

The right to maintain a first language

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One of the greatest gifts parents can give their children is language. The first language learned in the home forms the foundation for all later language development.

Parents and extended family are the most important influences in ensuring development of a strong first language. The continued use of a child's home language is important for successful mastery of a second language.

At playgroup, adults play an important part in making sure bilingual parents and caregivers feel comfortable using their first language at home and at playgroup.

In a supportive playgroup, children will feel confident using both languages. However, negative attitudes at playgroup may discourage parents from speaking their own language. This not only has a detrimental effect on children's language development but could make parents feel insecure in their parenting role.

Parents should never be made to feel they need to use English with their children even if they speak good English. Children will learn English from others in the group.

The ability to speak more than one language is a gift and young English speaking children can share this gift, learning words and songs in other languages. The child who speaks a language other than English at home needs to know that this language is valued by others as well as their family.

At playgroup bilingual parents can be encouraged to:

read and tell stories

sing to all the children

talk to other children at activities and introduce words in their own language

Learning in two languages

Children who are exposed to two languages from an early age go through similar developmental stages to children learning one language.

Differences emerge when children are learning to talk. At first, bilingual children may use one language more than the other to name some things; at other times they may use the other language.

Gradually they will associate a language with a particular person or place and the two languages will be used more systematically.

Young children can learn two languages easily when they are consistently exposed to good language models. Maintaining the first language helps children with English as it extends their knowledge through the language they know best and supports them to learn English from native speakers of English.

References

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