



Center for Family Policy
and Research
University of Missouri

Recommendations for Working Effectively with Dual Language Learners and their Families

*Recommendations for practices that help early
childhood programs meet the needs of dual language
learners.*

Background

In 2008, the Missouri Head Start-State Collaboration Office (MHSSCO) conducted a needs assessment focused on the collaboration, coordination, and alignment of services at Head Start programs. In addition, the Office of Head Start conducted a review of program needs with respect to serving dual language learners (DLL). Although the MHSSCO assessment did not focus on DLLs, similarities in needs, opportunities, and barriers to serving this population emerged from the findings.

The needs assessment findings create an opportunity to address the needs of DLLs. In 2000, 5.1% of Missouri households included a person over the age of 5 years who spoke a language other than English. This is in comparison to national data which indicates 17.9% of households included at least one person who spoke a language other than English. These numbers have been increasing in our state and nation, and it is thought many of these students are not receiving appropriate services.

This *Recommended Practices* brief will discuss the key findings of the MHSSCO assessment which relate to working with dual language learners and provide recommended practices for each.

Program preparedness: Head Start programs and their staff may not be prepared, or aware of what they need to know, in order to serve dual language learners effectively.

Although few questions on the MHSSCO needs assessment referred specifically to DLLs, programs serving more DLLs reported significant language and cultural barriers. Some of the comments demonstrated a potential lack of awareness about serving this population.

Recommended Practice: Head Start programs can become better prepared to serve DLL by assessing the readiness of the program and their staff. Determine if staff members are aware of what they need to know about the unique needs of dual language learners, and if they have the skills to implement what they know. Potential biases among staff should be assessed as well. Plans for professional development can be made based on findings. Tools for assessing readiness that can be found at the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center website include: Program Preparedness Checklist: Serving Dual Language Learners and Their Families, Community Assessment Workbook, Develop a Cultural Inventory, and Program Assessment Chart for ELLs.

Involving families: Head Start staff struggle to involve and communicate with linguistically diverse families. Programs reported a need for bilingual services for parents where no staff spoke the family's first language. Many programs also reported difficulty assisting parents with limited English proficiency to understand instruction and services that would be available when their child transitioned from Head Start to public school. One program experienced difficulty engaging fathers of dual language learners.

Recommended Practice: Head Start programs and staff can build partnerships with families by collaborating with immigrant-serving organizations and other cultural liaisons. Hiring staff that speak the languages of the families can help build family partnerships. Encourage staff to demonstrate respect and value for each family's culture by learning about the family's culture and preferences and identifying appropriate relational and classroom practices. For example, staff may encourage parents to use their child's first language with them. Staff may also need assistance with diverse families in the area of setting appropriate goals for their child.

Assessment: Programs and staff are unsure of how to best screen and evaluate dual language learners. Multiple programs identified their concern for evaluating dual language learners; especially those whom they suspect may have a disability.

Recommended Practice: Researchers have reservations about the reliability of standardized pre-k assessment measures, especially for DLL. Caution is advised when using tools that are normed on a sample that does not include children of the same cultural and linguistic background of the child being assessed and such tools should be avoided if possible. For all screenings and assessments, ongoing assessment is recommended. Staff can perform ongoing assessment using observational notes, checklists, rating scales, student work samples, curriculum based measurement and portfolios. In order to accurately interpret results, staff members need to understand second language acquisition, diverse family values, customs, and expectations for behavior.

Impact on Children and Families: Head Start programs and their staff have a significant opportunity to address the needs of DLL. Non-native speakers of English are at risk for negative future outcomes including low academic achievement and dropping out of school. However, children whose bilingualism is fostered from an early age show benefits. Head Start programs can help improve outcomes for children who speak multiple languages by learning more about their unique needs as well as how to support their families. Building partnerships with families and providing appropriate screenings and assessments are two ways programs can improve the likelihood of positive outcomes for dual language learners.

For additional information please see:

Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center. <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc>

Strawsine, M. (2009). Serving Dual Language Learners and their Families Resource List.

Strawsine, M. & Hawks, J., 2009

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