

# Supporting children to become bilingual

## Connections to *Aistear* and *Síolta*

### *Aistear*

**Themes:** Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, Exploring and Thinking

**Guidelines for good practice:** Learning and developing through interactions (pp.27-51)

### *Síolta* Standards

1: Rights of the Child, C1.1, 1.2, 1.3

5: Interactions, C5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, 5.5

Research Digests linked to the above *Standards*

**Bilingualism** means using two languages, for example, English and French.

**Multilingualism** means using more than two languages, for example, English, French and Irish.

Early childhood practitioners work with children from diverse family, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. For some children, attending an early childhood setting is the first time they are exposed to the English language. Practitioners can tailor the way they nurture and extend interactions to help all children learn language and develop as active learners.

Supporting children and parents who are learning English as a second language, requires particular knowledge and skills. This tip sheet can help practitioners to understand the needs of children learning a second language and provide advice to parents in supporting the child to become bilingual or multilingual.

## What can you do?

Here are some practical tips for supporting children learning English as a second or additional language.

- **Advise parents** to speak to their children in their **home language** (whatever language they are most comfortable in speaking at home).
- **Assure parents** that their children will learn English (or Irish) in the language-rich environment of the setting through interacting, play, the daily routine, songs and books.
- Allow children **time to settle** in and make them **feel comfortable**. Children who have confidence and are at ease in the setting will learn the language more easily.
- Encourage children to speak their **home language** or to mix both languages.
- Become familiar with a few **common words from the child's home language** which you can use in the setting to help him/her communicate needs such as when to go to the toilet or so you can understand when the child is talking about his/her mother or father.
- Consider **adding signs** in the child's home language in the setting, for example, toilet, sand area, home corner.

Hi	Cześć	Cheshch
Thanks	Dzięki	JEN kee
Yes	Tak	t-ah-k
No	Nie	Nee-eh
Toilet	toaleta	toaleta
Food	jedzenie	Yed-zen-yah
Drink	napój	Nah-poi
Sleep /bed	sen	Sen-ah

## Adjust how you speak

- Speak **slowly** and **clearly**.
- **Use pictures** such as a picture-timetable to explain what is going to happen next.
- Use **gesture, pointing** and **objects** to help the child understand. Encourage the children to do the same.
- Identify **words you use often and repeat** them, for example, *toilet, lunch, book* and *home*. Have pictures of these items displayed low down so children can point to them.
- Make **short comments** and name things that the child is interested in or is doing.
- Give children **extra time to respond** as they will take longer to think of what to say.
- **Respond** immediately and **with interest** to children's attempts to communicate with or without words.
- Make sure children experience **success at tasks where language is not needed** such as playing with blocks, making jigsaws, enjoying physical play or helping the adults or other children.

- Encourage **peer interaction** and **play** as children learn from other children.
- Help **children enjoy books and stories** – highlight key words, use puppets and actions, and point to the pictures.

## Value a child's home language

- Ask parents to **teach you** some **words in their language**. Ensure your pronunciation is correct.
- Learn how to **say the child's name properly**. Children's names are an important part of their identity which contributes to their well-being and self-esteem. Do not shorten names unless the parents have said this is what they do at home.
- Encourage **parents to take part in activities** to celebrate cultural events, explore food from their country or read stories. Parents may also translate some written material, such as signage, for your setting.
- Have **culturally-appropriate resources** in your room such as kitchen utensils, dress-up clothes and dolls from different cultures or make **a display** of words and cultural things from a child's home.
- Have **books in the child's home language** in your book corner. Parents might help you to source these or share some from home. Invite them to help you to read bilingual books.
- Look at the *Creating and Using the Learning Environment Self-evaluation Tool for Birth-3 years* or *3-6 years* for more ideas about adapting your environment to support children learning a second language.

## Concerns about a child's language development

**Learning English as a second language is a normal process and does not cause a delay in language development.** However, if you have concerns about a child who is becoming bilingual, discuss these with parents.

- Using relatives, children or other people in your setting to interpret can be useful for day-to-day information sharing between you and a parent whose first language is not English. Consider using a professional interpreter service, where possible, when discussing sensitive information or concerns about a child.
- Review the child's hearing ability and development in other areas – are these normal or delayed?
- Carry out observations of the child over time, document progress and your concerns.
- Talk to the parents about how well the child speaks in his/her first language.



## Further resources

You may also like to share the *Supporting children to become bilingual or multilingual - Advice for parents* tip sheet with parents and families.