

Supporting children learning English as an additional language



Frequently asked questions for early years practitioners

Does learning English as an additional language cause language difficulties?

No – is the short answer! The majority of the world's population are bilingual and speak 2 or more languages. They have no difficulties communicating. Being bilingual is an advantage as it gives people more opportunities and enables them to communicate with a wider group of people. For more on the advantages of being bilingual go to: www.londonsigbilingualism.co.uk and www.bilingualism.co.uk.

However, children who are new to an English speaking setting will need support settling in and help communicating while they are learning.

What can I do to support children who are new to English?

There are lots of things you can do to support children; they aren't a quick fix but are based on the principles of good practice:

- If you are working with a child who is new to the country and hearing English find out 10-20 key words from their parents when they start. You can ask parents to record them for you and write them down. This will give you and the child a shared language to communicate. It also puts you in the position of learning a language and makes the child the expert. This can help their emotional wellbeing as not only are you valuing their language you are modelling that it's ok to try things out as you learn. You can add to this list the longer children are with you.
- Use gestures and actions when you are speaking: this will give children extra clues to what you are saying. It will also let them join in any rhymes or songs.
- Tune in to what children are trying to tell you using their gestures or faces. You will need to watch carefully and follow their lead to interpret what they're communicating. They will also need lots of time to watch, listen and respond.

I CAN Help enquiry service www.ican.org.uk/help

Call 020 7843 2544 to arrange a free phone call from one of our speech and language therapists or email enquiries@ican.org.uk

Talking Point www.talkingpoint.org.uk

Visit this website for information about children's communication.

- Give lots of concrete opportunities for learning new words. Allow children to use all their senses to explore and learn new words.
- You can also use a visual timeline to help children learn the routine of the nursery. Find out more from I CAN's [Factsheet](#)
- Create opportunities for children to feel secure enough to try out their new language skills with confidence. For example, talking in pairs or small groups before speaking in a large group.
- Use opportunities such as familiar rhymes and routines for children to join in.
- Support parents to keep speaking their home language(s) at home and to build their literacy skills. There is lots of evidence showing that developing home language and literacy skills provide a good foundation for learning a new language and a different script.
- Have books and play resources that reflect children's culture and language background. Having different scripts in your setting shows that you value different languages and cultures.

What are the stages that children go through when learning a new language?

It's difficult to map this precisely as the rate a child learns and uses new language will vary according to many factors:

- What skills and strengths they have
- How they need to use their skills
- Their level of confidence and self-esteem

They will need to do lots of watching and listening to understand their new language and learn what is happening around them. This is often called the 'quiet' or the 'silent' period and how long this goes on for can vary depending on the child. Children can usually understand a lot more than they can say.

It can take up to 2 years for children to learn the basics in English and enough to get by in the playground. It can take them 5-7 years to develop the more complex language needed to complete GCSEs.

For more on the stages of learning language go to www.talkingpoint.org.uk.

How can I tell if the children I work with are struggling to learn language?

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Follow the principles of good early years practice and use your observations to inform assessment. There are lots of areas that you can observe that don't require language skills, such as seeing how they play and get on with other children and adults.

Find out what their home language(s) is/are (you may already have this information as it's good practice to find out when they start at your setting). This will let you know the languages they are familiar with. If they speak lots of languages you can make a language map that will let you know which language they speak and with who. This will give you lots of information about their language skills. Although it might take some time at the beginning, when they are settling in this will give you a really good starting point.

Ask their parents how they are doing in their home language and compare it to the guidelines on the Talking point website www.talkingpoint.org.uk.

The main question to ask yourself and parents is: 'how are they doing in their home language?' This will give you an insight into their language skills. If they are struggling to communicate in their home language they will find learning English difficult.

For more information:

National Association for Language Development in the Curriculum (NALDIC) has lots of information, research and resources for interested practitioners www.naldic.org.uk.

For more information for bilingualism and resources for parents in different languages go to www.wordsforlife.org.uk.

For more information about language development, a Progress Checker and advice go to:

www.talkingpoint.org.uk

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