

Supporting Home Languages

LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

Language, culture and identity are strongly related. Contemporary academic discourse highlights that language is more than words, phrases and sounds but the coming life of social interaction (Evans, 2014). Further, culture is recognised as not only surrounding language, but also residing within it (Evans, 2014). Respecting children’s cultural identities, including their languages, is a keystone of culturally competent practice.

A child’s language/s, particularly their first or home language/s, contribute/s to their wellbeing, identity and sense of agency through helping them to express their feelings and thoughts and to be understood (VEYLDF, 2016, p. 28). Educators affirm a child’s strong sense of identity by supporting and encouraging the use of the child’s home language/s, both outside of and within the service.

Reflection break

- How are children in your service supported to develop knowledgeable and confident self-identities through using their home languages to construct meaning? VEYLDF, 2016, p. 19)
- What opportunities currently exist in your service to observe multilingual children openly expressing their feelings and ideas in interactions with others? What other opportunities could be overseen or missed by educators? (VEYLDF, 2016, p. 19)

MULTILINGUAL BENEFITS

A current estimate indicates that more than half of the world’s population grows up with more than one language (Parodi, 2015). There is significant evidence to confirm that learning more than one language has many benefits. In recent articles (Espinosa, 2015; Okal, 2014), some of the benefits of bilingualism investigated and substantiated by peer-reviewed research include:

- greater social adaptability;
- advantages in cognitive abilities;
- a greater appreciation and understanding of different cultures and experiences;

- increased job prospects;
- mental flexibility;
- creativity; and
- possible links to executive brain functions.

The Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) acknowledges that maintenance of a child’s home or first language/s is important for identity, wellbeing, communication and learning (2016, p. 28). It recognises multilingualism as an asset and compels early childhood professionals to support children to maintain their first language (p. 11).



Reflection Break

- What attitudes do families and children attending your service have towards when, where and with whom they use their home languages? What obligations do educators have to ensure home languages are respected, encouraged and included in practice?
- How are children and families encouraged to use their home languages as languages of education and learning?
- To what extent are home languages taken into account when considering evidence of the VEYLDF outcomes, particularly Communication?

ACKNOWLEDGING, RESPECTING, AND PRACTISING MULTILINGUALISM

Supporting and respecting family languages within your pedagogy, practice and learning environment requires early childhood practitioner to:

- Recognise family languages as a right
- Include family languages as a foundation of curriculum and a resource for learning (VCAA, 2020)

Working within this perspective, early childhood professionals nurture a multilingual ecology: *“the entire range of language practices of all children in an educational setting, as well as in the interactions of all members of the learning community. A multilingual ecology fosters the use, learning and practice of languages. All languages are respected and assigned meaningful spaces in the learning program and environment.”* (VCAA, 2020 p. 38)

A multilingual ecology not only recognises family languages as a right also offers children an environment to use their language/s and explore linguistic diversity. To create such an environment, collaborative partnerships with families, communities and other professionals are required.



LEARNING ENGLISH

Children have the right to be continuing users of their home language/s and to develop competency in Standard Australian English (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2010, p. 38). With sufficient quality input in both languages, children can learn English alongside their home language/s. To learn English, it is important to support the continuing development of the child's home language/s as this provides a foundation to transfer skills from one language to another (Clarke, 2011).

The process of learning a language comprises several stages. Recognising a child's progression through these stages can ensure they are supported appropriately at the right time. Information on additional language

acquisition can be found through the *fkaCS Educator Resource: Learning English as an Additional Language* and in the VCAA resource *Supporting Children Learning English as a Second Language: birth to six years* (Clarke, 2011).

Reflection Break

- How is English language development assessed in the service? What resources are available to educators and families?
- How frequently are referrals made regarding language development difficulties or delays for bilingual children? Are signs and stages of language acquisition considered before making assessments and referrals?
- What information is shared with families regarding their child's ongoing language development?

CULTURAL INCLUSION SUPPORT

Cultural inclusion support is provided by *fka* Children's Services to eligible services. Through this program, services have access to on-site consultancy and bilingual workers for a fixed period, helping to enrol, settle and include children and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Cultural inclusion support can help with supporting children's sense of belonging in the early childhood service. This includes development and maintenance of home languages through conversations, stories, songs and play. For families, cultural inclusion support can facilitate the exchange of information with educators about their aspirations for their child and their child's education.

- How are families currently encouraged to participate in and contribute to children's learning and development experiences? (DET & VCAA, 2016, p. 10)
- How could cultural inclusion support resources, including a bilingual worker, enhance family centred practices in the service?

FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) explicitly outlines that children have the right to use their own language and enjoy their own culture, particularly if these relate to minority groups.

- What role do educators play in upholding this right for all children in the service?
- What role do educators have in advocating for this right to be acknowledged and respected in the wider community?

PRACTICE TIPS

- Utilise bilingual educators, *fkaCS* Community Language Support Workers and interpreters to facilitate conversations and interactions.
- Discuss home language practices with families. It is important to find out where, when and with whom different languages, including English, are used.
- Encourage children and families to use their home language/s at the service. Also encourage educators to use their own home languages at the service.
- Invite family members to spend time in the service and participate in reading or other activities using their home language/s.
- Families may ask if they should stop using their home language. Within your collaborative partnerships with families, it is important to share the benefits of multilingualism and how continued use of home languages supports acquisition of new languages such as English. It is important to understand the perspective of the family in these moments. Learning why the family wants to maintain the family language and/or focus on the development of English will better position you to engage in the conversation.
- Contact the *fkaCS* Multicultural Resource Centre to discuss and borrow appropriate resources, including books, games and posters.
- Ask families about things they do together at home and how you can replicate these in the service.
- Encourage families to replicate activities at home using their home languages to provide more opportunities for the child to engage in the learning. For example, story bags and simple games.

HOW WE CAN HELP

fka Children's Services (*fkaCS*) advocates for children's cultural and linguistic rights and provides support to education and care services in the provision of culturally rich environments that support a civil society.

We offer early childhood education and care services access to skilled and experienced pedagogy and practice consultants. We also offer a range of multilingual resources and professional learning opportunities for services, which are customised according to individual needs.

Contact us to discuss support

03 9428 4471 · culturalinclusion@fka.org.au

More resources available at www.fka.org.au

FURTHER INFORMATION

- Free Interpreter support for Victorian Government funded early childhood services: www.education.vic.gov.au
- The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in Child Friendly Language: www.unicef.org/rightsite/files/uncrcchildfriendlylanguage.pdf

REFERENCES / FURTHER READING

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