

# How to support bilingualism in early childhood

by M. Victoria Rodríguez

Increasingly, children come to early childhood centers with the experience of listening and speaking a language other than English at home. Many families, including those who speak only English at home, express strong interest in raising their children to be bilingual.

The reasons vary. They want their children to communicate with parents and other members of the family who do not speak English, or they want to maintain the family's heritage language and culture. They believe bilingualism is valuable for future employment purposes. Finally, they want their children to have the cognitive, academic, and social advantages of being bilingual (King and Mackey 2007).

While few people question the benefits of being bilingual, there are different opinions about the best ways of becoming bilingual. The purpose of this article is two-fold: 1) to suggest ways in which early childhood centers can support the parents' dream of bilingualism for their children; and 2) to give classroom support not only to English language learning but also to the maintenance of the child's native language.

## From the parents' viewpoint

To decide how to achieve bilingualism for their children, parents may consider several factors. They may decide based on what the family's linguistic characteristics are, what they consider is the best way to provide the support their children need to

learn both languages, and what the family thinks is the best way to learn English (Rodríguez 2006).

Families that spoke a language different from English at home in the past, but speak only English now, often look for early childhood centers and schools that offer bilingual programs in a specific language and English. Families that currently speak a language other than English at home may also choose to send their children to early childhood centers that provide bilingual services in the family's native language as well as English.

## RESPECT AND VALUE THE HOME CULTURE.

However, bilingual early childhood centers are not always available in the family's native language or located near their homes. Also, bilingual centers—even if they are available—are usually not affordable for most families.

In any case, bilingual programs, even when available and affordable, are often not the first choice of parents. Here are some reasons:

- Parents that express a strong interest in making sure their children speak the family's native language and English firmly believe that, as long as they speak the native language with their children at home, their children will be fluent in that language.

- Bilingualism for these families is more about being able to speak the native language than about mastering reading and writing in that language.
- Most parents are eager for their children to learn English, the language that guarantees academic and occupational success. These parents may feel, as do many people, including teachers, that the best time to learn a second language is when a child is young. Children are like sponges and quickly absorb the second language, in this case English.

This feeling, combined with the belief that the more you expose children to English, the faster they master the language (Espinosa 2006; Genesee 2006; McLaughlin 1992), lead parents to assume that the right choice is to send their children to preschools in which they are exposed only to English. They don't see the need for sending their children to bilingual programs that are often featured in the media as places where children speak their native language to the detriment of learning English.

### Addressing the linguistic diversity of your center

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC 1995), in the position statement on "Responding to Linguistic and Cultural Diversity," discussed the challenges that young children and their families face in negotiating the transition from home to early childhood center.

Often preschools have different rules, values, and expectations from the home and require different

behaviors from the children. For many children another obstacle is communicating for the first time in their young lives only in English, a language different from the home language and one they associate mainly with the cartoons and shows they watch on television.

To help children navigate the transition to a preschool and to promote children's development and learning, the position paper established that "educators must **accept** the legitimacy of children's home language, **respect** (hold in high regard) and **value** (esteem, appreciate) the home culture, and **promote** and **encourage** the active involvement and support of all families, including extended and nontraditional family units" (NAEYC 1995, p. 2 [bold in text]).

This is a statement that all educators would consider in line with developmentally appropriate practice. But what does it really mean? How do we show children and parents that "we accept the legitimacy of the child's home language"?

### Supporting the parents' dream

Attaining the goal of bilingualism is a difficult task, regardless of the programs available and the early childhood program parents choose for their child. However, many parents are not aware of the challenges their children face, especially in maintaining their native language.

Early childhood centers have an important role to play in promoting not only English but also the native language. Ideally this starts when the parents



enroll the child in the program and continues without interruption in individual and group conversations between parents and teachers until the child leaves the center.

At the intake stage, consider these suggestions:

- Get information about the language(s) used at home, including who uses which language(s), and for what purposes.
- Ask for the family's goals for the child, including language(s) they want the child to acquire. This is a prime moment to start an ongoing conversation about language development, bilingualism, and second language acquisition. The child's teacher will continue the conversation based on the child's needs, but it would be a good idea to have materials available in several languages for the parents to read about these issues.
- Prepare the center's philosophy about language, if it is not available, and share it with the family. This includes, but is not limited to, informing the family about the languages spoken in the center by children and personnel, the reasons the center offers or does not offer bilingual programs, and the center's commitment to supporting minority languages.
- Have staff available that are knowledgeable about bilingualism and second language acquisition.

