

# Dual Language Learners



## Introduction

Language learning is a primary task in young children’s development. As infants interact with their family members and primary caregivers, they hear the sounds of the language that surrounds them. In addition to sounds, children learn vocabulary and meaning from daily interactions that are concrete and related to their experiences. For example the word “apple” conveys the concept of a round fruit that may be red, yellow, or gold; that is ready to eat in the fall; that can be eaten raw or cooked, etc. Just one word carries a great deal of meaning.

“During the first five years of life, children’s brains develop rapidly, highly influenced by the experiences they share with the adults and peers in their lives. Exposure to language is a unique experience because it is continuous and constant. Children are surrounded by language during many of their waking hours. Constant exposure makes language highly consequential for brain development and learning.” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education 2016, 5)

The capability for infants to learn multiple languages is now well-recognized in the field of neuroscience. Through exposure to the home language, children’s language learning narrows and becomes focused on the interactions with their loved ones. Beginning as early as nine months of age, the brain starts to do away with language synapses that are no longer necessary for understanding the child’s home language (Kluger 2013). Throughout their early years, children’s ability to learn multiple languages is more acute than in the adult years as this pruning continues. Therefore, it is important for families and early childhood professionals to make the most of these remarkable capabilities and consider the benefits of learning multiple languages.

The number of children who speak two or more languages is dramatically increasing across the United States.

“The US Census Bureau projects that by the 2030s, children whose home language is other than English will increase from roughly 22 percent to 40 percent of the school-age population. The numbers are growing even more rapidly for the preschool years due to increasing immigration and birth rates (Center for Public Education 2012).” (Magruder, Hayslip, Espinosa, and Matera 2013, 9)

The increase in children who are dual language learners (DLLs) presents challenges in a society that is primarily English-speaking. As professionals in early childhood programs and educational systems implement Minnesota’s Early Childhood Indicators of Progress (ECIPs): Minnesota’s Early Learning Standards and work toward high quality services to improve child outcomes, they must consider recommendations for using the ECIPs effectively with all children including dual language learners.

# Benefits of Multilingualism

Research cites many benefits for supporting bi- and multi-lingualism:

“New studies are showing that a multilingual brain is nimbler, quicker, better able to deal with ambiguities, resolve conflicts and even resist Alzheimer’s disease and other forms of dementia longer.” (Kluger 2013)

“The weight of current research indicates that becoming proficient in two languages is both possible for and beneficial to young children... The reports also conclude that a strong home-language base makes it easier to learn English, and that young children can learn two languages as naturally as learning one (August & Shanahan 2006; Genesee 2010; Castro, Ayankoya, & Kasprzak 2011).” ((Magruder, et al 2013, 9)

“Research shows compared to their non-bilingual peers, bilingual people have an easier time:

- Understanding math concepts and solving word problems;
- Developing strong thinking skills;
- Using logic;
- Focusing, remembering, and making decisions;
- Thinking about language; and
- Learning other languages.” (Too Small to Fail) <http://toosmall.org/community/body/Benefits-of-Being-Bilingual.pdf>

In addition, benefits have been identified in social-emotional development, approaches to learning, school readiness and potential academic success, and, ultimately, future employment and life success.

“One-half to two-thirds of adults around the world speak at least two languages. In today’s global society, they have many advantages. Globally, bilingual and biliterate adults have more job opportunities than monolingual adults. Bilingual and biliterate individuals have the opportunity to participate in the global community in more ways, get information from more places, and learn more about people from other cultures.” (Too Small

to Fail) <http://toosmall.org/community/body/Benefits-of-Being-Bilingual.pdf>

With so many benefits identified, it is clear that young children who are dual language learners have many strengths. Yet, historically, their academic achievement has lagged behind native English-speakers (Magruder, et al 2013). It is essential that early childhood professionals build on the many strengths identified and engage in thoughtful and intentional practices that address the needs of DLLs in all varieties of programs and services for children and families. Academic achievement is not the only concern. The very fabric of families and cultural ties can be effected when children’s multiple language experiences are not supported.

