

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the winter of 2005-2006, the Office of Head Start (OHS) conducted a review of program needs with respect to serving young dual language learners, ages birth to five years. The purpose of this project was to assess program needs, opportunities, and barriers; gather existing resources and innovative programming; and outline recommendations and suggestions from the field.

Dual language learners are children learning two (or more) languages at the same time, as well as those learning a second language while continuing to develop their first (or home) language. For the purposes of this report, the term dual language learners encompasses other terms frequently used, such as Limited English Proficient (LEP), bilingual, English language learners (ELL), English learners, and children who speak a language other than English (LOTE).

OHS recognizes that dual language learners enter Head Start programs with unique challenges and opportunities. The goal of this review was to determine what Head Start, Early Head Start, Migrant and Seasonal Head Start, and American Indian Alaska Native Head Start programs needed—in terms of knowledge, skills, and resources—to address these challenges and maximize opportunities as they support dual language learners in learning English and in continuing to develop their home language. OHS' interest in this topic arose from its understanding of the importance of language development for learning in all domains and as a precursor for literacy development. The development of language and early literacy are fundamental building blocks for achieving Head Start's legislated mandate of promoting school readiness for all children.

While Head Start has a long history of serving culturally and linguistically diverse populations, the numbers have been growing rapidly. According to Head Start Program Information Reports, almost three out of ten Head Start children come from families who speak a primary language other than English, and only 16% of Head Start programs serve exclusively English speaking children. In 1993, a survey of Head Start programs conducted by the ACYF Office for Policy, Research and Evaluation found that over 140 languages were spoken by Head Start children and families nationwide. The number of cultures represented would be higher still.

In addition to the increase in the numbers of culturally and linguistically diverse children and families served by Head Start, the geographic distribution of these families is ever changing. Many communities throughout the United States have experienced rapid influxes of immigrant families. Head Start programs nationwide face significant challenges in obtaining the knowledge and rallying the resources and staff needed to effectively serve these children and families.

Rationale for Action

The Head Start Act, as amended in 1998, and the accompanying *Head Start Program Performance Standards* require that programs support children in the acquisition of their home language and English as well as provide the full spectrum of comprehensive Head Start services to families in culturally appropriate and respectful ways. Furthermore, the Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007 (P.L. 110-134) emphasizes improving outreach and increasing enrollment and quality of services to children and families, particularly in communities that have experienced a large increase in speakers of languages other than English (LOTE). Research also unequivocally shows the importance of intentionally supporting the acquisition of English *and* the home language in young children. Knowledge of the home language facilitates learning a second language. Children who know two languages often have higher levels of cognitive achievement than monolingual children and almost certainly will have a broader array of social and economic opportunities available to them as they become adults. Through their home language and culture, families share a sense of identity and belonging. Children learn how to relate to and communicate with others. Loss of home language can interfere with these important aspects of a child's life, disrupting family communication, inhibiting relationship development, leading to the loss of intergenerational wisdom, negatively affecting a child's self-concept, and potentially interrupting thinking and reasoning skills.

Methodology

To determine how best to address the needs of children, families, program staff, and local communities with respect to supporting language development in children learning two or more languages, OHS conducted this assessment. In addition to reviewing research in the field of dual language acquisition for young children, OHS conducted focus groups, conference calls, and meetings with over 200 individuals within the Head Start community.

Seventeen focus groups, conference calls, and meetings were held with Head Start parents, program directors, teachers, home visitors, family service workers, Federal staff, Head Start-State Collaboration Offices, and Head Start training and technical assistance providers and other national contractors. Input was gathered from Head Start programs in each of the ACF Regions as well as from the American Indian Alaska Native and Migrant and Seasonal Program Branches.

Findings

The findings from the assessment were extensive and complex. As we read the research and heard from families, practitioners, and experts, it became increasingly clear that supporting language development in young children learning two or more languages requires a comprehensive approach that includes families, communities, and all levels and positions within Head Start. The following major challenges were voiced by participants—

1. Many Head Start programs reported struggling with knowing how best to promote children’s language acquisition, both their home language and English, when children come from diverse language and cultural backgrounds. Because of the inextricable link between culture, language, and learning, supporting children’s language development is essential to attaining Head Start’s mission of ensuring school readiness for all its children.
2. Local programs are required to conduct developmental screenings and ongoing assessments of enrolled children. Yet, there exist few valid and reliable assessment instruments for evaluating progress in language and literacy development, as well as development in other domains of learning for children who are learning two languages. Without accurate assessment information, staff are not able to properly support the child’s development, identify progress, individualize the curriculum fully, or identify behavior or delays requiring further evaluation and possible intervention.
3. Many programs reported struggling with being uncertain about how best to support young English learners as they transition into or out of the Head Start program, as well as onto other child care arrangements or public schools. Transitions are important and often stressful times for children, often requiring extra support and scaffolding from staff and parents.
4. Head Start programs reported having great difficulty finding, attracting, and retaining bilingual staff qualified in early childhood education. Having staff who speak the language and understand the culture of the children and families is essential for communication and learning.
5. Many, if not most, monolingual Head Start managers reported having difficulty assessing the language skills of prospective bilingual staff, which is important to ensure that proper language usage is being modeled for children and clear and respectful communication occurs with parents.
6. Successfully serving children and families from various language and cultural backgrounds cannot be accomplished without a program-wide, comprehensive plan. Yet, many programs did not know how to undertake this process (and some did not understand its importance). As the full report clearly indicates, supporting children in the acquisition of two languages is a complex, multi-faceted task that requires intentional support at all levels of a program.

