

Caring for Infants in a Bilingual Child Care Setting

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Important Issues

Infants and toddlers need a rich linguistic environment in order to thrive and develop their language and communication competence. When a child is first learning language, we believe it is best to provide a rich linguistic environment both at home and in the child care setting which is the same as and supports the native language and the culture of the infant's family. This is true, regardless of the family's language or cultural group. When infants are cared for by the

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family, this usually happens automatically. However, when children are cared for outside the family, the native language of the caregivers may or may not match that of the infant's home language. Since English is the prevailing language in many of our child care settings, this raises some concerns and issues for families whose home language is not English.

Preserving a family's home language and cultural heritage is important to the identity and sense of well being for the entire family. For young children, cultural and linguistic identity provides a strong and important sense of self and family belonging, which in turn supports a wide range of learning capabilities, not the least of which is learning a second language (Cummins, 1979 a & b, 1981; Krashen, 1981; Lambert, 1972). Another important consideration is the relationship of language development and learning about one's culture. Language learning for the young child is closely tied to cultural learning.

So then, given cultural and language diversity of infants and toddlers being cared for outside the family, how can we best support and enrich each child's native language in our multilingual child care settings? First, in all of our child care settings we need well-trained, sensitive caregivers who speak the same language as the child and represent the child's cultural group. While this is not a current reality it is a goal we should strive for in order to support all children and families in our country. Second, and equally important, all caregivers need to become educated about and sensitive to the issues of language and culture, regardless of their own language background and cultural heritage. This understanding and sensitivity will support children, families, and providers as they grow and develop in our culturally diverse society. Third, for infants and toddlers whose child care arrangements expose them to a bilingual or a language environment different from their normal home language environment, caregiving will present some important challenges. It is necessary to understand several important characteristics of early bilingual experience to maximize the effectiveness of the care provided to children in nonnative language environments. This article explores several important issues: (a) dismissing myths which might exist regarding the supposed negative effects of bilingualism, (b) understanding what caregivers can do to insure a positive and responsive environment in which communication thrives, (c) communicating with the family and understanding its general social circumstances.

Dismissing Myths

What does bilingualism add or subtract in the arithmetic of language

development? Is bilingualism bad? Does it lead to linguistic delays, communicative confusion, other developmental risks, or all of these? Early research on the effects of bilingualism painted a bleak picture. In 1952, one researcher concluded, "There can be no doubt that the child reared in a bilingual environment is handicapped in his language growth" (Thompson, 1952, p. 162). In essence, this understanding of bilingualism concluded that learning one language is hard enough, so learning two must be at least twice as hard, particularly for a young child.

Present-day research has shown this conclusion to be false, a myth perpetuated by misunderstood common sense. Throughout the world and in the United States, more up-to-date research has shown that young children who live in supportive and nurturing bilingual environments do not suffer linguistically from those environments. This research has carefully documented the development of several types of bilingualism and compared the results to the development of English in monolingual children. The analysis of these comparisons clearly indicates that bilingual children, both at early and late periods of development, do not differ significantly from monolinguals on measures of vocabulary development, phonological development, syntactic development, and the development of the many nuances of communication.

An interesting and sometimes negatively interpreted finding is that bilingual children may move through a phase of language mixing. They are sometimes observed to use two languages as if they were one. For example, a Spanish/English bilingual child may say, "Yo quiero PLAY" (I want to PLAY), or "yo estaba PLAYENDO" (I was PLAYING). In such cases, the child is using English vocabulary, English grammar, or both, within a Spanish linguistic context. In the past, such instances of mixed language use were interpreted as evidence of language confusion. Today we understand these mixed language instances as a normal developmental occurrence for some bilingual children. They are much like the observation of overgeneralization (saying "sheeps" for the plural "sheep" or "deers" for the plural "deer") in monolingual English speaking children.

In the United States, millions of young children are exposed to two languages, particularly Spanish and English, although over 100 languages are spoken in combination with English in this country's families. Instead of perceiving bilingualism as a liability, today's research goes as far as documenting the linguistic and cognitive advantages which bilingual children demonstrate in comparison to monolingual children. A 1989 article in the *American Psychologist* reaches the following conclusion:

The research evidence suggests that bilingual acquisition

involves a process that builds on an underlying base for both languages. There does not appear to be a competition over mental processes by the two languages and there are even possible cognitive advantages to bilingualism. It is evident that the duality of the language proficiency has no negative effect on the cognitive development of bilingual children. (Hakuta and Garcia, 1989, p. 376)

Although bilingualism was once considered a bad habit that was thought best to eliminate as soon as possible, today we can rest easy about the supposed harm bilingualism causes and instead appreciate and support the communicative development of the bilingual infant.

