

Is It Wrong to Speak to My Babies in Their Home Language?

It is essential that infants and toddlers have access to their home language, both at home and at the early care facility. Early care programs and staff may find this article useful when caring for culturally and linguistically diverse infants. The article examines strategies to incorporate a child's home language to better promote attachment, bonding and social-emotional development.

Is It Wrong to Speak to My Babies in Their Home Language?

The answer is "no." In fact, the home language needs to be maintained in early care settings.

by Sylvia Y. Sánchez

Millie, an infant teacher, was standing by the doorway showing off the recently enrolled baby to a co-worker. She instinctively used motherese talk with the four-month-old baby as she lovingly looked into its eyes and said, "What a cute and sweet baby you are. Yes, you are an adorable baby. You are going to have a lot of fun here. Yes, you are, my love." It was the baby's first day in Millie's classroom and already the baby was responding to Millie's warm and caring voice. Millie spoke to the baby in Spanish, the baby's home language, and also Millie's home language.

Another infant teacher passed by and heard Millie's comments to the baby. She turned around and said, "Stop speaking to that baby in Spanish. You need to teach him English here." Millie did not respond, but rather stopped talking altogether until the teacher was out of sight. She then turned to her coworker and asked in English: "Is it wrong to speak to my babies in their home language?" Her co-worker, a teacher aide in the two-year-old classroom, shrugged her shoulders and responded, "I don't know, but I don't think so."

Millie's question goes to the heart of what many early caregivers are concerned about when they work with culturally and linguistically diverse infants and toddlers. Not wanting to harm the very young children in their care, and unclear about the effect that speaking the home language has on them, caregivers often hesitate or stop using the home language with the children in their care, even when it is also the caregiver's preferred language.

The question voiced by Millie, the early caregiver, can be interpreted as a call to action for all of us in the infant/family field. In response to her question, "Is it wrong to speak to my babies in their home language?," we can answer, an emphatic, "NO." It is not wrong to use the home language with infants and toddlers. In fact, both research and the *Head Start Program Performance Standards* recommend that the child's home language be maintained. Furthermore, early caregivers should not feel compelled to formally teach English to infants and toddlers; it is developmentally inappropriate. Later, as young children develop greater competency in their home language, they will be able to acquire English through meaningful everyday activities, as many preschoolers do in Head Start programs.

This article explains why it is essential for infants and toddlers to have access to their home language both at home and at the early care setting. The home language plays a significant role in supporting infants and toddlers through the two major developmental tasks of this early period:

- developing a strong emotional relationship with the significant people in their lives
- developing the knowledge, skills, and world view to help them make meaning of their environment

These two processes facilitate the development of a healthy sense of self as a cultural being and give young children the competencies needed to function effectively as members of their family and cultural community. With this foundation in the early years, children are prepared to achieve positive child outcomes and success in school.

By developing an understanding of language development and the role the home language plays in promoting socio-emotional and intellectual development, early caregivers will be able to support the development of the culturally and linguistically diverse infants and toddlers in their care.

Building a Relationship and a Cultural Identity by Using the Home Language

Even before birth, a baby is part of a relationship with her family and community. The baby's birth is anticipated, and there are expectations about what this child will be like. Once born, babies seem to be naturally programmed to continue intensifying the attachment with their family to ensure their survival. Furthering this relationship is one of the overarching major tasks for infants and toddlers. They use all of their senses and their motor and pre-verbal capacities to bond.

Language is central in the process of relationship building. Family members often get close to the mom and talk to the unborn baby as if it could hear and understand the meaning of the spoken words or sounds. Singing, humming, reading, and even caressing the mother's stomach are all attempts to communicate with the unborn baby. These are instinctive and effective communicative and culturally appropriate strategies used by families and communities to signal to the growing fetus that there are people waiting for it to be born.

More direct strategies are used by family and community members to communicate with the newborn. When speaking, they face the baby and get close to cue the baby that the spoken words, hand signs, and facial gestures are meant for her and carry an important message signaling that a bond exists between them. It can be said that language connects with the child's heart and lays the foundation for emotional well being. The language that signals this earliest connection is the home language of the family and the cultural community. Through the home language, the messages of attachment are transmitted to infants and toddlers.

The early experiences and memories formed by very young children as they interact in the family's communication system are the basis of their identity and their socio-emotional well being. An infant may not understand the individual words spoken to her, but the sounds, rhythm, cadence, and pitch of the language and even the use of silence and nonverbal cues are elements of language use that convey to a child the message of belongingness. Thus, how the family and community use the language as well as the language itself are means

through which the infant develops a sense of cultural identity.

Language Loss and Attachment

Some culturally and linguistically diverse young children are vulnerable in today's society. Whereas prior generations of immigrants experienced home language loss in the third generation, language loss is occurring earlier among recent immigrants (Portes & Hao 1998). As more linguistically diverse infants and toddlers are being cared for outside their homes, there is the strong possibility that the language of the caregiver is not the same as that of the family. In these early care settings, very young children may mistakenly pick up the message that their home language has minority status in society and has little value (Sánchez & Thorp 1998). Some young children may even view their home language with a sense of shame. Immigrant families report that when their children enter monolingual English settings (generally in public school), the children often refuse to speak their home language at home or pretend in public that they do not know the language. Many report that the children lose the ability to communicate with them and with the grandparents.

