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Sasha Long

Hi Michelle, thank you so much for joining me.

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Michelle Diaz

Hi Sasha, thank you so much for having me in your podcast.

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Sasha Long

I'm excited to have you because this is a topic that we really haven't discussed on the podcast. So I'm really excited for you to bring your area of expertise on this topic. Today we're going to talk about bilingualism and how we can best teach communication, increase communication with our learners with autism. A question that I've gotten a lot on this area is, you know, if my child has autism, should we only speak one language? Should we stick with English at home? Is it okay for speaking Spanish in the household? So what is your answer to this and what does the research really say?

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Michelle Diaz

Definitely. Yeah, that's one of the biggest questions family ah families tend to ask. um And it is definitely a concern that has been growing in the bilingual households.

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Michelle Diaz

So i think that this is a great topic to talk about and to clarify because research actually shows that there is

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Sasha Long

Mm-hmm.

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Michelle Diaz

no There is no sort of um bad thing in terms of teaching a child with autism two languages. There has been a study done by UCLA actually in 2025 and it was published in the Autism Research. And it shows that there has been no negative effects of bilingual exposure in the population of individuals with autism. Instead, it actually shows that individuals that are learning two different languages show stronger executive functioning skills such as cognitive flexibility and perspective taking.

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Michelle Diaz

and children who were exposed to two or even multiple languages. So research is actually showing that it's beneficial to teach children,

not um only typical developing children, but also children with autism, two or more languages.

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Sasha Long

Oh, that's awesome to hear. And like, especially some like recent research too. i know in my experience, when I was in the classroom, I had a lot of students that were bilingual that spoke Spanish at home and English at school and yeah, had, were really, you know, able to fluently switch between between languages or for students that were less verbal, still had receptive skills in both languages. So I, and I'm sure you see that in your practice a lot too.

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Michelle Diaz

Definitely. And one thing that i want to clarify is that being on the spectrum of autism does not mean that a child is not smart enough to learn two or more languages. That's totally false. It should be that the child can learn as many languages as they are exposed to in the household and what matters the most is consistent communication whether that is um in English or in another language that consistent communication is what's going to be best for for that child.

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Sasha Long

That's a really good point because you don't want parents to feel like, oh, I shouldn't be communicating in our native language to our child because i I want what's best for them, but that's actually going to do the opposite if you avoid communication.

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Michelle Diaz

Exactly. And that also goes with the child's culture, identity, and relationships with their families. So obviously being exposed to that second language and learning that second language allows them to find themselves a little bit more in their culture and and their values. So it's it's part of who they are.

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Sasha Long

Yeah. You know, and that's actually one thing I really liked about your Instagram page is you talk a lot about culturally responsive care. What does that look like for you in practice with the families that you work with and the students you work with?

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Michelle Diaz

Definitely, yes. So whenever a family comes in for the first time or whenever I first meet a family and their child, the first thing that i want to ensure is that i am upholding the family's language, culture,

and values in the intervention process that I'm conducting as a speech therapist because language is more than just getting wants and needs met.

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Michelle Diaz

um It's actually part of their home routine, their um cultural identities. So that's something that I always want to value and and uphold as a speech therapist because language is part of who we are and I want to ensure that they are accessing the vocabulary that they that they need in one language or multiple languages so that's something really important especially with children that have autism if I need to add in a language to their AAC device that's something I want to know right away

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Sasha Long

Okay, so speaking of AAC devices, when a child is using an AAC device and comes from a bilingual household, are there special considerations that you make? What are some things you do in practice? Are you putting both languages on the device? What does that look like?

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Michelle Diaz

Yes. So one thing that I do when I'm talking to the families when I first met them when they come in is that i either have them fill out a sheet prior to coming in just so then I already have all that information.

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Michelle Diaz

And if not, then when they come in, they can tell me if they use different vocabulary in terms of maybe um for foods, they have a specific name for cheese in the household.

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Michelle Diaz

So if they are speaking two or more languages, then I want to make sure that I create a different page that has the language that they use at home.

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Michelle Diaz

For example, I work a lot with the Spanish-speaking populations, and all of these kids basically have a page in English and a page in Spanish, and the pages translate.

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Michelle Diaz

so So it's the same icon in both pages, just different language, if

that makes sense.

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Sasha Long

Yeah, no, I love that. And I think it's good to like visually think about what that looks like that there's yes, this page with food items in English and food items and in Spanish.

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Michelle Diaz

Mm-hmm.

