WHY ARE LANGUAGE ISSUES IMPORTANT?

***Looking In, Looking* Out**
Principles of Quality Care in a Diverse Society: Language

California Tomorrow proposes as one of our Principles of Quality Care in a Diverse Society that child care programs foster bilingualism by: (1) helping to preserve the primary languages of children from families whose first language is not English, and (2) encouraging children whose first language is English to take an interest in learning a second language. This chapter is not an assessment of effective bilingual programs or a "how to" guide. More, it seeks to explain how and why fostering bilingualism can be incorporated as a positive goal when working with young children, and suggests strategies toward this goal. This first requires addressing many questions and myths about language development and bilingualism. Working through some of the misunderstandings about bilingualism and language development exposes far greater common ground than many people expect-which ultimately can benefit children.

While English is the dominant language of the United States, this nation is home to many families and communities whose members also speak other languages. Nationwide, one out of every 25 children comes from a home where a language other than English is spoken. In California, this figure is one out of three. In Los Angeles, the children speak some 100 different languages. In the United States, it is a tremendous asset socially and economically to speak English as well as another language. Yet, on the whole, we do not do a good job of fostering bilingualism in the United States.

The California early childhood education community is beginning to grapple with the challenges of serving multilingual communities. California Tomorrow's 1993 survey of child care centers found that more than 80 percent served children from two or more language groups, and 77 percent served at least one child who did not speak any English or spoke only a little English. Issues of bilingualism and second language acquisition are among the newest and most complex in the field. How should providers adapt their practice to ensure the positive development of children's primary language in an increasingly multilingual society? There is an emerging consensus that all programs and providers need to at least think about these issues and the linguistic needs of the children in their care. In a few cases, child care providers are offering bilingual curricula that seek to foster bilingualism. In many cases, providers recognize the importance of bilingualism and preserving family languages, but they are stymied by the dearth of information reaching the profession regarding language acquisition and how

to provide appropriate language development instruction to young children. In still other cases, programs do not foster bilingualism, choosing to focus solely on English. All in all, the language needs and potential to become bilingual for many children are going unattended.

DIFFERING VIEWS, NOT SO DIFFERENT VALUES

Some parents and teachers resist programs that promote bilingualism or the use of non-English languages in the mistaken belief that this will hinder children's ability to become fluent in English. English-speaking families may think that if staff is using, for example, Spanish or Mandarin or Tagalog, then instructional time in English is being lost. Research shows, however, that children living in an English-speaking society are literally immersed in the language, absorbing the structure, vocabulary, tone and gestures of English at all times. Rather than being at risk of losing English, exposure to another language enriches their language capacity and comprehension. In most of the world, bilingual instruction is seen as fundamental to education.

Families who speak languages other than English often feel that they are sending their children to school specifically to become fluent in the new language, and so may not feel comfortable about the use of their home language in the program. They often do not realize that if their child's first language is not nurtured and developed, chances are great that he or she will lose the ability to speak it. Such a loss can be devastating and far-reaching, depriving a person of not only potential future economic opportunities, but the ability to communicate with family and community. Because language is so core to culture, a child's cultural identity will be impacted by his or her connection and fluency in the family language. Many providers and parents are not aware that, in fact, the use of the home language also promotes the cognitive development, self esteem, second language (usually English) acquisition and academic preparation of children. Some individuals and organized groups adamantly oppose supporting children's home language out of fear that the use of non-English languages creates division among Americans. But we believe that division is, in fact, created by discrimination against people who speak other languages and by practices which prevent them from participating in the larger society. One such practice is denying children the use of their home language in the classroom and the beneficial academic preparation that it fosters. A truly multilingual society is stronger and better equipped to contribute to an international community and economy.

Some opponents of bilingual programs do not recognize that, in fact, learning English is a shared value among monolingual English speakers and speakers of other languages. Most people in the United States agree that children must eventually acquire English to succeed in this society, where

English is the language of government, business, media, schooling and virtually all major arenas. Children must speak English to access higher education and well-paying jobs. Our interviews with parents and providers for this study paralleled the broader society: recently arrived immigrants placed just as high a value on speaking English as did citizens whose families have lived in the United States for generations.