This cannot be done without ongoing and in-depth professional development that includes administrators, teachers, and aides. Based on my conversations with parents and early childhood

teachers, I suggest asking the following questions as you prepare for addressing the needs of the linguistically diverse children as well as children whose parents want them to be bilingual:

**What are the staff's attitudes toward language diversity?** Teachers who firmly believe that children should learn English as soon as possible, without considering the minority language the child speaks, may have difficulty thinking positively about the child's native language and, therefore, accepting the minority languages in the classroom. They may also find it hard to accept and support the parents' wish of bilingualism for the child.

## ACCEPT

### THE LEGITIMACY OF CHILDREN'S HOME LANGUAGE.

**How do we help staff understand important issues related to bilingualism?** Training needs to cover at least six issues:

1. a definition of bilingualism and its advantages;
2. misconceptions about a) the best time to acquire two languages, b) time required to become bilingual, c) effects of maintaining the native language on the acquisition of English, and d) impact of birth order in becoming bilingual;
3. different programs available to develop bilingualism;
4. theories of second language acquisition;



5. effects of native language loss on the socio-emotional, academic, and cognitive development of the child and on the well-being of the family; and
6. challenges families encounter when raising children bilingually.

**How do we inform parents about issues of bilingualism when they are set on beliefs that are not supported by research?** Parents need to know what the research says about roles played by the individual characteristics of the child, birth order, gender, and the linguistic characteristics of the family in maintaining the minority language (De Houwer 1999; King and Fogle 2006; McLaughlin 1995).

## Children's language experiences

The acceptance of the minority language of all children needs to be consistent throughout the child's experience in the early childhood center. This is clearly revealed in the child's classroom experience and in the ongoing conversation between parents and the school personnel, especially the teacher.

The suggestions below, many of which are from NAEYC's position statement, need to be explained to parents who often are concerned only about the child's acquisition of English.

On the child's language experiences:

- Show parents and children that your agenda is not to teach the children English while completely disregarding the child's native language.

This may seem challenging when staff do not speak all the minority languages represented in the school. Actually, it is not. Teachers and children may show interest in learning important words that the children are eager to teach. This is an easy and meaningful way of showing that everybody in the classroom values the children's family language, that all acknowledge a child's expertise in that language, and that all are interested in a child's language.

- Support the children's native language by asking everybody (director, teachers, aides, and support personnel) to speak with the children in the minority language(s) in which they are fluent.

Often the staff speak at least some of the minority languages represented, but they use the minority language only when they have to talk to non-English-speaking parents or when translating for other staff. When staff speak minority language(s), children become aware that important people in



the school also speak the native language and thus have the opportunity to feel proud of it.

- Invite parents to share lullabies, songs, poetry, dances, books, games, toys, and the values they want to transmit to their children.
  - Provide materials in the classroom in the languages represented by the children.
  - When more than one child in the classroom speaks a minority language, invite them to work together in challenging activities using that language.
- For ongoing conversations with parents, plan how you will deal with the following topics:
- The emotional and social cost of losing the native language for the child and the family alike (Chang et al. 2007; Wong Fillmore 1991).
  - Ways to support the native language at home. For example, encourage parents, older siblings, and extended family members to teach their children lullabies, songs, and dances in the native language if they don't do it already. Suggest that the parents involve the children in fun community activities in which languages other than English are spoken. Children need to see the utility of the languages they speak.
  - The many different ways young children learn languages and the different paces at which they learn them.
  - The challenges of bilingualism. Although bilingualism is a valuable goal for children that the school supports, learning two languages takes

time and is a complicated enterprise for children and adults alike.

- Maintenance of the native language. In a society in which bilingualism is not fully valued and where the majority language (English) enjoys worldwide prestige, we need to support the first language. Children will learn English because it is around them and it is the “cool” language to speak, but many forget or feel ashamed of the native language unless it is valued by important people in their lives, including their teachers, friends, parents, and grandparents.
- The need for providing input at home in the native language. Often parents who speak in the native language at home think their children get much more input in that language than they really receive.

## PROMOTE AND ENCOURAGE THE ACTIVE INVOLVEMENT AND SUPPORT OF ALL FAMILIES.

In fact, let’s consider a child who is in a monolingual English preschool for seven to eight hours a day. Then the child may return to a home in which older siblings talk to each other more in English than the native language and the children spend time watching TV in English.

The child in our example listens to and is encouraged to express thoughts and feelings in English much more often than in the native language. Your conversation with the parents probably will lead them to focusing on the native language, the weakest language in our society, and, contrary to popular belief, the one that needs more support.

## A responsibility and an opportunity

Early childhood centers, regardless of the programs they offer, have the responsibility of responding adequately to the linguistic needs of children who, at home, listen and speak in a language other than English. In addition, centers can encourage and support families whose goal is bilingual education for their children.

Professional development, using topics suggested here, will guide the meaningful and ongoing conversations that families, teachers, and staff initiate at the intake stage and continue all during the child’s experience in the center.

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