

Celebrating bilingual under-fives

The benefits of being bilingual include:

- Having a wide dual language vocabulary and understanding how language is constructed (grammar) in both languages
- Being able to speak to people in different cultural and language contexts, using the right language and knowing the social codes that go with it, and
- Great capacity for lateral thinking and problem solving.

So how can you help nurture the skills that young bilingual children in your preschool are developing to enable them to realise their potential?

- Find out about the child's home language from the parent - make sure you know what language the child speaks and how to pronounce their name.
- Provide an interpreter for at least the initial meeting with the parent to ensure all the information that needs to be shared both ways is understood.
- Find out from the parents some information about the child's language development in their home language - just as you would for any child.
- Work alongside the parent, especially when settling in, use lots of gestures and open body language - much can be communicated and understood in this way.
- Provide as many 'language bridges' as possible - for example, ask parents for some key words in their child's home language. It is helpful to write them phonetically to help your pronunciation.
- Encourage parents to speak to their child in their home language when in the setting to explain aspects of the new environment, such as where the toilets are or what the different toys and play materials are called and what they are for. Encourage parents to read a book in their home language or talk about the pictures or sit with their child during a story session to interpret.

Children will learn to speak English more readily if their home language is being acknowledged and reinforced.

It is important to show parents and children that you value the languages spoken in local communities. As children become settled they will soon learn to speak English and will do so all the more readily if their home language is being acknowledged and reinforced.

Place posters, books, tapes and games in other languages as well as familiar cultural objects and pictures of people from different ethnic groups in your setting.

Allow children to feel comfortable speaking in their own language to other children or staff in the setting who speak the same language. Other children can be taught to accept this and develop interest in other languages, learning a few words or singing a song, for example, at

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circle time. There are benefits for all children in developing an interest in languages, especially those beings spoken all around them.

There are key points to consider regarding how bilingual children develop their language skills.

- Children from community language homes are already developing language skills as tools for communicating, thinking, engaging with the social world and for making sense of new experiences. Learning English as an additional language should build on this, not seek to replace it.
- Many children can go through a 'silent period' when beginning to learn a new language. This is when they neither speak in their own language or in English while in the setting. This is an important stage when they are taking it all in - 'inputting' rather than 'outputting'- and staff should talk to the child as normal and neither cajole them into talking nor ignore them.
- You should ensure that children learning English as an additional language are exposed to situations where the language is pitched at their level of development and understanding. There is a need for visual materials to support meaning and it is important that there is sufficient opportunity for interacting with other children and adults.
- There is no need for one to one sessions or special activities. Playing with other children and participating in a wide range of activities that encourage communication is the best way to support a child's bilingual development.

Monitoring development

Through regular observation and monitoring you will begin to notice various stages emerging. This is important as knowing what to expect will help you recognise when a child is progressing well, or alert you to a language development problem. Many bilingual children's special needs go unrecognised where staff are unsure of the normal range of language development in young bilinguals. Indicators of normal progress include:

- Developing home language at home with no parental concerns - this is the best indicator of normal language development.
- Joining in with the children in preschool but using non-verbal gestures to indicate meaning.
- Going through a 'silent period' for a few weeks in the new setting.
- Watching what other children do and copying their actions.
- Imitating and echoing what others say - especially enjoying the repeated lines of a song, rhyme or story.
- Using a few words in English for significant or favourite things.
- Picking up phrases and repeating as one word e.g. 'me-wanna-do-it', or 'siddown-juice-time'.

- Choosing their home language when playing with other speakers and wanting to write in home language - in some cases with awareness of the different script of the home language.
- Preferring stories as a means of trying out skills in English.
- Mixing the two languages in the same sentence to convey meaning.
- Being able to converse with children in English, but understanding more than he/she can say.

Bilingualism is not a learning difficulty, nor is it the cause of learning difficulties.

If, in the first few months in preschool, children new to English are developing as above then they are likely to go on widening their vocabulary and being increasingly skilful with grammar and syntax.

Bilingualism is a significant achievement in very young children and their efforts should not go unrecognised. It is important to stress that bilingualism is not a learning difficulty, nor is it the cause of learning difficulties. Provide praise and encouragement, monitor and support development and work with parents, stressing the value of the home language in the child's life, and then bilingual achievers in your care will benefit from the sound starting points they have gained in preschool.

Other useful terms

- Simultaneous bilingualism – two or more languages are acquired before the age of three
- Successive or sequential bilingualism – one language is established, a second is learned later
- Additive bilingualism – the first language and culture associated with it continue to be developed and valued
- Subtractive bilingualism – the second language is added at the expense of the first

Recommended reading: Supporting Identity, Diversity and Language in the Early Years by Iram Siraj Blachford and Priscilla Clarke (Open University Press).

For more information visit: <https://naldic.org.uk/> - the national subject association for English as an additional language.

Created for Talk to Your Baby (originally from articles in From Under Five magazine and Nursery World)