

EARLY HEAD START TIP SHEET

No. 42

Supporting Infant & Toddler Language Development, August 2010

How can Early Head Start programs support language and communication development when staff members do not speak the child's home language?

Response:

Early Head Start (EHS) is required to support the child's overall development by respecting and supporting the home language, culture, and family composition of each child. Programs are required to make efforts to hire qualified bilingual and bicultural staff to be able to communicate with and support the children and families served. While this is a challenge, programs should continually find ways to provide meaningful language learning opportunities for all the children.

Supporting language and communication development through caring, responsive relationships

Infant-toddler development, including communication and early literacy skills, begins before birth and unfolds over time within the context of relationships. To develop communication and early literacy skills regardless of the particular language, infants and toddlers need to hear lots of rich language and be a part of meaningful interactions. Staff and parents should be encouraged to extend their interactions with children by describing the environment (e.g. "Look, it's raining outside. Do you see the puddles?"), talking about meaningful events (e.g. "It's so sad to say goodbye to Mommy. Would you like a hug?") rather than only providing directions (e.g. "Sit and eat."). Also, adults should speak, gesture, ask questions, listen, and respond to the child in a caring ways, so that infants and toddlers may learn:

- **The purpose of communication** – that their sounds and actions convey messages and that adults 'answer' these messages by responding appropriately to the child's cues (e.g. understanding that a certain cry means "I'm hungry" and then immediately feeding the child).
- **The process of communication** – that conversation with another person involves turn-taking, listening, and speaking.
- **The rhythm and tempo of speech** – that the speed and cadence of words have meaning.
- **The sounds of speech** (phonemes) – that the specific sounds are used within a language. These sounds combine to make words.

Supporting dual language and communication development

Frequent, meaningful interactions in both the family's home language and the staff member's language provide an additive language environment which supports the child who is exposed to two or more languages during the infant-toddler years. It is critical, for successful dual language acquisition that the child has an opportunity to interact with and engage in both languages in rich, caring, and meaningful ways. "Dual language learners will not acquire full competence in both languages if their exposure to each falls below some as-yet unknown lower limit."¹

¹ Genesee, 2008, 20.

When staff members do not speak the family's home language, programs and staff should:

- Encourage families to use the home language in engaging and meaningful ways with their children. This helps maintain emotional bonds and communication with their extended family members.
- Promote interaction and talking with the babies and toddlers in engaging and meaningful ways using the staff member's primary language.
- Learn and use familiar words from the family's home language that are important to the daily care and are of interest to the child. Interacting with infants and toddlers in a loving, playful, comforting and responsive manner while using a few words in the family's home language, enhances their self-esteem, honors their home language and culture, and provides continuity with the home.
 - Encourage bilingual staff and families to assist monolingual staff to learn and use basic phrases, such as greetings, songs, or praise words, in the language that the family uses with the child (bottle, juice, diaper, please, thank you, and questions such as 'Do you want?').
 - Invite families of children who are dual language learners to spend time in the classroom. This gives staff an opportunity to learn about the family's values and beliefs in addition to helping monolingual staff add to their newly acquired vocabulary in the infant's or toddler's home language.
- Seek the help of an interpreter or a bilingual adult family member or community volunteer. Whenever possible, reach out to bilingual volunteers in the community or local colleges. They can contribute their time in the classroom by interacting, reading, or singing to the infants and toddlers in their home language in addition to serving as interpreters for parents who speak language other than English, if appropriate.
- Utilize quality translation services to provide program materials and information written in the family's home language.

Considerations:

- What effort is the program making to hire qualified staff members who speak the same language and reflect the culture of the children and families served? How does the program support these staff members in using their bilingual skills with children and families?
- How does the program create a safe environment where staff members can reflect upon their beliefs about dual language learning and diversity in general?
- How does the program encourage families to assist non-bilingual staff to learn and use basic phrases, greetings, or key words in the home language of the children being served?
- How does the program support staff members working with families who speak a different language than them?
- How does the program support the child's communication and early literacy development?
- How does the program ensure that the child's environment(s) provide language-rich experiences?

