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Now, more than a year on from the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, there is a noticeable uptick in the number of babies born recently.

This new generation of “panda babies” (short for “pandemic babies”; credit to my partner for this linguistic creativity) is coming into a very different world from those born before the pandemic began.

However, while panda babies are experiencing the negative pressures of an overtaxed healthcare system and the stress of families going in and out of lockdown, there has also been an unexpected positive occurrence from a linguistic perspective.

For many babies, more time at home means more frequent interaction with their families. This increase in interaction is key for a child’s development, as babies who are spoken to directly develop a much higher vocabulary than babies who spend the majority of time listening as bystanders to conversation.

Additionally, the benefit of increased interaction with families at home is even more present for bilingual/multilingual babies. In a new study by researchers in



# Baby talk

## LANGUAGE MATTERS

the UK, Ireland, and Norway, 900 multilingual families were surveyed about their language practices at home during periods of lockdown (April through July 2020).

The preliminary results point to an increase in the use of the families’ heritage languages at home (family languages that are minority languages in society).

Why are researchers excited about this result? As language and linguistic researchers have shown through decades of research, speaking heritage language(s) at home brings massive benefits to children who then grow up to be bilingual/multilingual.

It is a longstanding myth that children should speak the dominant societal language at home (e.g. English in New Zealand). Children are remarkable at acquiring language and will pick up the dominant language very quickly at school, often leading to language shift within families.

If the heritage languages of the families aren’t spoken regularly at home, it is highly likely they will become passive languages or completely lost. However, the more that children are encouraged to use heritage languages at home, the better the chance they will maintain their ability to speak and understand them.

Growing up bilingual and multilingual has countless benefits, including faster processing time for analytical areas like

mathematics, a greater ability to empathise with people from diverse backgrounds, and greater skill at memorising information.

Some parents worry their children will be disadvantaged by using a heritage language at home (another widespread myth). While bilingual and multilingual children sometimes experience initial delays due to processing multiple linguistic information at once, these delays are short and soon overcome, with children then bounding ahead.

The same holds for bilingual and multilingual babies. While parents might be worried if they notice their babies not speaking their first words as early as their monolingual peers, fear not! This perfectly normal temporary delay is due to the babies listening, processing, and sorting linguistic information. Soon they will be chattering away like their peers and able to do so in multiple languages.

The key, whether monolingual or multilingual, is to provide frequent linguistic input in the languages that you want your child to eventually speak, and to do so while speaking to them, not just near them.

“Baby talk” has also been shown to serve this purpose and to have the added benefit of being exciting to babies because of the more widely varying pitches and simplified sounds.

So parents and caregivers – if more lockdowns await us (or even if they don’t), take the time to talk to the panda babies near you about all of the aroha that their ‘aiga has for them.

## Contact us

Got a language query? Email [opinion@stuff.co.nz](mailto:opinion@stuff.co.nz). Not all queries will be answered.



## A declaration of war on democracy

Views from around the world. These opinions are not necessarily shared by Stuff newspapers.

House judiciary committee chairman Jerry Nadler and his buddies just declared war on our nation’s democracy, even as they pretend to be defending it. That’s how radical their Supreme Court-packing bill is.

The bill would expand the high court by four seats, allowing President Joe Biden to almost instantly turn the current liberal minority into a majority – ensuring that the Supreme Court, and the US Constitution, would no longer stand in the way of anything Democrats chose to do.

For all its recent noise about voting rights and so on, the left only cares about power – it wants to transform America now. Anything that stands in

## Viewpoint

its way, it simply denounces as “anti-democratic” and “racist”.

Biden, Speaker Nancy Pelosi and other top Dems have opposed court-packing in the past. A “bonehead idea”, Biden called it. Yet now they’re afraid to condemn it outright. Biden kicked the can by naming a commission to consider court-packing. Pelosi says she’ll block this bill for now but calls it “an idea to be considered”. They are terrified – and therefore controlled – by the extreme left-wing of their party.

There is no way to overstate this. Messing with the fundamental structure of our government will undermine our democracy. Any responsible politician must oppose it.