7. Many Head Start parents stated that they were unable to fully participate in their children’s education or in the Head Start program’s governance and parent involvement activities because they did not speak English well or at all. Additionally, parents often were concerned about their children continuing to speak the home language at home because of the pervasive, mistaken belief that doing so interferes with English language development. The costs to the child of losing the home language and the benefits of learning two languages overwhelmingly point to the value of (and feasibility of) nurturing the development of both English and the home language.
8. Many Head Start programs reported being unable to communicate fully and, at times at all, with parents, particularly when multiple languages and cultures were served by a program. This inhibited, at best and prohibited at worst, parents from participating in the education of their children and the governance of Head Start, cornerstones of the Head Start philosophy.
9. Many Head Start programs reported having difficulty helping families from diverse language and cultural backgrounds access the support services they need (medical, dental, mental health, English as a Second Language classes, speech therapists, social services, etc.) due to a lack of culturally responsive services and providers. At times, accessibility was aggravated by community biases. This limited the ability of the program to provide the comprehensive services and support to families that are a hallmark of Head Start.
10. Many American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) communities, as well as other native communities, reported facing the impending loss of their native languages. Supporting children in learning their community-wide languages and cultures, which are inextricably tied to the languages, requires a community-wide approach. In addition to supporting children’s language development as they learn their native languages and English, support must also be offered to the native communities to strengthen native language revitalization and expansion.

Recommendations

Each of the recommendations that follow address the needs cited above.

1. Establish a Head Start priority/initiative dedicated to improving staff knowledge and program performance with respect to promoting dual language learning for children, birth to five, and for providing the full range of comprehensive Head Start services to children and families who speak a primary language other than English. A Head Start initiative may include some or all of the recommendations that follow.
2. Commission, through the establishment of a National Head Start Center for Dual Language and Literacy Development and/or through partnerships, consortiums, or contracts with other organizations, the following activities—
 - a. Research, design, and develop resources and strategies to—
 - i. Support language development for children who are English learners,
 - ii. Promote family involvement, and assist families in identifying, addressing, and advocating for their family needs, and
 - iii. Help build community capacity and strengthen program planning as they relate to working with children and families who speak a primary language other than English.
 - b. Disseminate information on demographic trends in Head Start eligible populations and programmatic services for its children and families through analyses of Head Start PIR data, U.S. Census data, and other demographic data sources.
 - c. Provide translated core Head Start documents and templates of typical program documentation/information in multiple languages as well as funding options and strategies for accessing additional translation and interpretation services.

- d. Develop culturally and linguistically appropriate child development assessments in multiple languages for all domains of learning and development for young English learners.
 - e. Develop language and literacy assessments for children learning two (or more) languages in multiple languages.
 - f. Develop or identify strategies for assessing staff language skills to assist Head Start managers in knowing how best to evaluate the language competency of prospective staff based on the needs of the staff position and task.
 - g. Provide research-based resources and facilitate an online forum, through the Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC), for programs to share information and resources related to dual language learning.
 - h. Liaison with Federal staff and TA providers to ensure that the expertise of the Center reaches the field and that TA providers have the knowledge and skills needed to assist programs in implementing appropriate program policies, procedures, strategies, and activities.
 - i. Collaborate with the Administration for Native Americans (ANA), Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA), and other Federal agencies to implement strategies for supporting native language acquisition among Alaska Native and American Indian children, as well as other native communities, and actively support native language revitalization and expansion.
 - j. Conduct, as needed, additional analysis to further define the extent, type, and distribution of program needs, as well as resource development priorities.
3. Enhance professional development opportunities to strengthen Head Start staff’s knowledge and skills related to serving young English learner children and their families, including support for online training and credentialing programs, such as—
 - a. Teaching certifications in dual language acquisition for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.
 - b. Early Childhood Education degree programs (AA, BA) and early childhood credentials (CDA) offered in multiple languages.
 - c. Additional coursework for two and four-year institutions on language and literacy development theory and strategies for working with young children who are learning English and their home language.
 - d. Language courses designed for early childhood professionals to enhance their ability to communicate with children and families who speak languages other than English.
 4. Pursue and carry out appropriate research with ACF partners in the area of home language and English learning for young children, birth to five.
 5. Coordinate with other Federal and State agencies to ensure the efficient and effective dissemination of targeted resources and strategies that promote dual language acquisition for young children.

Conclusion

This national assessment of program needs related to supporting dual language development among Head Start children is intended to provide the Office of Head Start with the preliminary information it needs to direct resources in a targeted and efficient manner. Ultimately, effective program support for promoting dual language acquisition in children will result in more children eager to learn in Head Start as well as more children being prepared to begin school ready and eager to *continue* learning—an investment well worth making.