

## Practical Tips and Tools

# DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION SETTINGS

**A**N INCREASING NUMBER of children are exposed to more than one language from birth. Dual language learning has many benefits for children and families, including stronger connections to family and culture. In your role as an early childhood educator, you will likely encounter families whose children are learning multiple languages. A few ways in which early childhood professionals can support dual language learners include:

- Provide opportunities to engage in play activities (e.g., outdoor play, water or sand play) that do not require a lot of talking.
- “Double up” your message to bilingual children by using words along with a gesture, action, or facial expression.
- Repeat new words and concepts: Saying the same thing more than once gives children several opportunities to learn the meaning.
- Build on words a child already knows. For example, a child may hold up a piece of play-dough and say, “Cookie.” You can expand on this statement by saying, “Cookie! A chocolate-chip cookie. Yummy! May I eat it?” (Hirschler, 2005)

<p><b>Language Development</b></p> <p>Children who acquire a second language before age 3 years are generally referred to as simultaneous bilinguals. (Cryer &amp; Harms, 2000). In the short term, these children typically have smaller vocabularies in each language that they speak (compared with children who are monolingual, i.e., who speak only one language). However, they often have larger total vocabularies (adding up the words they know in both languages) than their peers who speak only one language (Pearson, Fernandez, Lewedey, &amp; Oller, 1997, as cited in Cryer &amp; Harms, 2000).</p>	<p><b><i>What This Means for Your Work With Families</i></b></p> <p>If you think a child may be experiencing a delay in language development, it is important to know whether he or she is learning two languages at the same time (i.e., the child’s home language and English). If you believe a developmental screening is necessary, then it is critical to involve skilled assessors who have experience with dual language learners. Children should also be assessed in both languages, which helps to ensure an accurate and culturally appropriate assessment.</p>
<p><b>Language Mixing</b></p> <p>It is typical for bilingual children to show some language mixing (Cryer &amp; Harms, 2000). For example, children may use the Spanish word for bottle and the English word for juice. Language mixing (or code mixing) should not be penalized. Children are not mistaking one language for the other. On the contrary, language mixing is common in many bilingual families who combine English and their home language in their daily interactions. As children grow, they begin to modify their language use depending on the person to whom they are talking (Petitto et al., 2001). For example, a child whose home language is Korean will tend to use more English when talking to English-speaking caregivers and more Korean when speaking with his grandparents, for whom Korean is their first language. This shows how adaptable and sensitive dual language learners are to the people with whom, and the settings in which, they are interacting.</p>	<p><b><i>What This Means for Your Work With Families</i></b></p> <p>Talk with families to learn how their children communicate important needs and wants (e.g., “milk,” “hungry,” “hurts,” “diaper/potty”). Sometimes these needs, wants, and feelings may be expressed in the child’s home language. Because this may be a language that caregivers don’t know, families can meet with providers to share the words children usually use to communicate at home. Providers and teachers can be encouraged to learn this vocabulary themselves so they will recognize the words more easily when children use them. Sharing this information with children’s caregivers and educators helps to ensure that children’s needs are met and that the family’s home culture is respected.</p>
<p><b>Concerns About Losing Home Language</b></p> <p>Some families may worry that, if their children are exposed to English in a child care setting, they may lose their home language. This is not the case. When parents are consistent in</p>	<p><b><i>What This Means for Your Work With Families</i></b></p> <p>This research underscores the importance of supporting families’ home language and culture. When providers create an environment that is open and welcoming to families who use languages</p>

<p>the use of the home language, children continue to develop skills in that language even when they are exposed to a second language (Pearson et al., 1997, as cited in Cryer &amp; Harms, 2000).</p>	<p>other than English, children and families receive the message that their home language is good, important, and respected. The ability to use one's home language in the early education setting—and having this skill be welcomed and supported by providers—helps children develop confidence, self-esteem, and a positive cultural identity. Providers can also show respect for families' home cultures by incorporating foods, songs, stories, and toys that reflect children's home cultures into early learning and caregiving programs. Teachers and caregivers can look for ways to incorporate aspects of children's cultures into daily routines; children become more interested in the learning process because the activities look familiar to them. Recognizing and celebrating holidays from the family's home culture(s) creates a welcoming and inclusive setting as well. Finally, offering written information in languages other than English is another important way to reach out to culturally diverse families.</p>
<p><b>Relationships</b></p> <p>Opportunities to converse in a second language on a regular basis are necessary for young children to become fluent in that language. Research has found that overhearing or watching television in a second language is not enough exposure for children to learn to speak it fluently (Pearson et al., 1997, as cited in Cryer &amp; Harms, 2000). Another important ingredient for language learning is the quality of the relationship that the child has with the adult who is helping her learn the second language (Cryer &amp; Harms, 2000). A close, nurturing relationship, in which a child feels loved and safe, helps her feel comfortable using new language skills, making mistakes, and trying again.</p>	<p><b>What This Means for Your Work With Families</b></p> <p>This is a reminder that relationships are the context in which all learning—especially language development—unfolds. It is critical to build warm, nurturing, and responsive relationships with all the children and families with whom you work and to show respect for their home languages and cultures. Early childhood coordinators can also help parents identify high-quality child care environments in which the staff is committed to supporting children's home culture. (Ideally, caregivers would know some words or have some familiarity with the child's home language.)</p>

## Learn More

For additional reading on this topic, consider the following three resources that explore the many ways to support family culture in early learning environments:

- *One Child, Two Languages: A Guide for Preschool Educators of Children Learning English as a Second Language*, second edition  
 By P. O. Tabors. (2008)  
 Baltimore: Brookes.
- *Diversity in Early Care and Education Programs: Honoring Differences*  
 By J. Gonzalez-Mena (2007)  
 New York: McGraw-Hill
- *Learning to Read the World: Language and Literacy in the First Three Years*  
 Edited by S. E. Rosenkoetter and J. Knapp-Philo (2006)  
 Washington, DC: ZERO TO THREE
- *Building Literacy With Love: A Guide for Teachers and Caregivers of Children Birth Through Age 5*  
 By B. S. Bardige and M. M. Segal (2005)  
 Washington, DC: ZERO TO THREE

## References

- CRYER, D., & HARMS, T. (2000). *Infants and toddlers in out-of-home care*. Baltimore: Brookes.
- HIRSCHLER, J. A. (2005). *How teachers support English language learners in the classroom* (Head Start Bulletin No. 78). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Available at [http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/ecdh/eecd/Individualization/Language,%20Culture,%20and%20Ethnic%20Diversity/edudev\\_art\\_00020\\_062105.html](http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/ecdh/eecd/Individualization/Language,%20Culture,%20and%20Ethnic%20Diversity/edudev_art_00020_062105.html)
- PETTITO, L. A., KATERELOS, M., LEVY, B., GAUNA, K., TÉTRAULT, K., & FERRARO, V. (2001). Bilingual signed and spoken language acquisition from birth: Implications for mechanisms underlying bilingual language acquisition. *Journal of Child Language*, 28, 1–44.