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Michelle Diaz

Yes, and that's one thing that also as a bilingual SLP in my practice, whenever i am working with these bilingual students, I will switch from page to page, even though, you know, it gets a little hectic at times because it is AAC device and you have to click different things.

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Michelle Diaz

But I want to ensure that they are recognizing the item, having exposure to the vocabulary in both languages because they are using both pages. So I want that to be consistent both at school and at home.

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Sasha Long

Do you ever get feedback or kind of concerns from teachers that like, oh, no, is that going to be confusing? And then how do you address that with them to ensure that like it that we can still learn both?

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Michelle Diaz

Definitely, yeah, that's something that um it continues to be not, I don't want to call it a hurdle, but something that that we continue to work towards, that understanding that having that exposure um is beneficial for these students and educating my colleagues, educating them.

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Michelle Diaz

the teachers that i work with and also teaching them how to use the device when I'm not there in terms of food is a big, big one, because when the students are eating snack, I want to ensure that they are able to request exactly what they want and maybe at home they call it a different thing than they call it at school.

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Michelle Diaz

So that's when I teach the teachers or the um teacher assistants how to access both languages on their AAC device so then the student can know exactly what they want to request.

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Michelle Diaz

and um and work towards that. So so there's definitely a lot of education that I provide to my colleagues.

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Sasha Long

Yeah, I mean, you think about AAC on its own needs so much training and education, but also bilingual education as well. And i I liked your example earlier of like, yes, I'm bopping between pages and that takes more time and effort, but exposing to both languages is is is essential.

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Sasha Long

And I thought of in that moment, like a really great yeah ESL teacher is going to speak in two languages. And that's kind of the same thing you're doing with the device.

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Michelle Diaz

Mm-hmm.

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Michelle Diaz

Definitely, and one thing that um bilingual students that are typical developing do a lot is code switch between languages. So they might start a sentence in English and then end it in Spanish.

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Michelle Diaz

And that's one thing that I want to also provide to my students that have autism that are nonverbal, just because they're nonverbal and cannot code switch verbally, that doesn't mean that they cannot do it on their device.

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Michelle Diaz

So that's one thing that I'm always um pushing for in terms of like, it's okay if they if they request one thing or if they say one thing in English and then they say another thing in their second language.

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Michelle Diaz

Like, totally okay. That doesn't mean they have to stick to one language the whole day.

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Sasha Long

who And I think, like you said earlier about teaching your colleagues and and new teaching assistants, that we're just valuing communication, not like, oh, well, you didn't say it in English, you can't have it.

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Michelle Diaz

Exactly.

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Sasha Long

Yeah. When working and supporting students that are bilingual and have autism or other diverse learning needs, what are some other practical strategies that you do within a classroom setting to support communication and in both languages? Yeah.

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Michelle Diaz

Yeah, so one thing that I've also been working on is during circle time, whenever we're all in the group and we are not only requesting things, but more so commenting like we are saying hello to our peers. We go around and you know say hello to each one.

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Michelle Diaz

And I make sure that each individual student is able to access their AAC device and say hello there. So more than just requesting, also greeting, saying goodbye or saying good morning during circle time or when we have surprise box.

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Michelle Diaz

We also practice on saying like, open, open the box. So more than just um requesting, more than just saying, I want, i want, you know, because I feel like that's pushed a lot on on these people.

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Michelle Diaz

students on on these um individuals with autism, I also want them to go beyond that and and use their device in in any sort of setting. So I also bring it to the playground. If they want to go on the swing and they they want swing, then it's on their AAC device. So they can press swing, let's go on the swing. They want me to push them on the swing more than they can say more on their device.

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Michelle Diaz

So I really try to make sure that their device is used in every setting that they're in.

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Sasha Long

That's such a good point. And I like that you like recommended ideas like morning circle or recess. Like those are routine based part of the days. And I think sometimes we get stuck on snack and lunch because it's like, oh, this is an easy routine.

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Sasha Long

They're motivated. But there's also a lot of other motivating routines within the day.

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Michelle Diaz

Yeah.

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Michelle Diaz

Exactly. Totally agree. And, you know, sometimes you just have to make things up and make them a little bit fun for them to be engaged. Like the surprise box, they tell me open, they tell me the, sometimes put like different um activities there that are like colorful. So then and they they tell me what color they want, or they tell me um like,

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Michelle Diaz

a close the box when we're all done so these are more than just like I want I want this I want that it's it's actually embedding their AAC device into just a normal everyday activity that they do yeah

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Sasha Long

What do you respond to teachers or other kind of educators that might be hesitant to use AAC because they think it's going to diminish verbal language?

