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Infants and Toddlers —Developing More Than One Language .G1989

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Infants and Toddlers — Developing More Than One Language

Adapted by Janet S. Hanna, Kayla M. Hinrichs and Carla J. Mahar, Extension Educators
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StoryQUEST's Vision: High-quality early relationships and experiences throughout their daily routines provide each infant and toddler with the tools and skills to build a strong foundation for future school readiness. Families, caregivers, and communities as a whole collaborate to enable all children to become highly competent in language and literacy. This series was developed as part of a national research project — StoryQUEST — through the California Institute on Human Services, Sonoma State University.

Toddlers who are learning more than one language benefit from having supportive adults helping them. Learn strategies to assist them in this NebGuide, the sixth in a series of nine.

When infants and toddlers are developing more than one language, the goal is that they will learn English *and* develop fluency in their home language.

Children can become truly bilingual and use two or more languages with equal fluency. Children, families, schools, and communities all benefit when children keep their connection to their language and heritage.

Children best learn language skills in caring, one-on-one relationships that lead to frequent interactions in which they know they will be understood. Close relationships between providers and families support a child's efforts to learn English while still developing her/his home language(s).

Adults can support young children who are developing their home language and English, and ready them to succeed in school in the United States.

Support Sense of Comfort, Familiarity, and Safety

Carefully watch, listen, and talk with infants and toddlers. Supportive caregivers:

- Attend to all the child's communicative signals.
- Respond naturally with understanding and a visible willingness to communicate.
- Pay close attention to the family's communication patterns, and use them when appropriate. For example, if parents use touch more than words before naptime, follow their lead and use the same technique.
- Learn some common phrases and songs in the child's family language, and use them throughout daily routines. Example: “¿Tienes hambre?” (Are you hungry?)

- Provide adult role models who speak the child's family language. Hire a caregiver or home visitor who speaks the same language as the child whenever possible. Invite people who speak the family's language to spend time in the classroom and speak the family's language.

Support Children Learning More Than One Language

Use these strategies to support beginning language and literacy development in children who are learning more than one language:

- Have both parent information and children's books in the languages of the child's family, as possible. Homemade books as well as commercially published books can be provided.
- Parents can share empty food containers, menus, dolls, musical instruments, clothing, art supplies, and games from their home countries.
- Provide adult role models who speak the child's language well to encourage literacy development. Hearing them will support the child developing of his/her primary language.
- Sing songs, use rhymes, and play music in the languages spoken by the child's family. Many common rhymes and songs are similar in a variety of languages.
- Have culturally authentic posters and pictures around the classroom, in the welcome areas, and in shared hallways.
- Post labels in home languages throughout the classroom.
- Know that a young child learning two languages will often speak words from both languages, even in the same sentence. This is normal and will disappear as the child becomes more fluent.

The Professional's Role

When professionals speak a different language than families, professionals should let families know they are willing to learn, understand, and find resources if they want them. Learn a few phrases in a family's language and use them in greetings, partings, etc.

Regularly communicate with families using their preferred language. Hire an interpreter if necessary. *Always* use a professional interpreter in formal settings. Never use a child or teen to interpret for his/her parents.

Make sure all family members know they are welcome to spend time in the program whenever they wish.

Give families time to become comfortable with staff and the setting. Encourage families to communicate freely with their children in their preferred language.

Encourage families to bring in pictures and to share family celebrations, holidays, or other events from their culture.

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