And, studies of children who have immigrated to the United States indicate that virtually all eventually acquire English. The greater threat to these children is the very high likelihood that they will lose the ability to speak their home language, as has happened among many earlier immigrant groups, such as Italians and Poles. This happens for a complex set of reasons that includes the stigma this society places on speaking another language. Many English speakers express open disdain when they hear other languages used publicly. People who cannot express their ideas clearly in English are assumed to not understand issues, or to not have any useful contributions at all. This is one of the first lessons non-English-speaking children learn when put in an insensitive setting that does not validate their language. The immigrant children quickly learn that the English spoken by their peers is more highly valued than their home language, and many internalize this view themselves. Recent studies report that many eventually refuse to speak their home language out of embarrassment or shame, even with their family.

PRESERVING THE HOME LANGUAGE AND FOSTERING BILINGUALISM

Achieving bilingualism requires different strategies for different types of children. English-speaking parents who wish for their young children to learn other languages commonly encourage this interest in the home and seek out opportunities for the children to interact with speakers of other languages, including in the preschool setting. This is discussed further later in this chapter. For children whose families speak a language other than English, bilingualism is fostered through nurturing the continued development of their home language while creating the conditions for them to acquire English as well (Wong Fillmore, 1991). Steps must be taken to ensure that English is learned in addition to - as opposed to "instead of" -the language of the family.

There are differences of opinion among language acquisition scholars about how to best support a child's non-English home language, and when and how to introduce English. Some believe it is appropriate to introduce English at a young age - provided adequate attention is paid to the home language (Sandoval-Martinez, 1982), while others feel it is most effective to wait until after a child has developed basic literacy in the home language (Wong Fillmore, 1991; Cummins, 1989; Diaz Soto and Smeaker, 1992).

In any case, all of these scholars agree that providers and parents should encourage children to speak and develop their home language. Young children are in the process of developing cognitive skills that are not language specific - for example, learning that a word on paper is a symbol of something that is spoken. It is easier for most children to learn such complex concepts in the language in which they are most comfortable - their home language. Once basic literacy concepts have been developed, children can more easily transfer this knowledge to a second language, such as English (Cummins, 1989).

Children's ability to retain their home language is essential to maintaining strong social and emotional ties to their parents, grandparents and extended family members, particularly if the primary caretakers do not speak English. Language minority parents, unlike their children, are much less likely to have opportunities to learn English even when they are highly motivated to do so. Consequently, when language minority children lose their family language, their parents may lose their ability to provide verbal comfort and support, offer guidance and discipline, or transmit family values, hopes and traditions. Parents find themselves feeling more and more inadequate and ineffective, and children often grow alienated from their families (Wong Fillmore, 1989).

But through language, ethnic and cultural groups transmit customs and beliefs to the young. Values and traditions are embedded within words and expressions unique to the language. Children who cease to speak the language(s) of their community begin to miss the subtle, but often crucial, nuances of their heritage. In many languages, specific words are used to address relatives. For example in Mandarin, there is no generic term for "aunt"; rather each relative is referred to by their exact connection to the child, as in "my mother's oldest sister." These words teach a child fundamentals about the importance of family and esteem for elders. In most languages, there are at least a few words which cannot be meaningfully translated into any other language -illustrating the unique interplay between language and culture. Knowing the home language helps children to build a strong cultural identity, which, as discussed in our Principle on Culture, can promote the development of a secure, confident individual who can function effectively in cross-ethnic and multilingual situations.

In recent years, Black English, or Ebonics, has become recognized as another legitimate language with a standard set of rules spoken by many families. In her book, *Testifying* and *Talking,* Geneva Smitherman (1986) defines Black English as "an Africanized form of English reflecting Black

America's linguistic-cultural heritage and the conditions of servitude, oppression and life in America." Black English traces its roots to both Africa and the U.S. South, developing among enslaved Africans who arrived speaking many diverse African languages and dialects. Smitherman estimates that 80 to 90 percent of African Americans use Black English at least some of the time. With a few notable differences, the challenges facing African American children who use Black English parallel those who speak entirely different languages. African American children are still able to understand "standard" English. On the other hand, like other languages, Black English is a critical vehicle for the transmission of culture and for retaining a strong sense of connection to family and community. Speakers of Black English also learn very early that the language of their home is not respected by the dominant society. If African American children are constantly corrected or humiliated for their speech, their self-esteem can suffer and they may even refuse to speak.