“Unless teachers and families make an effort to support both the home language and English, young DLLs can easily lose the ability to speak and understand their home language, or lose the balance between the two languages (Puig 2010; Castro, Ayankoya, & Kasprzak 2011). If young children lose the language of their home, they will never experience the many advantages of becoming fully bilingual. They might find communicating with elder family members difficult and feel less connected to their family traditions and heritage. This disconnect can lead to emotional and self-esteem concerns as DLLs approach adolescence (Wong Fillmore 1991).” (Magruder, et al 2013, 9)

## Dual Language Learners in Minnesota Early Childhood Programs

Dual language learners in Minnesota are an increasingly diverse group including:

- Immigrant and refugee children who speak their families’ languages at home and are learning English in school.
- Native English speakers learning a second language in a language immersion school.
- Native American children who may speak both English and their native language or be involved in their tribe’s language revitalization efforts.

Parent and family educators, teachers, and providers recognize and celebrate the diversity of families, languages, and cultures in their programs and communities. Early childhood programs and services for children and families are more meaningful and have greater impact on children's learning and success when professionals attend to the social and cultural context in which children are being raised.

“For optimal development and learning of all children, individuals who work with children must respect, value, and support the culture, values, beliefs, and languages of each home and promote the meaningful, relevant, and active participation of families.” (Division for Early Childhood 2010, 1)

As early educators use Minnesota's Early Indicators of Child Progress (ECIPs), they integrate the unique cultures, languages, and abilities of each child within the framework provided by the ECIPs (see Brief #10: Using the ECIPs in Diverse Communities). They can refer to a new policy statement about dual language learners released in 2016 by the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services and Education with the following mandate:

“Early childhood programs should be prepared to optimize the early experiences of these young children by holding high expectations, capitalizing on their strengths- including cultural and linguistic strengths - and providing them with the individualized developmental and learning supports necessary to succeed in school.” (DHHS and DOE 2016, 1)

They can also turn to recommendations from the organization WIDA, whose mission is to advance “...academic language development and academic achievement for children and youth who are culturally and linguistically diverse through high quality standards, assessments, research, and professional learning for educators.” (<https://www.wida.us/aboutus/mission.aspx>)

WIDA developed Early English Language (E-ELD) and Early Spanish Language (E-SLD) Development Standards to provide guidance to early childhood professionals. The key reminder in these standards is that children who are dual language learners need listening, speaking, and meaning-making skills (e.g. gestures and facial expressions) to make sense of and to contribute to the world of the classroom, home,

and community. The recommendations from WIDA have been cross walked with the ECIPs so that early educators in Minnesota can easily see the ways the ECIPs can be used with dual language learners. It is important to note that the language demands in most of the indicators of the ECIPs are high. Therefore, educators must consistently make the distinction between what a child would be expected to learn and know developmentally and what he demonstrates given his language ability in English and/or in his home language. Teachers and providers must also employ the best practices that support learning by children who are dual language learners.

Teaching dual language learners means being more alert to their language development and skills in both their home language and in English. Language experiences and opportunities to build vocabulary and understanding must be provided throughout the day. For example, a four-year-old child may speak his home language fluently but only use one word sentences in English. It's important that early educators not react to the lower expressive ability children by lowering their expectations. Perhaps new English words are taught in a guided group reading experience. Pictures help the child to relate his knowledge to the new English words. In addition, teachers and providers can reinforce vocabulary throughout the day and expand the complexity of the concepts with demonstrations and gestures and thus, address many domains in the ECIPs as well.

- “I'm carrying the pumpkin.” (Physical Development)
- “It's very heavy.” “Let's compare this big pumpkin and this little pumpkin.” (Mathematics)
- “Help me carry the pumpkin. We're working together.” (Social Emotional Development)
- “Let's see what's inside the pumpkin.” (Scientific Thinking)

These opportunities to use the vocabulary outside of reading time give children a chance to practice their understanding of the new terms in English.

Early childhood professionals must ensure that the ECIPs are used in a rich language environment that builds on children's strengths and scaffolds opportunities to support the development of each child towards their full potential. Specific recommendations will be shared in the remainder of this brief.

# How to Use the ECIPs with Dual Language Learners

We will focus on six primary ways for early educators to use the ECIPs with dual language learners:

1. Celebrating the cultural and linguistic diversity of children and their families.
2. Supporting children's fluency in their home language or honoring home languages if staff are not proficient in that language.
3. Using best practices to teach English.
4. Establishing a culturally responsive learning environment across domains.
5. Supporting children's language development through play (in English and in home languages).
6. Talk, read, and sing together every day in English and in home languages.