But if bilingualism is not harmful, should it be promoted? Should non-English-speaking infants be exposed to as much English as possible? Should they receive early and consistent exposure to English so they can begin to acquire the English they will need to be successful in this country? Should child care providers attempt to teach English to non-English-speaking infants? Is an English speaking care situation early in life exactly what is needed?

If the family's native language is not English, each of these questions can be answered with a clear "No." We now know that the better a child learns the native language and the many cognitive and socially related skills that the child needs to communicate in it effectively, the more capable the child will become in mastering the complexities of communicating in a second language.

Providing A Supportive Language Learning Environment

The optimal situation for supporting native language learning is when the caregiver's language matches that of the infant and the infant's family. Providing this native language in the caregiving situation supports and reinforces many rich encounters with language the infant has within the family. As children begin speaking, it is important, in fact, for them to be exposed to and to use their native language in a wide variety of ways. Since language and intellectual development are so closely related, when young children hear their native language spoken in familial settings as well as in the wider community, they are exposed to more words, more complex grammar, and more complex ideas, thoughts, and concepts. This broad range of linguistic and cognitive experience in natural situations enriches the development of both language and intellectual functioning in the older infant and preschool child (Heath, 1986).

Infants develop and thrive linguistically in rich but natural communication interactions. They do not require any special teaching (Ervin-Tripp, 1973). In

other words, caregivers should not formally teach any language. What caregivers naturally do is what supports native language learning. We know that “caregivers intuitively modify their speech to young children in such a way as to make it more easily understood” (McLaughlin, 1985, p.60). We also know that infants are like sponges as they receive language and store an incredible amount of language long before they begin producing spoken language. Activities such as telling stories, singing, rhyming, and chanting in the child’s home language, along with generally talking with the baby, support language development and are enjoyable for children and caregivers. These activities bathe the infant in a rich linguistic environment. The nonverbal communication that accompanies spoken language is also powerful and communicates an emotional context for the language experiences.

It is important for the caregiver who speaks the child’s home language to communicate in a variety of ways, especially with the older infant or toddler. In one-to-one interactions with the young and mobile infant the caregiver will speak intimately with the child, using informal language forms and simple and familiar words. As the infant grows older, the caregiver’s communication about objects and activities in the environment and use of words and language forms will naturally become more diverse and varied. As children hear the caregiver speak to their parents and other caregivers, yet another form and context of language will be modeled. In all of these different conversations, children receive exposure to language and communications in their native language. This exposure to vocabulary and grammar in a natural setting provides children with a firm foundation in their native language. This foundation supports children and enables them to learn a second language more easily. Children’s rich and varied involvement in their native language, before attempting to learn a second language, sets the stage for second language learning (Cummins, 1981; Duncan & DeAvila, 1979; Legarreta, 1981).

But what if it is impossible to provide non-English or bilingual caregivers? Won’t this harm the linguistic development of these infants? Certainly, if the caregiver refuses to interact with the infant by ignoring the child’s natural communicative attempts, the infant will soon stop communicating.

Over 60% of any communicative act is nonverbal. Infants communicate initially by pointing, crying, screaming, wiggling, nodding, and grimacing. The best approach to handling a language mismatch in a caregiving situations is to attend to the total communicative signal of the infant and to respond naturally with understanding and a visible willingness to communicate.

Regardless of the language environment, all infants will attempt communication. Young children have not yet learned to be afraid of making

mistakes; they will risk communicating with caregivers regardless of the language they speak. Caregivers should do the same. The child will not be confused by an unfamiliar language used by the caregiver as long as that communication is authentic.

Still it is important to find someone who can speak the infant's language (a parent, relative, or community volunteer). The infant must feel welcome in this nonhome environment. The presence of the child's language will assist greatly. However, English speaking caregivers should never fear that English is bad and should not hesitate to speak to the child as they would to infants from their own language. The language mismatch is simply not optimal for the child's overall language and cognitive development.

Communicating with Families

A number of activities and strategies can aid the communication between caregivers and families when the two have different native languages. When information must be given to parents in a formal setting (for example, a workshop on child care, or when State regulations must be explained), it should be done by a professional who speaks the parents' native language. All parents appreciate this type of information and educational session. But they will often understand the information only if it is presented in their native language.

Informal situations for interaction can be quite useful. Providing a parent corner with simple refreshments for parents when they drop off or pick up children allows for conversations in which caregivers and parents can chat about the day's happenings or other significant community events. This type of informal setting is much more tolerant of linguistic diversity. These informal interactions allow for each participant to learn and practice aspects of the language which are foreign. Parents always appreciate the caregiver learning and using greetings and other simple phrases with them in their native language. The family must be kept informed at all times of relevant activities, moods, and the health of their infant. This requires that the communication between caregiver and family occur in the family's native language. In some situations, an older bilingual child can serve as a translator, although this may place the bilingual child in an awkward situation in which it is difficult to serve as an effective translator. Do not count on children's translations to inform the family. Always use adult bilinguals if translators are necessary.