FOSTERING BILINGUALISM BY NURTURING THE INTEREST AND ABILITY OF ENGLISH-SPEAKING CHILDREN TO LEARN A SECOND LANGUAGE

For children whose home language is the dominant language of society, fostering bilingualism begins with introducing them to languages other than English. Because their home language is dominant in society, these children are not at risk of losing English. The early care setting is, in this case, a very appropriate time to introduce a second language to children, with many important benefits. Although for children of higher socioeconomic levels, bilingualism has long been viewed as an asset for future careers in trade and international affairs, the United States is still the only industrialized nation in the world where children grow up monolingually unless they are motivated personally to learn another language. Learning another language offers children greater appreciation and insights into people from culturally diverse backgrounds. At the same time, learning words in different languages for the same concepts teaches children about commonalities across groups. Many believe that becoming bilingual has cognitive advantages because it promotes greater mental flexibility (Hakuta. 1986). The development of bilingual children is an opportunity which the United States can ill-afford to miss.

HOW CHILD CARE PROVIDERS CAN HELP FACILITATE LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT AND FOSTER BILINGUALISM

Acquiring language is one of the most important developmental tasks facing young children. Of course, for this age group this is not an academic process; young children naturally learn language and form attitudes about the languages spoken in their environment through their interactions with

people. Language development for young children is embedded in all of the aspects of care, rather than tied to certain activities.
Early on, children pick up messages from their surroundings too about the value of the languages spoken. Providers are constantly conveying messages through verbal and nonverbal responses to the language spoken by children and their families. Children, who are careful observers, don't miss these messages. For example, if a child observes that when his mother greets the bilingual teacher in Spanish, the teacher always responds in English, the child gets the message that Spanish is unacceptable. In the video, *Essential Connections: Ten Keys to Culturally Sensitive Child Care,* Yolanda Torres makes the following observation:

> *If you shame a child because he is using his own language, or if you shame the parents of the child and say his mother shouldn't do that, and the child knows that this is very important to the mother, that is terrible. You are telling the child that his parents don't know how to raise him.*

In the worst cases, children may be openly put down by adults for using their family language. One teacher we interviewed shared the following story regarding a child whose language was Black English:

> *One of the kindergarten children in the afterschool program was sent to see a school psychologist because she wouldn't talk. It turned out that the problem was her teacher had been constantly ridiculing her for the way she spoke. Her response was to simply stop speaking.*

Standard English-speaking students who observe such negative exchanges can easily absorb the message that speaking another language or dialect is bad, and that their language is the only "good" or "right" one.

Whether providers actively support and validate the languages of families has a tremendous influence on how children feel about their home language-and whether they will lose or retain it. This may be particularly true for infants and toddlers whose language needs should not be overlooked because they are still at a pre-verbal stage. Infants and toddlers are just beginning to develop sounds and form their first words. But traditionally, infants and toddlers have been primarily cared for by parents or family members who speak the home language. Unfortunately, very little research has been conducted on the impact of placing a language minority child for long periods of time with an outside caregiver who does not speak the home language. Caregivers could provide tremendous insight into such research. For example, Darlene Correia, director of the Marie Kaiser Center, observed:

In my experience working with infants, I observed that six- and seven-month-olds whose home language was Spanish responded when I spoke to them in Spanish. They would look at me very intently or responded with their bodies differently than when I spoke in English. In cases when the language was not English or Spanish, I would make it a point to learn words or phrases in the family's language. Not only was it important for the child, it was important for the family. It was important that the family know and observe that the language - in some cases the languages - they spoke at home were valued, supported and viewed as an asset.

What happens in care also influences whether English speakers develop an interest in learning other languages. Some early care and education programs can and do encourage children to interact and play with children or adults who speak other languages.

PROMISING STRATEGIES AND CHALLENGES

What child care strategies can contribute to preserving children's home languages and/or fostering bilingualism among all children? The following approaches focus on one or both of these goals. Some of the strategies are obviously easier to implement when a provider is working with several children from the same language group. Most strategies also have some relevance for settings where one child speaks a language different from the rest of the children, or where the children represent many language groups. This chapter offers no definitive answers, but does glimpse at the variety of promising strategies we observed in the field.

Reprinted by the Early Childhood Equity Alliance (www.RootsForChange.net) with permission from California Tomorrow