## Celebrating Cultural and Linguistic Diversity

Developmentally appropriate practices include addressing the social and cultural context in which a child is being raised. This context is a complex whole of language, knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, laws, customs, and ways of living. When early childhood educators are intentional in creating a climate that celebrates cultural and linguistic diversity, they establish strong partnerships with families built on trust and acceptance. These partnerships increase the effectiveness of early education and improve outcomes for children. Such practices are recommended in the 2016 policy statement of the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services and Education:

“Early childhood leaders should intentionally promote a climate and values that are respectful of each and every child and their family, welcoming and inclusive to all, and assumes that every child has strengths that can be built on to help them meet their potential. Leaders should communicate that bilingualism is an asset, not only for DLLs, but

for all children. Learning two or more languages is not a risk factor; it is a strength that should be fostered. Families, regardless of their English proficiency, should be seen as capable partners in promoting children's learning and development and should be provided language assistance services to ensure they can act as the most important advocates in their children's educational experience. (In some cases, language assistance services may be required to be provided.) The program should not only demonstrate respect for peoples of all cultures; it should embrace and celebrate their diversity. “(DHHS and DOE 2016, 20-21)

In Minnesota, the implementation of the ECIPs is done with a sense of cultural relevance and respect. As teachers and providers make use of the ECIPs in curriculum and assessment in their programs, they recognize the appropriateness of the developmental expectations in the standards for all children while also taking into consideration the social, cultural, and linguistic context in which the children in their program are being raised. They communicate with families in a reciprocal, two-way manner so that their knowledge of family values, beliefs, and child-rearing practices helps them to consider the ways children are demonstrating their accomplishment of specific indicators of progress. They view the ECIPs through the lenses of the cultures of the families in their program community.



# Supporting Children’s Fluency in Their Home Language and Honoring Home Languages

By their later preschool years, most children develop fluency in their home language unless there are delays in language development, expression, or processing. Some children’s home language development may be delayed. They may live in families who have low literacy and use a low vocabulary. Or they may have language processing difficulties. It is important that teachers and providers support and honor children’s continued use of their home languages and recognize their developmental capabilities and accomplishments in the languages of their families rather than in English alone.

**“DLLs come to early childhood programs with richly varied backgrounds, sets of skills, and cultural ways of knowing: they need teachers who welcome them and recognize their unique abilities, what they know, and what they need to learn. Teachers of young DLLs understand that children communicate their knowledge using the safest method possible, and this may mean the use of their home language, English, or a mixture of both.” (Magruder, et al 2013, 10)**

Monolingual English educators have the responsibility to honor the children’s home languages, even if they do not know those languages. They can make use of language specialists, family members, and volunteers to assist them in learning key words and phrases, finding resources in various languages to bring into the classroom, and interacting with the children in their home languages.

# Using Best Practices to Teach English

English is the dominant language in the United States and Minnesota. There is agreement that all young children need exposure and instruction to learn English. There are multiple ways to approach teaching English and more and more research to guide English-language learning experiences for children whose home language is not English.

“Multiple bodies of literature – including developmental and cognitive psychology, education research, and neuroscience – point to the benefits of supporting the home language of young children who are DLLs, alongside their English language development, in early childhood settings.” (DHHS and DOE 2016, 10)

Early childhood programs have opportunities to work with children and families at the time in children’s lives when language development in multiple languages has its most potential. Recommendations focus on a strength-based approach that recognizes the many benefits of bi- and multilingualism for children. Administrators and teachers and providers can identify a “language plan” for their program. (Passe 2013). They can approach language learning with children who are dual language learners by identifying and implementing a Classroom Language Model (CLM) (DHHS and DOE 2016). Those CLMs that are supported in the recommendations include:

- Dual immersion with instruction in both English and a second language.
- Home language instruction with English support.
- English language instruction with home language support.

Benefits are seen to the three approaches above for not only dual language learners but for monolingual English-speaking children as well.

“Taken together, research on language use in early childhood programs, and on the aforementioned benefits of supporting home language development, including fostering bilingualism, maintaining cultural connections and communication with family members, and the

transferability of home language skills to English language acquisition, suggests that systematic and deliberate exposure to English, paired with supporting home language development within high quality early childhood settings, can result in strong, positive outcomes for children who are DLLs, as well as positive outcomes for native English speakers. (DHHS and DOE 2016, 12)”

There are challenges to implementing the recommendations when teachers and providers are monolingual themselves. Such challenges and the need for strong staff development and support will be addressed later in this brief.

