

FACTS and TIPS



Young Dual Language Learners (Birth through 5 years)

TOPIC #1: Who Are Young Dual Language Learners (DLLs)?

FACT # 1: *Children, ages birth through 5 years, who are acquiring two or more languages simultaneously OR who are acquiring English sequentially as they continue developing their home language are often being referred to as Dual Language Learners* (Office of Head Start, 2008).

The term Dual Language Learners (DLL) better describes the important language learning time of young children, birth-5, who are still actively developing their home language as they acquire English. Dual Language Learners also acknowledges the fact that *all* young children, birth-5, are actively acquiring English in this country—even native English speakers! English Language Learners (ELLs) is a term that was originally developed for the K-12 population and implies the full development of one language.

FACT #2: *Young DLLs come with a wide range of abilities, interests, strengths, and weaknesses.*

Young Dual Language Learners are first and foremost children! It is tempting to just see children who are acquiring English as a “problem” or as “that child who doesn’t understand English”. But *all* children long to be valued for *who* they are—not for the language they do or don’t speak! It is impossible to adequately describe children who are DLLs just by the fact that they are in the process of acquiring English. That is only one small part of who they are. Children who are DLLs will all look and sound very different in *both* languages.

FACT #3: *DLLs’ level of development across languages will vary substantially depending on many factors including when and how they are exposed to different languages.*

Children’s personalities, motivations, abilities, and interests will affect how fast they acquire English (Tabors, 2008; Genesee, Paradis, & Crago, 2004). Some children are risk-takers who are very motivated to learn English. Others are shy and reticent about trying new things—especially a language that doesn’t make much sense to them! And children who have speech/language disabilities may take longer to learn *both* languages. However, a key factor in how children develop in *both* the home language and in English is the *quantity and quality of input* that they receive in each language (DeHouwer, 2009). If children have received consistent and regular input in the home language (with rich and varied vocabulary) chances are they will develop age appropriate home language skills. Children will also acquire English to the extent that they receive consistent and regular input *and* appropriate language supports.



Instructional Tips for Engaging Young Dual Language Learners

- ❖ Find out dual language learners' likes/dislikes and what motivates them by talking to parents, observing the children at play, or by asking children who speak the same home language to ask them. Learn the names of their favorite things in their home language if possible and find pictures or objects of them. Teach children the names of their favorite things in English!
- ❖ Create an "identity text" with children in your program by asking parents for pictures of important people and things in their child's life. Use simple blank paper booklets or small picture albums and help children construct a book about themselves for ready display in the classroom. Let children tell you all about their photos and/or drawings in any language they feel comfortable using. Make sure to include the child's name and picture on the cover of their "identity text"!
- ❖ Support children's home language development by pairing children who speak the same home language together for learning activities. Encourage children to speak in their home language throughout the day—even to you!! Asking children to stop talking in their home language and to use English not only hampers their home language development but also sends the message that their home language is not "as good as" English.
- ❖ When speaking, reading, or singing in English, make sure that you are providing DLLs with adequate language supports. Simple language supports include using lots of visuals and gestures when talking. Also remember to speak clearly and slowly (but not unnaturally slow) so that children have time to process your message. Give simple 1-2 step directions.



Connecting with Families

- ❖ Meet with parents, accompanied by an interpreter if possible, and discuss which language(s) are spoken at home *before* their child begins your program. Let parents know that in order to meet their child's language needs to the greatest extent possible, you need to know the child's history of language use, the family's patterns of language use, as well as language preferences for their child. Some programs develop a "**Home Language Survey**" to help them consistently gather essential language information. This enables programs to intentionally plan for the social/emotional, linguistic, and cognitive needs of dual language learners and their families in terms of acquiring bilingual/ bicultural supports and resources.
- ❖ **Let parents know the importance of continuing to support their child in the home language as he/she acquires English.** Children who are immersed fully in English during the early years often don't perform as well academically in English as children who have maintained their home language (Espinosa, 2008). Children also thrive better socially and emotionally when their home language is maintained because they can communicate with parents and family (Espinosa, 2008; 2010). Reinforce parents' use of their home language and let them know that they are actually helping their children learn English by doing so. Also ask parents how you can help support their child's home language development in *your program*! You might consider inviting parents to volunteer in your program to help provide home language support to children who are dual language learners.