

## Helping Young Children Learn Two Languages

From birth, many children in the United States are learning two languages at the same time—the language of their family and English. All babies are born with the potential to learn language. Parents may fear that raising a child to learn more than one language might confuse the child. Research, however, has found that being raised bilingual gives children many advantages. Children gain a deeper understanding of two cultures, acquire stronger thinking skills and have a greater general sense of language. This *Bulletin* discusses how families can help children who are dual language learners build skills to become successful learners and readers once they start school.



### First, Let's Talk

Start talking right away! Talk in Spanish. Talk in English. Talk in Somali. *Talk in the language that is most comfortable for you.* From birth to age three, a child's brain is growing more quickly than at any other time. Just talking to children during these years is the most important thing parents can do to make the most of the brain-building early years. It doesn't matter what language parents use to talk

to their children. Simply by talking and listening to their child, parents make a difference that lasts a lifetime.

A large research study found that, by age three, children whose families frequently talked to them had a vocabulary twice as large as children whose families rarely spoke to them. The more words parents use when speaking to their infant and the more often they talk, the bigger the child's vocabulary will be at age 3. The

bigger the child's vocabulary is at age 3, the bigger the vocabulary will be in 5<sup>th</sup> grade. These differences last through all the child's school years.

Just putting a child in front of a TV doesn't do the job. Children need to interact with others about what is happening so they can connect the words they hear to their own experiences. *Sensitive interactions with adults do much more to help brains develop than any toy, TV or DVD.*

### Tips for Talking...

- **Talk about everyday events.** Talking helps babies and young children connect words to their experiences. For example,
  - When dressing, name and describe everything you are putting on your child—from diaper, jacket, pants, shoes and socks, to colors, buttons and zippers.
  - When riding on the bus, in the car or taking a walk, talk about what you see and feel. Read signs, point out certain numbers, letters or colors.
- **Baby talk is good.** At first, use words and touch to respond to your child's cries. Once your child starts babbling, keep responding with words, gestures, sounds. Children who are responded to gain confidence and delight in language.
- **Talk in real sentences.** Use big words, too, even though you know your child won't understand them. Use simpler words to help your child understand. Speak slowly, use gestures. Hearing new words helps your child's vocabulary grow.
- **Tell stories.** Stories introduce words that may not arise in everyday life.
- **Ask questions and have conversations.** As your children get older, ask them to tell you a story or to repeat a familiar story. Encourage preschool children to talk with you about their friends, experiences, ideas.
- **Have fun.** Rhyming, tongue twisters and other forms of word play in your home language will help your children learn about sounds.

## Read to Expand your Child's World

When you give your children words, you give them the world. One of the best ways to expand a child's vocabulary is through books. Children who are read to from birth, regardless of the language, are more successful at learning to read. Remember, early reading skills that are learned in one language can transfer to another language. The stronger a child's language and reading skills are in his or her home language, the stronger they will be in the second language.

### Reading Tips...

- **Begin reading right away when your child is an infant.** Read every day. Read with expression and use different voices. Carry books to read wherever you go.
- **Don't read? Don't Worry!** You do not have to read to help children learn about reading and to have fun with books. Talk about pictures and the story they tell. Invite your child to point to pictures and turn the pages. Talk with your child about what you see on the pages.
- **Read with your child.** Use lots of ways for your child to take part in the action. Encourage children to "read" or tell you the story. Ask them to point to a picture you name or ask them to name it. Ask them to guess what comes next in the story. If you can, help them recognize letters and connect them to the sounds you both make.

Your child's early years pass quickly, but their impact lasts a lifetime. When you create an everyday environment rich in language through conversations, stories, word games, rhymes, song, and reading, you prepare your children for a future of learning and success. So go ahead, have fun—talk, read, smile, sing, and play with your children. Talking and reading to and with them is the best preparation you can give children for beginning school ready and eager to learn.

## Talking and Reading

### Proven Ways to Help Young Children Learn Two Languages

This *Bulletin* highlights some of the things research has recently shown to make an enormous difference for young children who are growing up learning two languages at the same time. In this *Bulletin*, we refer to these children as "dual language learners." It is important for parents and family members who do not speak English to understand that the early language skills children learn in their own home language will help their children learn and understand English.



#### Resources

**Get Ready to Read!** This Web site aims to help Spanish-speaking parents build their preschool and kindergarten children's early literacy and learning skills. To learn more, visit [www.getreadytoread.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=98&Itemid=107](http://www.getreadytoread.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=98&Itemid=107)

**¡Colorín Colorado!** This bilingual Web site provides parents and families with information they can use to help their children become good readers and successful students. For more, visit [www.colorincolorado.org/families](http://www.colorincolorado.org/families)

*Parents' PLACE Bulletin* is funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Innovation and Improvement, Parent Information and Resource Center program, under Grant #84.310A. The views and opinions herein do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Department of Education. This *Bulletin* was written by Janet R. Vohs, Mass. PIRC staff. We encourage copying of this newsletter to distribute to parents and families. Permission is granted to reprint this newsletter in whole or in part. Please credit *Parents' PLACE Bulletin*, Massachusetts PIRC, Federation for Children with Special Needs, and contact us at [masspirc@fcsn.org](mailto:masspirc@fcsn.org) to indicate the number of copies disseminated.

© Federation for Children with Special Needs, 0310.

Massachusetts PIRC  
Federation for Children with Special Needs  
1135 Tremont Street, Suite 420  
Boston, MA 02120

Non-Profit  
U.S. Postage  
PAID  
BOSTON, MA  
PERMIT NO.  
50539