In some Native American communities, language revitalization efforts promote the teaching of Heritage languages. In this case, English is the first language of the children. It is important for early childhood professionals to recognize the importance of these efforts and work in collaboration with those involved, aligning curriculum and activities to maintain continuity for children.

## Establishing a Culturally Responsive Learning Environment Across Domains

To be culturally and linguistically responsive, the learning environment needs to reflect the children and families in the early childhood program. Teachers and providers intentionally plan for an environment that is organized into established learning areas appropriate for the age and developmental capabilities of the children in the program. They consider materials and experiences that will encourage interaction among children and adults so that oral language is nurtured and supported. They offer materials in multiple languages so that they are reflecting children’s home languages as well as English. Print-rich environments include labeling of shelves and areas and providing books and posters in multiple languages. Here are more recommendations for establishing a culturally responsive learning environment for DLLs:

1. Find out what languages will be spoken by children in your class and focus your classroom setup on what will most effectively support children who speak those languages.
2. Stock bookshelves with bilingual and monolingual books in each of the languages needed. Look for storybooks and nonfiction books that come with CDs or books available as apps with sound to help you learn to pronounce words in each child’s language. Wordless books are also great for multilingual classes.
3. Ask families to send in photos of things that are meaningful to each child, such as foods, celebrations, and family activities. Ask them to help you label the images with words in both English and the home language to give you lots to talk about with the children. Use the pictures to make personalized posters, displays, and class books that children can relate to.
4. Add labels that reflect the represented languages. Ask families or volunteers to help with the proper and the phonetic spelling. Labels don’t build language and literacy unless you and the children really use them.
5. Play music from different countries and in different languages. Ask families to send in their favorites to build that home-school connection.
6. Learn to say 10 to 20 key words in each child’s home language to help them feel welcome, safe, and comfortable starting from their first day. Use an online translation app like Google Translate or ask parents to record words for you to learn. Try hello, my name is, eat, drink, hurt, bathroom, your parents will be here soon, wash your hands, help, yes, and no to start.
7. Make a picture communication board to help all children communicate their needs and feelings. Post photos of the children looking sad and happy, helping each other, cleaning up toys, going outside, solving a conflict, and participating in daily routines. (Nemeth 2016, 5)

# Supporting Children's Language Development through Play (in English and in Home Languages)

The most effective curricular approaches in early childhood are based on young children as active learners emphasizing play, exploration, and constructive learning more so than didactic, teacher-led, passive learning experiences. The Minnesota Early Childhood Indicators of Progress (ECIPs) support play, exploration, and active learning for children from birth through kindergarten entry.

Play provides multiple opportunities for teachers and providers to address children's language development. Books, toys, art, science, building materials, and dramatic play props can generate rich language interactions that reinforce vocabulary, concepts and language usage in all areas of the classroom. Adults interact with children as they play, narrating what they are doing, asking questions, and engaging children in non-verbal and verbal conversations. If early educators do speak the children's language, they can have a conversation in that language. If they do not speak the child's language, early educators must use clear and precise English, with the addition of demonstrations, gestures, and facial expressions. Here are some examples:

- They comment on a situation "Oh, this tea is hot" (+ gestures) or "I wonder what vegetables would be good in the soup?" (+ gestures).
- They name the props or toys in the play area: "Let's put the blue truck on the shelf" (+ demonstration), or "Yes, the teddy bear's fur is soft."

Play facilitation can be conducted in a child's home language or in English. Teachers and providers can pair children in ways to encourage cross-language communication. Early educators must be aware of the amount of talking that children do. Classrooms with dual language learners tend to be quieter than classrooms with monolingual speakers, as children have less language to use with each other. Teachers

and providers do not want to miss the great meaning play has for children and the rich possibilities for both receptive and expressive language development it provides.

## Talk, Read and Sing Together Every Day

One of the most common recommendations to support dual language learners involves talking, reading, and singing together every day with children as they learn both English and their home languages.

