



Support Children from Immigrant Families

with *Luis Hernandez, early childhood education specialist*

Most early childhood programs include children who are members of families who are new immigrants. Their families have come to the United States for multiple reasons and from all over the globe. They represent multiple economic groups, religions, experiences and expectations, and diverse languages. And they are here, members of communities and early childhood classrooms. Teaching and caring for these children with respect and skill is a fundamental responsibility for early childhood teachers.

A study of immigrant families in several US cities found that they often feel a mix of hope and apprehension when they enroll their children in early childhood programs (Adair & Barraza 2014). Their concerns “can be connected to disparaging and discriminatory comments and attitudes circulating in the larger society about immigrants and immigration. In addition, some teachers have limited experience with or education about the immigrant communities they serve” (32).

Although the impact of cultural discontinuity is considerable for all children, for those in new immigrant families the impact is more intense and has more potential to damage the relationship between children and their families. Consider that the word *familiar* is based on the word *family*. When the world young children find themselves in is *unfamiliar*, where they make their way for the most

part without their families present, think how hard it must be for them to trust their own perceptions, to feel competent and sure of their capacities.

The following strategies can help support children and families who are immigrants:

- **Nurture a sense of welcome, belonging, and safety.** Showing children that you care about and want them in the group is even more fundamental to your role than teaching specific content, including English. Counter negative attitudes toward immigrants in media, other children, and elsewhere. Not feeling safe and cared for undermines children’s learning. Immigrant parents often mention hugging, comfort, and patience as most important for their children before they talk about learning (Adair & Barraza 2014).
- **Help children feel competent by building on the strengths they bring—but do not overwhelm or rush them.** Intentionally and sensitively work to identify each child’s funds of knowledge, interests, and skills. In addition, give children time to open up at their own pace. Be patient and encouraging, giving children time to learn. Do not label a child as having a lack of intelligence and ability for not yet speaking English easily or for being reserved (Adair & Barraza 2014).
- **Use instructional strategies and materials that specifically support dual language learners.** Make learning visual and hands-on. Narrate what you are doing and what the child is doing so he hears the connections between a new language and what he sees, feels, and does every day. Make it comfortable for children (and families) to take the risks of learning a new language. Model correct use of language rather than correct a child’s language mistakes while he is speaking; you risk interrupt the child’s thinking and can make the child wary about using the new language.
- **Stand up for honest assessment.** Identifying where a child is in her development and learning yields accurate results only if assessment is carried out in the child’s languages (NAEYC 2005). Assessing a child in a language she does not know is, by definition, an inequitable and therefore inaccurate vision of the child’s skills and understandings.

- **Make a special effort to welcome the children’s families and help them feel that they also belong.** As much as possible, make connections with other families in your program or in the community who speak the families’ language and can help you communicate with them. Set up an initial meeting in a place that is convenient and comfortable for the family, such as a place of worship or a community organization that supports immigrant families, and bring someone who speaks their home language if you do not. Talk about what their child will experience in your program and listen to what the family has to say about their child.

Find out what their child enjoys doing and learning, and ask how things are different in the United States from what children experience in their country of origin (Adair & Barraza 2014). Encourage family members to come to your class with their child for the first few days so they see how your program works.

- **Learn about the dreams families have for their children.** Hoping to create a better life for their children is one of the most consistent and strongest motivations for people to immigrate to the United States. Acknowledging this can start an ongoing series of conversations with families about their children and home cultures.

Language Matters: Nurturing Dual Language Development

by Laurie Olsen, founding director of SEAL (Sobrato Early Academic Language Preschool–3 Initiative)

Young children are linguistic geniuses—their brains are wired to acquire language, absorbing the sounds and rhythms of the language(s) that surround them. By the time they arrive in your program, they have spent years soaking up language, developing vocabulary, learning to pronounce and form the sounds of their home language, and internalizing the language’s structure and use. They absorb the sounds, words, and structure of that language from the songs and stories of their families, the intimate loving murmur of grandparents, and the negotiations and play with siblings. By age 2, they have an emerging competence to understand and label their world and express what they need and want in their home language. That language is both functional—used for communicating—and emotional and personal—deeply entwined with thought, culture, and identity.

