitra V. Katsarou

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8690-0314>

University of the Aegean, Greece

Evangelos Mantsos


 <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-8490-2660>

University of Western Macedonia, Greece

Alexandros Argiriadis

Hellenic Mediterranean University, Greece

Georgios A. Kougioumtzis

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2362-2094>

National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece

ABSTRACT

Bilingualism, occupational therapy (OT), and mental health intersect in unique ways for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), presenting both challenges and opportunities for cognitive development and educational progress. Children with ASD often experience difficulties in communication, social interaction, and executive functioning. However, research indicates that bilingualism can provide cognitive

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and social benefits without hindering language acquisition in children with ASD. Occupational therapy, when integrated into educational and therapeutic plans, can further enhance these benefits by using structured, activity-based strategies to foster communication and cognitive flexibility. Moreover, addressing mental health needs alongside bilingual and OT interventions is critical, as children with ASD are at an elevated risk for anxiety, depression, and emotional dysregulation. This abstract explores how these domains interact, highlighting the implications for cognitive development, educational perspectives, and professional practices.

INTRODUCTION

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) presents a diverse range of challenges, particularly affecting social communication, cognitive flexibility, sensory integration, and emotional regulation. In recent years, the intersection of bilingualism and ASD has garnered significant attention, dismantling earlier misconceptions that dual-language exposure could hinder development in autistic children (Davis, Zaki, & Sargent, 2023). Research now shows that bilingualism can enhance cognitive flexibility, social participation, and emotional resilience in children with ASD, offering them broader tools for navigating complex social environments (Howard, Katsos, & Gibson, 2021).

Occupational therapy (OT) interventions are key in supporting this population, providing sensory-friendly, structured activities that promote motor skills, language acquisition, and social-emotional regulation. Multisensory strategies, when combined with dual-language approaches, have been shown to create more inclusive and effective environments for children with ASD (Al-Badawi & Tarawneh, 2025). Moreover, OT practices that integrate bilingual communication reinforce both linguistic and developmental goals, further validating the need for culturally responsive therapy models.

The mental health implications of navigating a bilingual environment are profound. Children with ASD are already at increased risk for anxiety, depression, and emotional dysregulation, challenges that can be exacerbated by miscommunications or cultural dissonance (Beauchamp, Amorim, & Wunderlich, 2022). However, when educational and therapeutic settings celebrate bilingualism and provide culturally grounded support, they act as protective environments that strengthen a child's self-concept, emotional resilience, and familial bonds (Digard et al., 2023).

Educational settings serve as pivotal arenas for implementing bilingual and OT strategies. Structured supports like visual schedules, dual-language materials, sensory-friendly classrooms, and teacher-therapist collaboration have been recommended to enhance engagement and learning for bilingual students with ASD

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