

Why and How to Support Young Children Learning Multiple Languages

ZERO TO THREE Critical Competencies for Infant–Toddler Educators™

If you have experienced an increase in enrollment of families whose home language is not English, you are not alone. Survey data show that the number of children in the United States who live in a household where a language other than English is spoken has steadily increased over the past decade and is now approximately one in three (Child Trends, 2014). This has significant implications for early educators. Even 10 years ago, Tabors (2008, p. 182) noted:



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Given the statistics . . . concerning the numbers of children from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds who are entering early childhood settings, it is clear that business as usual is no longer possible. Responding appropriately to children from families that are culturally and linguistically diverse requires new information, new attitudes, and new practices on the part of early childhood educators.

As an infant–toddler educator, you play an important role in ensuring that this “shift” is appropriately supported *and* celebrated as a strength that benefits all children and our society.

The Benefits of Learning Multiple Languages



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For infants and toddlers from homes where languages other than English are spoken, the goal of supporting language learning means intentionally helping them to acquire each of the languages to which they are being exposed. Providing support for each language a child is learning, both at home and in the early childhood education setting, benefits him in several ways. Here are three reasons to intentionally support all language learning in young children.

- 1.** Perhaps the most obvious benefit is that supporting each language a child is learning encourages communication in general, which is an essential component of a child’s daily experiences in an early learning setting. Incorporating words and phrases from each language into his daily experiences facilitates his understanding of the connections between the languages (e.g., the same object can have a label in Spanish and English), and each has the same purpose, to communicate between people.
- 2.** A second reason for supporting multiple language learning is that the process of learning more than one language during early childhood has been found to uniquely change brain development in positive ways. For example, studies have shown that children who understand and speak multiple languages show evidence of higher cognitive and executive function, flexibility in thinking, and creativity in problem solving (Espinosa, 2008, 2014). Studies also have shown that those who remain fluent in two or more languages experience social, cognitive, and economic advantages throughout their lives (Castro, 2014; Espinosa, 2008, 2014).

However, as with learning one language, the degree to which children are successful in learning multiple languages is directly connected to the amount and quality of each language they experience in meaningful interaction. Therefore, for children to reap the maximum advantages, educators need to do as much as they can to facilitate children’s learning of their home language(s) as well as the dominant language in the early education setting.

3. A third reason for supporting children’s home language learning is that it supports the development of the child’s identity and social ties to her cultural group. The language of a people reflects many things about them: where they live, how they live, their values and interests, and so much more. A sense of self and belonging are critical elements of each young child’s social–emotional development. Appreciating and fostering each child’s home language is an important facet of self and belonging.

“Our language is a reflection of ourselves.”

—Cesar Chavez, Labor and Civil Rights Activist

“Language is the road map of a culture. It tells you where its people come from and where they are going.”

—Rita Mae Brown, Author and Activist

Equipped to Learn Multiple Languages

Babies’ brains come equipped with the neural connections to hear every possible phoneme in any human language. A baby’s neural connections that distinguish the phonemes of a particular language are strengthened every time she hears it spoken to her. The neural connections for the phonemes she is not hearing, on the other hand, begin to wither away from not being used, a process called neural pruning. The neural connections that remain strong will then enable the child to produce those language sounds accurately once she begins speaking. This process applies regardless of whether an infant is hearing only one language spoken or is hearing multiple languages spoken.



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Infants and toddlers also need exposure to language in order to learn the vocabulary, grammar, and uses of that language, first to comprehend the language and then to produce it accurately as a speaker. Children learn every aspect of a language when that language is used in the context of meaningful, face-to-face interactions with caring adults. Again, this statement is true whether a child is hearing one language during interactions with caring adults or multiple languages. Young children’s brains are remarkably capable of distinguishing the unique sounds, patterns, words, and sentence structures of each language, provided they are given enough linguistic “raw data” from conversations each day. In fact, early childhood is the best time to learn multiple languages because those remarkable capabilities diminish with age, making language-learning more difficult and less successful as the brain loses its sensitivity to the sounds and patterns of different languages over time.



Supporting Multiple Languages



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Contrary to what one might guess, learning two languages at the same time does not result in a delay in language acquisition. However, children are developing two separate but connected linguistic systems, thus the rate of language development among dual-language learner toddlers varies in direct relation to their relative amount of exposure to each language. It is critically important that, whenever possible, educators use key words in the child's home language and that parents continue to expose the child to rich, descriptive interactions in the child's home language. Educators and families can make a coordinated effort to ensure the child develops expressive and receptive vocabulary in both languages.

Rich, responsive language experiences support not only young children's language development but also their cognitive and social-emotional development. Language is a multipurpose tool for educators and children. Its effect on a child's experience in, and benefit from, the early childhood education environment rapidly increases as children become verbal. For this reason, it's especially important that infant-toddler educators consider ensuring that children who enter the early childhood education environment as new English-language learners are experiencing rich, meaningful language so they don't miss any of the benefits.

Unless you believe “in your bones” that having a second language in addition to English is a gift and not a disadvantage, and that diversity is a resource not a problem to be solved, you are likely to respond to ELL [English language learning] children in ways that discourage the continued use of their home language . . . The intentional teaching strategies for young ELL children will look similar to high-quality instruction for all young children, but will include specific adaptations and enhancements for children whose home language is not English. During all parts of the daily schedule . . . children's home language and cultural knowledge will be used as resources and as the foundation for building dual language competency.

(Espinosa, 2014, pp. 91, 103–104)

For more information, ideas, and strategies for supporting infants and toddlers learning multiple languages in early childhood program settings, explore the *Recommended Resources* handout for L&L-2.

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