When they enter an early childhood program, young dual language learners—children who are learning their home language and English—are exposed to a broader world, a place beyond their home and family. Children who enter English-only programs must leave their home language at the door. Their world disappears. Despite your warm smile and reassuring touch, they find themselves in a place in

which their language, their means of communication and understanding, has no relevance, no power, no function. It is profoundly disorienting. Children experience a loss of self, resulting in disequilibrium and invisibility. How you respond and support them as they face this significant transition has a profound impact on their long-term language development, their sense of belonging and identity, their future educational trajectory, and their relationship to their family and culture.

In the United States, everyone needs English. It is the language of school, commerce, political participation, and access to other systems. Every child also needs the language of her home, heritage, and culture to maintain relationships and connection and develop a strong identity. Mastery and ownership of both languages, therefore, is essential. And a strong grasp of the home language is the best foundation for developing strong English skills (Burchinal et al. 2012; Cárdenas-Hagan et al. 2007). Many view bilingualism as a great benefit for everyone; it is linked to stronger executive function, increased social interaction, strengthened literacy and academic outcomes in both languages, and greater economic opportunities (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2017).

- **Learn how the child’s family thinks about the role of teacher.** Families bring a range of ideas about and experiences with teachers. Do not make assumptions about how the families you serve think regarding a relationship with their children’s teacher. Instead, as you get to know each family, talk with them about their experiences and hopes for relating to teachers, and share the kind of family–teacher role you hope to achieve with them. Over time, figure out a relationship that meets both your needs and the family’s.
- **Connect new immigrant families to each other and to other families in your program.** It is important for people to know that they are not alone, that they have allies to help them learn to negotiate life in a new country. Ask family members of other children to familiarize new immigrant families with community resources, such as the library, parks, medical help, and immigrant support advocacy groups. Bringing new immigrant families together also allows them to connect and help each other.

Children have the capacity to learn two languages simultaneously. This reality contradicts the myth that simultaneously learning two or more languages confuses children and is detrimental to their development (Paradis, Genesee, & Crago 2011). In fact, considerable research concludes that simultaneous development of a home language and English is the strongest approach to fostering dual language learners’ linguistic, cognitive, and social and emotional development (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2017). Devastating rejection and loss of the home language often occurs when young children are in English-only programs, with clear long-term negative consequences for family relationships, cultural connection, identity, and academic success (Oh & Fuligni 2010).

Wherever possible, dual language learners should be in early childhood programs in which both their home language and English are actively affirmed, engaged, and supported—where there are bilingual adults who talk to them, read to them, and model language for them and where they can develop increasing competence in both languages (Cummins 2001; Cummins & Early 2011). This is not always possible, however. Many programs do not have staff who speak the languages of all the children and

their families. But every program can find ways to make room for a child’s language, actively affirm that language, support the child’s connection to and exposure to his home language, and help him develop pride in his bilingualism. Early childhood educators must recognize the urgency and stakes if they fail to provide this support.

Supporting dual language learners’ linguistic development and identity can only be done in partnership with families. Teachers must find ways to communicate with families in their home languages. Every program can also express the importance of maintaining children’s home language while learning English and support families’ efforts to do so. Because families’ desires for their children to learn English can be so strong, and because there are still lingering damaging effects of harsh English-only policies in the United States, teachers are an important source of clarification and information about supporting children as *dual* language learners (Ovando 2003).

Early childhood educators must act with clear intentionality. During the early childhood years, children’s linguistic capacity is open and receptive. Whether children learn shame or pride in their bilingual capacity is very much in the hands of their educators.