

**Capital District/  
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Early Childhood  
Direction Center**

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*Helping  
preschool  
children  
learn  
a second  
language*

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Country Early Childhood  
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**Parents are a child's first  
and most influential teacher**

All parents can help their child learn to read; it doesn't matter how much education they have had or what language they speak at home. Through a family's first language, a child can develop basic skills in language and literacy so he or she is ready to learn in kindergarten.

Some of the best things that a parent can do to help their child learn and grow are also the most natural, such as talking and listening to their child regularly. However, you may be wondering whether you should be reading to your child in your native language or English. You may be afraid that reading to your child in your native language may confuse him or her as they try to learn English, and that it will make it harder for them to read in English. You may also be concerned that you shouldn't read to your child in English if you don't feel comfortable with your English skills.

This publication is designed to help answer such questions, provide research on this topic, and offer suggestions on ways you can help your child learn.

# QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

## What's typical?

The following behaviors are recognized as typical and part of the second language learning process.

- A “**silent period.**” When children are learning a new language and adapting to a new culture, they may go through a very quiet period, speaking less as they focus on listening and understanding the new language. The younger the child, the longer this period tends to last.
- **Mixing languages.** From time to time, children may mix grammar rules, or they might use words from both languages in the same sentence. Such behaviors are recognized as a normal part of bilingual language development.
- **Loss of language.** As children learn English, they may lose skills and fluency in their native language if it is not reinforced and maintained.
- **Cultural differences.** Young children may have difficulty paying attention and remembering if they cannot relate new information to previous experiences in their respective cultures. They may also experience exhaustion as they learn a language in which they are not yet proficient.

## Should I speak to my child in his/her native language at home?

Parents and caregivers should speak in the language in which they are most proficient so they can serve as a strong language role model. If you are most comfortable with your native language, you will be better able to communicate your thoughts and feelings with your child in that language. In addition, by speaking in your native language you will teach your child about his/her cultural heritage and identity.

## Won't my child have a harder time learning English if I speak in my native language?

No. It's difficult to build a second language if the first language foundation is not established and supported while the second language is being learned. In fact, research shows that children with native language skills are more ready and able to learn a second language. This means that by developing your child's literacy skills in Spanish, for example, you will be making it easier for him or her to speak, read, and write English in the future.

## Will my child lose his/her ability to speak in our native language if we only speak to him/her in English?

As children learn English, they may lose skills and fluency in their native language if it is not used and supported. Therefore, families must make an important decision about whether they want their child to maintain his/her skills in the family's native language.

## How do I know if my child has a language-learning disability?

When a young English language learner is not proficient in English and is experiencing academic/behavioral difficulties in a preschool setting, it can be hard to figure out if the difficulty stems from the language difference itself or from a true disability. **A true disability will be present in all languages that the child knows.** It's important to talk about your concerns with family members, childcare providers and the family physician to help identify any potential causes.

A referral for an evaluation may be recommended.

## How can the Early Childhood Direction Center help?

The ECDC helps parents understand the special education referral process and availability of services. We guide families to the programs they are eligible for—and we follow up with them to make sure they are getting what they expected.

## What happens in the evaluation process?

If a child appears to be having language difficulties in his/her native language, an evaluation may be recommended.

If your child is referred to a Committee on Preschool Special Education (CPSE), you will be given a list of agencies approved by the New York State Education Department to provide preschool special education evaluations. You will be asked to select one of the approved evaluators, then sign a consent form for your child to be evaluated at no cost to you or your family.

If it is determined that your child is eligible for services, you and other CPSE members will write an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for your child. It will list the recommended services to be provided, how often and for how long.

If the CPSE finds your child is not eligible for special education programs and/or services, you will be given the reasons for the decision in writing.

If you would like more information about this process, please contact the ECDC at **518-464-6356** or **877-669-3232**.

## Website Resources

- *Colorincolorado.org*—Find free activities and advice on this bilingual website.
- *Readingrockets.org*—Find information to help struggling readers.
- *Mamalisa.com*—Enjoy poems, songs, rhymes and worldwide traditions.

## Tips for parents

Now that you know some of the reasons why it is important to encourage literacy in your child's native language, here are some simple things you can do to make learning fun and engaging.

**Engage in storytelling** – Adults help children learn language by talking with them. Talk to your child about everything from daily experiences to storytelling of folktales and traditional stories in your first language.

**Read, read, read** – Reading aloud for just 15 minutes each day is the single most important thing you can do to improve your child's readiness to read and learn. Keep books, magazines, newspapers and other print materials available in your native language.

**Say rhymes and sing songs** – Rhyming games help children learn to play with words and language. Rhyme everything, no matter how silly. Singing or listening to music in your native language will help expand your child's language skills.

**Take advantage of community resources** – Public libraries, community centers and religious groups offer resources, programs and services designed to bridge language and cultural gaps.