Performance Standards, Title 45, Code of Federal Regulations:

- 1304.21(a)(4)(i)-(iv) Grantee and delegate agencies must provide for the development of each child's cognitive and language skills by:
 - (i) Supporting each child's learning using various strategies including experimentation, inquiry, observation, play and exploration;
 - (ii) Ensuring opportunities for creative self-expression through activities such as art, music, movement, and dialogue;
 - (iii) Promoting interaction and language use among children and between children and adults;and

- (iv) Supporting emerging literacy and numeracy development through materials and activities according to the developmental level of each child.
- 1304.21(a)(3)(i)(E) Grantee and delegate agencies must support social and emotional development by supporting and respecting the home language, culture, and family composition of each child in ways that support the child's health and well-being.
 - 1304.21(b)(2)(i) Grantee and delegate agencies must support the social and emotional development of infants and toddlers by promoting an environment that encourages the development of self-awareness, autonomy, and self-expression.
 - 1304.51(c)(2) Communication with parents must be carried out in the parents' primary or preferred language or through an interpreter, to the extent feasible.
 - 1304.53(b)(4) Staff and program consultants must be familiar with the ethnic background and heritage of families in the program and must be able to serve and effectively communicate, to the extent feasible, with children and families with no or limited English proficiency.
 - 1304.52(g)(2) When a majority of children speak the same language, at least one classroom staff member or home visitor interacting regularly with the children must speak their language.
 - 1306.20(e) Classroom staff and home visitors must be able to communicate with families they serve either directly or through a translator. They should also be familiar with the ethnic background of these families.

Resources:

Bardige, Betty and Marilyn Segal. **Building Literacy with Love: A Guide for Teachers and Caregivers of Children from Birth Through Age 5.** Washington, DC: ZERO TO THREE. 2005.

Early Head Start National Resource Center (EHS NRC). **Building Blocks: The Essential of Early Head Start [webcast series], 3: Supportive Relationships: Meeting the Diverse Needs of Families.** DHHS/ACF/OHS. 2008. <http://www.fc-tv.com/webcast/ehswebcastarchive/> (accessed August 14, 2010).

EHS NRC. **Technical Assistance Paper, 5: Linguistic Diversity and Early Literacy: Serving Culturally Diverse Families in Early Head Start.** DHHS/ACF/HSB. 2001.

Genesee, Fred, Johanne Paradis and Martha Crago. **Dual Language Development and Disorders: A Handbook on Bilingualism and Second Language Learning.** Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes. 2004.

Head Start Bulletin, 78: English Language Learners. DHHS/ACF/ACYF/HSB. (2005).

Rosenkoetter, Sharon and Joanne Knapp-Philo, Eds. **Learning to Read the World: Language and Literacy in the First Three Years.** Washington, DC: ZERO TO THREE. 2006

Stechuk, Robert, Susan M. Burns and Sharon Yandian. **Bilingual Infant/Toddler Environments: Supporting language and learning in our youngest children.** Washington, DC: AED/Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Technical Assistance Center. 2006. <http://www.aed.org/Publications/loader.cfm?url=/commonspot/security/getfile.cfm&pageid=15384> (accessed August 14, 2010).

Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project. **Early Head Start Research to Practice: Supporting Language and Cognitive Development in Early Head Start.** DHHS/ACF/OPRE. 2006. http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/ehs/ehs_resrch/reports/lang_literacy/lang_research.html (accessed August 14, 2010).

Tabors, Patton. **One Child, Two Languages: A Guide for Early Childhood Educators of Children Learning English as a Second Language**, 2nd Ed. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes. 2008.

***Zero To Three Journal*, 29(1): Language, Culture, and Learning.** (September 2008).

- Fort, Pilar and Robert Stechuk. **“The Cultural Responsive and Dual Language Education Project.”** 24–28.
- Genesee, Fred. **“Early Dual Language Learning.”** 17–23.

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This Tip Sheet is not a regulatory document. Its intent is to provide a basis for dialogue, clarification, and problem solving among Office of Head Start, Regional Offices, TA consultants, and grantees. If you need further clarification on Head Start policies and regulations, please contact your Regional Program Specialist.