

INCLUSION

Bilingualism – Myths and Facts

There are some misconceptions surrounding bilingual children and what may or may not confuse them and be good for them in regards to assisting language development. Research shows that the “in at the deep end” approach whereby in order for the child to best learn the dominant language (English in this case) they must only speak English and their first language must be discouraged is now discredited. Current research indicates that children benefit emotionally and academically from speaking both their first language and one or more additional languages.

When considering the topic of bilingualism it is helpful to look at the dominant and the first language as two whole but separate areas of knowledge. What is important is the quantity and quality of exposure in both languages separately.

Here are some recommendations based on current research about bilingualism to help you understand how children in your service are speaking and relating to people around them.

Language Development

Assessing bilingual children’s English development can only be done in the context of their first or home language. It cannot be assessed with the same measuring tools as other monolingual children. Early ‘misdiagnosis’ of a child’s language development may unfairly reflect their true ability and may impact negatively on the child’s future academic life. It is important to look at the quantity and quality of exposure of each language.

- How much of which language at home and by whom?
- How much interaction is there with adults and children?
- How often and how much time do the children spend in the dominant language setting?
- What is the content of each of the languages used in each setting?

Research shows that on the whole, early *simultaneous* language acquisition in bilingual children means they reach language goals at similar stages to other children.

Where the first language only is spoken at home, expect a “silent” period of language absorption (passive knowledge) before the child uses the language actively (productive knowledge).

Cultural Identity

It is essential for children’s identity and social life to maintain a strong relationship with the language and culture of their family. Very young children who spend large amounts of time in the dominant culture in a child care setting, for example, may have a reduced cultural and emotional attachment to their family. It is recommended that the first language is maintained at home to assist in the formation of the child’s identity and self-image, supporting their sense of belonging.

Linguistic Competence

In order for both languages to flourish and maximise their growth and development, it is recommended that the minority language at home mirrors linguistic development in the dominant language. Early care and education professionals and families should share information on how language and social interaction are being introduced to the child in the different environments and aim to support the use of social formula (e.g. taking turns) in both languages with similar activities. This will enhance the development of the dominant and first language.

Other strategies to support the home language include:

- encouraging children to express themselves in their home language throughout the day in different learning situations
- educate parents on benefits of bilingualism
- the use of community members and volunteers as a resource to help support the home language in the early care and education settings
- recruitment of staff from cultural and language backgrounds that reflect those of the children accessing the early care and education setting

Mixing the languages

Some mixing of language can occur for children up until around 8 years old and this is normal. Children are extremely competent in separating two or more languages and this will happen. Their cognitive ability equips them with metalinguistic knowledge (knowledge about language systems).

- Single-parent, single language: For example, if one parent is a native English speaker, s/he should only speak to the child in English at all times. If the other parent speaks the first language, s/he should speak only the first language to the child at all times. This simultaneous learning of languages has a complimentary effect on the child linguistically.
- First language at home, dominant language at school: Where both parents speak the first language, this should be maintained by both parents at home. This is particularly true if the children are attending child care service in the dominant language – English.

The main aim of the both these strategies are to provide consistent use of the language in particular settings. How these settings are defined can vary and should be based on the natural composition of the child's environment.

To minimise confusion it is encouraged to maintain the same structure of language use once it has been established.

References

1. *'Raising Bilingual Children: Common Parental Concerns and Current Research'* Kendall King and Lyn Fogle, Georgetown University. CAL Digest April 2006.
2. Bilingual Families Perth Website.
www.geocities.com/bilingualfamilies/bilingualism.html
3. *'Preparing the ground for partnership. Exploring quality assurance for Aboriginal Child Care'*. Kathryn Priest. Literature Review and Background Paper for the Department of Families and Community Services. Australian Government. December 2005.
4. *'Challenging Common Myths about English Language Learners'* Linda M. Espinosa, National Association of State Boards of Education (US). June 2008.
<http://claytonearlylearning.org/files/espinosaarticle.pdf>