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Michelle Diaz

Yeah, I've had that actually happen more with parents more so than with teachers, just because I feel like there has been a lot of education now on AAC device.

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Sasha Long

Mm-hmm.

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Michelle Diaz

But yeah, I've had some pushback on AAC and research actually shows that AAC promotes education language and growth of vocabulary in individuals with autism. So oftentimes having that visual that's on the AAC device paired with that, um,

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Michelle Diaz

verbalization that it provides whenever you press on the visual that allows them to expand their vocabulary too because you are also modeling um on their AAC device when they are doing different activities so then they are learning that oh this is a stuffed animal. Oh, this is an elephant. Now their vocabulary is expanding so much more since you are providing that expressive language and that visual paired with that model. It just allows them to understand language a lot more and allows them to also then

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Michelle Diaz

imitate that model that you're providing and now they're using that language that you're modeling. So then it just increases language.

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Sasha Long

Yeah.

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Sasha Long

All the way around.

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Michelle Diaz

There's, yeah, yeah.

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Sasha Long

Yeah. Yeah, that's a great that's a great way to put it because we sometimes hear that pushback, but we're like, actually, it's going to help. Don't worry. um And I do understand, you know, a parent is, of course, going to always be worried and and want what's best for their child.

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Sasha Long

um Kind of going back to this kind of, as you were talking earlier, I was thinking about this. When it comes to AAC devices and setting up buttons and in two different languages, i could – I can hear someone listening thinking like, well, I don't speak the child's native language.

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Sasha Long

Like I don't speak Spanish. I don't speak Mandarin.

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Michelle Diaz

Oh, mm-hmm.

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Sasha Long

um What is your advice there when you don't speak the child's lit native language? Technology has made it us a lot it a lot easier on us on translating things, right?

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Michelle Diaz

Definitely, yes. So I do have some monolingual like teachers and assist um and teacher assistants that work in the classroom where there are a lot of children that are bilingual. And a lot of the times... um when a child might be requesting and um a language that's not English, then a lot of the times the um the teachers will look at the visual or like look at the picture and then they can just like wrap their head a little bit on what the child is saying.

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Michelle Diaz

So having those visuals, actually, they're helpful for both the child and the teachers.

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Sasha Long

yeah

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Michelle Diaz

Honestly, um But other than that, i would say, you know, if you are speaking in English, then then model in English. Like, obviously, we want the modeling of language to continue. i don't want anybody to think like, oh, just because I don't speak their language, I cannot model language for this student anymore. or show them on their device where where they have to access that vocabulary. So I would say to continue to do it in the language you feel most comfortable in. But if the student responds in the language they feel most comfortable in, then then continue that language.

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Michelle Diaz

that conversation because I wouldn't like you to push towards English only just because you don't understand both languages.

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Sasha Long

I really like that advice because it feels like we're still being respectful to the child and like the and honoring the communication they feel most confident in.

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Michelle Diaz

Mm-hmm.

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Sasha Long

But also like that theme that you've kind of been interpreting or in integrating into everything is like the more communication, the better kind of matters less on the language and more just the exposure.

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Michelle Diaz

Exactly. And it's just like when we are in person and someone is trying to get their point across to us and we might not be understanding what they're saying, but we use our gestural cues, the way they are, you know, using their hand gestures or their are facial expressions.

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Michelle Diaz

Well, that's the same the same thing for someone who is nonverbal. If they are, you know, using the language they feel most comfortable in, well, we can look at the visuals that um that language has and for us to understand with those like visual cues, what they're trying to say.

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Michelle Diaz

So, so yeah, thinking a little bit outside the box.

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Sasha Long

Yeah, the visual helps everyone. And, you know, I love that there's so many like AI tools and tools embedded into our AAC softwares that will translate things for you.

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Michelle Diaz

Mm hmm.

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Michelle Diaz

Definitely.

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Sasha Long

We don't know always have to bring a translator in necessarily. Well, thank you so much, Michelle. This has been so interesting to think about because I think a lot of teachers are in classrooms, especially with early learners where there are children that speak multiple languages. So this has been so informative to learn about best practices in this area. Where can people go to learn more from you?

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Michelle Diaz

Yeah, so I actually have a website and my website is called Michelle Diaz, slp.com. And there you can access all of my links and you can also email me if you would like more information about a specific topic or have specific questions um about what we just talked about. And yeah, we can get connected through there.

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Sasha Long

Awesome. Thank you, Michelle. I'm going to link your website in the show notes. And thank you so much for joining us.

19:07.03

Michelle Diaz

Of course, thank you for inviting me.