Bilingualism in the early years

Early Years Alliance mini-guide

early years alliance

How you can help support the development of children's bilingual skills in your early years provision

Bilingualism refers to an individual's ability to speak more than one language. Children have a right to maintain the language of their home and community, but it is essential that children have the skills in English they will need when they go to school, and later when they enter the world of work.

"*For children whose home language is not English, providers must take reasonable steps to provide opportunities for children to develop and use their home language in play and learning, supporting their language development at home. Providers must also ensure that children have sufficient opportunities to learn and reach a good standard in English language during the EYFS: ensuring children are ready to benefit from the opportunities available to them when they begin Year 1.*" (EYFS 1.13)

Early years settings have an important role to play in supporting children as emerging bilinguals, working with parents to enhance opportunities across the spectrum of their language development.

Key principles for success

- being bilingual carries social, culture and cognitive advantages
- home language development is critical to and supports learning English as an additional language
- parental and community involvement is crucial
- the home language is especially important for children with special educational needs

Promoting children's ability to learn a second language is most successful when attention is paid to maintaining and developing their first language.

Working in partnership with parents is critical as parents are a valuable resource for the child and the setting. Relational aspects of learning a new language need to take account of attachment and separation issues for the child, for whom the early years setting is both a cultural and a linguistic new experience.

There are other aspects of the provision that can be developed to support the continuing development of children's bilingual skills. For instance, employing bilingual staff, encouraging language awareness for all children, creating language rich and communication friendly environments, and providing resources that specifically encourage stimulating conversation.

Bilingual babies

Babies as young as four to five months respond more positively to the sounds and intonation of languages that they have heard from birth and before than they do to languages that are unfamiliar.

By two years, children can begin to work out which language to use with whom and in what circumstances, and respond accordingly. If parents want their baby to grow up bilingual – or even multilingual – the best time to start may be during pregnancy, and certainly from birth.

The process of development is exactly the same for children learning two or more languages as for those who are learning only one. An approach, based on active partnership with parents and attention paid to the linguistic as well as the emotional importance of attachment, will help create an environment where the bilingual potential of babies and children under two can flourish.

It is important to find out as much as possible about the child's home language and cultural heritage as this will help to support their development.

Enabling the bilingual potential from two years

Practitioners, especially those in a key person role, need to engage young children, supporting their learning through play by responsive interaction with the child. In addition, closely observing the child, becoming part of their imaginary worlds, following their interests and creating opportunities for sharing understanding will help children's languages to develop.

The practitioner's role is to model language in situational contexts so that within play experiences, she/he may offer a running commentary, structuring language and offering vocabulary. Children with special educational needs, such as those with Down's Syndrome, are capable of being educated in both languages.

Children with learning difficulties can share the cognitive and social benefits of bilingualism according to their ability and can still learn two languages, despite their impairment. Their progress may be slower, but it remains on par with other aspects of their development, so is not detrimental to their learning.

There are three main directions for the assessment of children learning English as an additional language, which conform with the guidance to the Early Years Foundation Stage:

- recognition of the importance of the home language at home and in the setting, with emphasis on promoting English
- observation of the child's understanding and knowledge across the curriculum in home language and English
- assessment of language development in English only

The successful approach to assessment of early bilingual children needs to involve all aspects of their experiences and learning, taking into account parents as well as all practitioners involved with the child.

There may well be communication differences observed in young bilinguals, which do not require targeted intervention, but these are not the same as a language delay where intervention is necessary.

Bilingualism does not cause language delay, so advising parents only to speak in English at home is not going to help, especially where that is the weaker language of the family.

Bilingualism itself is not a special educational need or an additional need. Bilingualism is not the cause of any kind of learning difficulty, speech or language impairment, nor of any emotional or behavioural problem. Bilingualism is a learning pathway for children who have the opportunity to grow up learning two languages, and is a learning achievement.

Find out more

Bilingualism in the Early Years (Pre-school Learning Alliance, 2014)

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