

What does the research say about meeting the needs of **bilingual children** in early childhood settings?

Real World
Wednesday!
with Milagros Ramirez

Children from immigrant families represent an incredibly diverse and growing segment of the U.S population. Many young children from these families (including children who are foreign born) speak a primary language other than English. While there are several terms used to identify their linguistic background, such as *Dual Language Learners* and *English Language Learners* (for clarification of these terms, [click here](#)), these only begin to tell their story. Several important distinctions can be made in order to understand their complexity, including:

- Children learning two languages are vastly heterogeneous not just in background, but also in experiences, as well as language and literacy abilities.
- Children learning two languages, particularly Dual Language Learners, build parallel language systems that can support communication in both their first and second language. Hence, many young children can learn two languages at the same time early on¹.

Early childhood programs are a key resource for these children and their families, providing valuable educational and supportive services. While there is extensive research on the benefits of early childhood programs, more research specifically focused on dual language learners is needed. There is a consensus however, on several dimensions that are important for supporting these diverse groups, including:

- Promoting home language skills can be meaningful for development: In optimal educational settings, instruction in the home language contributes to growth in both English language skills and home language skills. Additionally, promoting the home language can have a positive impact on the social-emotional development of young children².
- Involving families in their children's learning is key: Research has demonstrated that young children can learn more than one language. Hence, language development need not be a zero-sum game. Working closely with families of dual language learners can and should include activities for supporting home language skills development³.
- Professional development strategies specifically designed to address the needs of dual language learners can foster effective instruction: Ideally, early childhood education staff should receive professional development that educates them on the needs of dual language learners and keeps them up-to-date on bilingual issues, and the rewards of bilingualism, so that language diversity is truly accepted in the classroom. This kind of training and awareness will help create a continuous dialogue between teachers and families.



Milagros Ramirez is currently a PhD student at the Heller School for Social Policy and Management. As a PhD student, she has written about education and child & family policy issues, including the importance of Head Start in supporting the long term success low income children. She has also worked for three years as Director of Program Evaluation and Development at a Head Start program where she supported evaluation and grant writing efforts.



+ Useful Resources

- National Center on Culture and Linguistic Responsiveness:
<http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/cultural-linguistic>
- New America Foundation, EdCentral
<http://www.edcentral.org/>
- National Center for Language Development in the Curriculum:
<http://www.naldic.org.uk/eal-teaching-and-learning/outline-guidance/early-years>
- National Association for Bilingual Education:
<http://www.nabe.org/BilingualEducation>

¹ Williams C., (2015), Dual Language Learners: Summarizing the Research on Dual Language Learners, American Educator
<http://www.edcentral.org/dllresearch/>

² Goldenberg C., Hicks J., Lit H., (2013) Dual Language Learners: Effective Instruction in Early Childhood, American Educator
https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/periodicals/Goldenberg_Hicks_Lit.pdf

³ Same as above.