It may also be necessary to communicate with people other than the infant's parents, because many families count on older siblings, aunts, uncles, and

grandparents to serve as primary home caregivers. Any formal written communication such as letters, forms, or newsletters, should be in the family's native language.

Infant caregivers may be perceived as extended members of the family. This role requires a much different communicative style than is usually expected in other formal caregiving situations. Parents are likely to invite caregivers to family gatherings and celebrations. Although nonattendance would not usually be received in a negative manner, attending such events may enhance the positive communicative relationship that is important in a caregiving situation.

Meeting the Challenge of Diversity

An unfortunate social circumstance often reported in caregiving situations with bilingual and non-English speaking children, is the tendency to perceive these children and their families as foreigners. That these children and their families do not speak English marks them as different, and this observed difference sometimes leads to negative feelings and treatment, perhaps owing to a sense of defensiveness and suspicion. This uncomfortable social situation often leads to the desire to change this difference by ridding children and their families of those attributes which make them different. Unfortunately, such attempts only serve to develop suspicion and negative reaction from the infant and families. Rather than attempting to minimize diversity, appreciating and respecting diversity can enrich all of our lives.

Appreciating the significance and validity of the child's and family's language and culture is a challenge in itself. But today, when so many children from diverse language and cultural groups are placed in early child care, this appreciation must be transformed into challenging actions that go beyond acknowledging diversity. (Moreover, because at present only a few caregivers come from these varied language and cultural groups and therefore, through no fault of their own, lack personal experience with these diverse languages and cultures, the challenge is quite formidable.) It is important to have caregivers from the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the families needing child care. If caregivers in a program are unable to communicate with the child and family in their own language, whenever possible, refer the family to a program that has caregivers who can.

It has always been evident that child care staff appreciate the significance and validity of the child's and family's language and culture. But only recently, when so many children from diverse language and cultural groups have made

use of early child care, has this appreciation required transformation into a set of distinctly challenging actions that go beyond acknowledging diversity. Moreover, since few caregivers come from these diverse language and cultural groups and, therefore, through no fault of their own, lack experience with these diverse languages and cultures, the challenge is formidable.

Meeting the diversity challenge creates some conflict: some of it inevitable and some of it unnecessary. Majority attitudes of condescension can be viewed as signals to children and their parents to abandon their language and culture in favor of adopting the mainstream culture and English. Caregivers who emphasize these mainstream values pull children away from the important linguistic and social resources available in the family and community. As a result, parents become wary of placing their children in caregiving situations that do not emphasize and practice their own values, traditions, and language. Other parents may come to believe that only if they abandon their language and culture will their children succeed in American society. A family's rich cultural heritage need not be taken from them because of insensitive attitudes and misunderstandings about language development.

The obvious solution to this predicament seems simple: ensure that the caregivers come from representative linguistic and cultural groups and use their personal and professional expertise to achieve the required supportive environment so necessary for infant growth and development. In many caregiving situations, this simple solution is not yet possible. In those programs in which the caregiving staff does not represent the children served, increased understanding and appreciation of the linguistic and cultural diversity of the children will create a positive caregiving context for the infant, the family, and the staff. Construction and maintenance of such an environment requires the staff's willingness to set aside any misconceptions they might have regarding the linguistic and cultural groups with whom they have had limited contact. Moreover, staff must be willing to learn from the children and the families they serve. For those serving linguistically diverse populations, learning communicative aspects of the family's language will be deeply appreciated and seen as a signal of acceptance and respect.

In today's increasingly diverse society, where minorities are becoming majorities, unfounded stereotypes and condescension have no place in a caregiving staff. A commitment to and respect for diversity can be transformed into a highly supportive child care atmosphere where children and families thrive.

Conclusion

An understanding and appreciation of the issues discussed can make providing care to infants from bilingual and non-English speaking homes a rewarding experience. Keep in mind and practice the following:

(1) Set aside all the negative myths and misunderstanding about bilingualism.

(2) Provide a secure communicative environment for all children. Remember, the goal, whenever possible, is for the child's principal caregiver to speak the same native language of the family and to reflect the family's cultural heritage as well. When this is not possible, it is important to find some regular assistance from others who speak the family's native language. When using a language other than the infant's, use your language as a natural communicative tool.

(3) Bathe infants in a rich linguistic environment. Provide many opportunities for verbal and nonverbal communication, both listening and responding to the child with the voice, facial expressions, gestures. Use music, stories, and other communicative means to expose and engage the child with a wide variety of language communication. Communicate effectively with the infant's family formally, informally, and frequently in their native language.

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