"The more interesting and interactive the conversations are that children take part in, the more language they learn. Reading books, singing, playing word games, and simply talking to and with children builds their vocabulary while providing increased opportunities to develop listening skills. Children learn by engaging in daily interactions and experiences with peers and skilled adults." (Magruder, et al 2013, 10).

Daily conversations, exposure to books, and engagement in songs and chants are common happenings in early childhood programs. When teachers and providers plan intentionally to engage with children in these ways, they are supporting the language development of all children. Conversations within the context of a warm and caring relationship provide a safe place in which to take risks with self-expression. Dual language learners may attempt to interact with a trusted caregiver in their second language because they know they will be supported. They feel confident to interact in the new language when adults encourage them in a calm and matter of fact manner. That happens best at play or reading time, one-on-one and in small groups.

Teachers and providers recognize that learning language is important and are intentional in supporting such learning. They know that exposure to books in many languages builds on children's enjoyment of stories and connections to print and the sounds of languages. And that songs and chants provide opportunities for repetition, vocabulary, rhythm, and word play. In addition, for preschoolers, they plan for opportunities to support their emergent writing skills in multiple languages.

# Partnering with Families

Family engagement is an important part of best practices in early childhood programs. (See Brief #7, Using the Early Childhood Indicators of Progress in Parent and Family Education and Engagement). Partnering with the families of dual language learners is an essential step in supporting the development of DLLs. Here are some of the recommendations for developing such partnerships:

- Create a respectful, welcoming, and inclusive climate.
- Perceive dual language learning as a strength and benefit.
- Learn about children's language backgrounds and families' preferred language for ongoing communication with the program.
- Engage with families in establishing a culturally responsive learning environment.
- Inform families of how the ECIPs are used with dual language learners and with all children.
- Emphasize the importance of oral language as the foundation for literacy.
- Support families as children transition between programs and systems.
- Reassure families that their children will learn English to be successful in school.

Policies and procedures in early childhood programs should include attention to the needs of dual language learners and their families and provide information to families about:

- The benefits of bilingualism.
- The importance of home language development.
- Families' central role in home language development and tips on providing a high-quality language environment in the home language, at home and in the community. (DHHS and DOE 2016, 21)

# The Importance of Staff Development, Training, and Support

With the increase of dual language learners in early childhood programs, staff development efforts must be strategically planned and offered so that teachers and providers are prepared to meet all children's needs, to improve their outcomes, and to ensure that their potential is realized. Both bilingual and monolingual staff need training and support to build their skills so that they are intentional and confident about teaching DLL children. Administrators and educational leaders in early childhood programs need to consider the linguistic communities in which their programs reside and act accordingly in hiring practices along with the implementation of ongoing training and support for their staff members.

Early Childhood programs could benefit from using WIDA E-ELD standards to determine the kinds of language supports needed at different levels of English language development and during activities such as during large group, early literacy, or circle time activities, so that children understand and can participate with the entire group. All adults working in the classroom should learn how to help provide various language supports to dual language learners during small group learning activities, snack time, outdoor play, or free-choice play. Educators use E-ELD Standards and the ECIPS for guidance on how to help dual language learners reach the next level of English language development.

## Conclusion

Children who are dual language learners are attending early childhood programs in growing numbers. The benefits of bi- and multilingualism for both children and adults are well-documented. The Minnesota's Early Childhood Indicators of Progress (ECIPs) are designed to support high quality services to improve child outcomes. Early childhood professionals must take steps to use the ECIPs effectively with ALL children including children who are dual language learners.



# Resources

The Division for Early Childhood (DEC). 2010. Position Statement: Responsiveness to ALL Children, Families, and Professionals: Integrating Cultural and Linguistic Diversity into Policy and Practice. Missoula, MT: Division for Early Childhood.

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Too Small to Fail. Talk, Read and Sing Together Every Day! The Benefits of Being Bilingual – A Review for Teachers and Other Early Education Program Providers

<http://toosmall.org/community/body/Benefits-of-Being-Bilingual.pdf>

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education. 2016.

Policy Statement on Supporting the Development of Children Who Are Dual Language Learners in Early Childhood Programs.

[https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ece/dll\\_policy\\_statement\\_final.pdf](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ece/dll_policy_statement_final.pdf)

WIDA." WIDA is a research center founded in 2002 within the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

<https://www.wida.us/standards/EarlyYears.aspx>