Research has shown that both babies and families need extensive interactions over extended time to form attachments (Brazelton, Koslowski, & Main 1974; Lamb 1982). Young children who can no longer competently communicate in the home language inadvertently lose interest in pursuing the extensive interactions which facilitate the emotional attachment process in families. Even when linguistically diverse family members try to switch languages and speak in English to their children, they often can not function as fully capable adults in the English language. The interactions with their children become linguistically and cognitively limited and more infrequent. Hence, both families and their children lose the opportunity to continue strengthening the emotional bond needed to maintain closeness. For the children, language loss has devastating and long term consequences: Their socio-emotional foundation is weakened, and their cultural identity becomes fragile (Sánchez et al. 1998). Consequently, one of the primary developmental tasks for infants and toddlers—to develop a strong emotional relationship with the significant people in their lives—is compromised at a very critical age.

Making Meaning of the World and Language Development

Another primary developmental task for very young children involves making meaning of the world around them. The success of this task is dependent on the adults in their lives; adults must be willing to guide and teach them the knowledge and skills needed to explore and interpret the complex and culturally laden world they are born into. This major task is also greatly impacted by language. Language is the primary cognitive tool used by families and significant adults to help very young children mediate and make meaning of their new experiences.

All children are inherently driven to use their home language. Linguists state that humans possess a strong biological drive to acquire language (Chomsky 1968) impelled by the social need to belong to their linguistic community (Vygotsky 1986). Language is social in nature; it is the vehicle that helps humans connect with and name their social world. Our home language is more than just sounds, gestures, and symbols; our home language is socially constructed to reflect the way our family and cultural community see the world and how they have chosen to interpret and name it. Thus, language helps children understand the

important and meaningful ideas, feelings, problems, and experiences that they need to live as members of their socio-cultural reality. They learn these cultural meanings and practices through the everyday interactions, routines, stories, caring responses, and problem-solving activities of their families.

Language and Literacy Development

Research demonstrates that the foundations of literacy are formed through these common everyday meaning-making activities between families and very young children (Cummins 1989; Purcell-Gates 1993, 1995; Wells 1986; Wong Fillmore 1991). Gee (1992) proposes that children acquire the discourses or ways of language use as they participate in the everyday life of their particular family and community. Freire stresses that children must first learn to read their cultural world before reading the word (Freire 1970; Freire & Macedo 1987). Through these socialization processes and the use of the home language, children acquire a way of acting, interacting, storytelling, talking, and valuing that is connected to a particular social identity and forms the basis for early language and literacy development ((Fagan 1995; Sanchez 1999).

Language and thought work together as young children make meaning of their world. They talk, and their ideas are clarified, expanded, and given meaning in the process; they think and then communicate their thoughts. If this relation between language and thinking is broken, which may happen when linguistically diverse infants and toddlers do not have access to their home language while they are making sense of new experiences and concepts, both language and intellectual development may be adversely affected. Linguistic continuity facilitates accessing the prior knowledge or concepts that children need to link with new learning and further their understanding of their world.

Although infants and toddlers need linguistic continuity to make meaning of new knowledge, the use of the home language alone is not sufficient to propel advanced levels of language and literacy. Without exposure to more advanced levels of thought and experiences, language and literacy may not develop to optimal levels. Similarly, without exposure to advanced language and literacy models, early thinking cannot effectively progress to its fullest potential. Hence, an early care setting that can both provide linguistic and cultural continuity as well as implement powerful learning environments that help the children with the key developmental task of making meaning of their world will simultaneously and effectively advance language and cognitive development.

But, what happens when early caregivers are unable to speak the home language of the culturally and linguistically diverse infants and toddlers in their care? Even when they can not provide linguistic continuity, they can still support the critical developmental task of making meaning of the world. Early caregivers can do this by:

- encouraging infant-family interactions and supporting the use of the home language as parents and community members talk, sing, read, and play with young children
- remembering that all infants and toddlers need extensive opportunities both at home and in other settings to problem solve, test and discover new knowledge, engage in decision making, use oral communication with self and others, interact with willing and culturally responsive adults, and participate in emergent literacy activities
- partnering with both families and members of the children's linguistic community to

involve them in creating rich and powerful learning environments and promoting learning goals both in the educational setting and in the community at large;

By emphasizing the support of the home language at home and encouraging positive and stimulating learning experiences in the early care settings and in the community, caregivers are working to prevent the overall language delays that can affect future school-related academic achievement (Thomas & Collier 2002).

Summary

We need to acknowledge that most early caregivers will never be fluent in all the possible languages represented in today's early care settings. However, children need to see themselves reflected in the staff that cares for them. Therefore, as recommended in the *Head Start Program Performance Standards*, we need to make every effort to find adults who can support home language development in the early care setting and who can also respond to the need for cultural continuity in the care of diverse young children. Whenever possible, programs need to hire adults who are linguistically and culturally representative of the children and encourage them to serve as advanced language models for the young children.

Finally, to maximize the overall developmental potential for linguistically diverse infants and toddlers, early care centers must be strategic and purposeful in their efforts to reach out and partner with families and communities. To appropriately serve infants and toddlers, each child must have a group of responsive adults or teams of family and community members and early care professionals who work together to create the linguistic and cultural continuity that bridges home and the early care setting and promotes optimal development across the settings.

All young children deserve to hear a clear message: that their language has a significant place at home, in the early care setting and in the larger society and that achieving the hopes and dreams of their families and communities is an additive process. They do not need to sacrifice their home language and culture as they gain skills and knowledge in another language.

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See also:

[English Language Learners: Head Start Bulletin #78](#)

"Is It Wrong to Speak to My Babies in Their Home Language?" English Language Learners. Head Start Bulletin #78. HHS/ACF/ACYF/HSB. 2005. English.