

Parents Partnering With Teachers to Bring Up Multilingual Children

By Karen Nemeth

I work with preschools, Head Starts and child care programs all over the United States to help them be more effective in teaching young children who come from different language backgrounds.

Everywhere I go, teachers ask me how they can work more effectively with parents to support their child's education. I believe that one of the best ways to build parent-teacher partnerships is to share information. To help that along, I'd like to share with you some of the key points from my workshops for teachers about teaching young children who come from different home language backgrounds.

The most important thing early childhood teachers learn is that young children need a rich, engaging, interesting, stimulating language environment. Recent research has made it clear that this is the foundation that makes literacy and school success possible.

What is even more interesting is that researchers are also finding that young children need this to happen in any or all languages they are learning. If a child is growing up simultaneously with two or more languages, that child needs to hear stories, songs and conversations in each of those languages. And, if a child started learning in one language and later begins an additional language – it is absolutely critical that they continue to receive enriching language input in their original language while learning the second.

We also know that children encode most of the concepts they learn via language. That means that all the information they learn in their first few years of life is encoded in the language or languages they speak at home.

If they go to school and receive no support for those home languages, they may lose their ability to use the information that was learned in those first few years. This puts them at a terrible disadvantage as they are growing and developing.

So, parents and teachers need plenty of strategies to help children continue learning their home languages and to help them learn the school's language as well. Based on the research, here's what I suggest:

Read. Read to your child every day in your home language so they can receive the full value of the richness, expression and depth you can offer in your own language.

Talk. Talk about the books in your home language(s). This is one of the best ways to build vocabulary and understanding. Two great questions to ask are: “What do you think will happen next?” and “Has anything like that happened to you?” Oral language forms the basis for later literacy skills. You need to expose your children to all kinds of words and what they mean – by talking about them during your everyday activities. If children don’t learn enough words in the target language when they are young, they may learn to read in that language down the road but they may not understand what they are reading.

Sing. I’m not kidding. There’s no such thing as bad singing when you are singing with children! Songs you remember from your childhood are great. Any songs in the home language or languages provide the rhythm, interest level, and repetitions that help children build language skills. And, if you want to make a valuable contribution, teach those songs to everyone in your child’s class (and for families, teach the songs to everyone in your whole family)!

Chat. It turns out that interesting conversations form some of the best foundations for early learning. Don’t settle for simple sentences and one-word answers. Get your child talking about what they’re doing or what they are about to do or what they see or where they are going. Conversation has so many cognitive and social/emotional benefits. Brain research tells us that babies depend on the beautiful dance of back-and-forth conversation right from the beginning. It becomes even more important as young children grow and develop language. A real conversation needs the participants to take turns going back and forth at least five times, and captures the interests of both participants.

Participate. Yes, there are lots of toys, flashcards, videos, and software being marketed to parents making claims about teaching language and reading to young children. Research says these methods are much less effective than interacting with another person. That’s because they don’t give the child any real feedback, they’re not the natural way the brain is meant to learn, and they lack the depth and motivation that young children get from their interactions with other people – especially their parents. I always say flashcards and videos are like ice cream. You have to admit that ice cream does have a tiny bit of nutrition, but you certainly wouldn’t feel like a good parent if you gave your child nothing but ice cream three meals a day! Can a preschool child learn a few words with flashcards or videos? Sure – but why would you want your child to spend so much time with such a tiny benefit when they could use that same time in active play and interaction to learn hundreds of words and concepts?

Parents and teachers need to know that children need a solid foundation in their home language in order to have the best success in their second language. Children who have had the benefit of a rich, engaging language and literacy environment in their early years in their home language are much more likely to transfer their language and literacy skills to their new language successfully.

I hope you'll share this information with your young child's teachers so you can compare notes about how much of these activities are happening for your child in each of their languages. Keep in mind that you all share the goal of helping your child progress and succeed in the language of their school – but the best way to achieve this is by continuing to support their learning in their home language or languages throughout the first five years of life.

This article is reprinted with permission from July 2010, on the Multilingual Living website: www.multilingualliving.com.

Karen Nemeth has a Masters degree from Rutgers University with specialization in language development. She has been a teacher, teacher educator and college professor in the field of child development and early childhood education for more than 25 years. Karen is the author of Many Languages, One Classroom: Teaching Dual and English Language Learners . She is a writer and consulting editor for the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the Dual Language Learning Advisor for Teaching Young Children magazine. Karen provides a wealth of resources, teaching ideas, and information at her website Language Castle LLC. You can also follow her on twitter at KarenNemethEdM or sign on to her Facebook page Karen at Language Castle LLC.