

Treasuring cultural riches in your setting



According to recent research, one in eight children in Britain speaks a language other than English before starting primary school. London is the most linguistically diverse area, boasting over 300 different languages, while other community languages can be heard in increasingly wider areas.

A head start in languages can be a huge asset for children, broadening their cultural horizons as well as developing their creative and analytical skills. But how can childcare workers value cultural diversity while helping children build up their confidence in speaking English?

Which language first?

Although it is often assumed that the faster children learn English, the happier and more socially integrated they will be, real damage can be done if a child used to speaking a community language at home is pushed into English too soon.

The languages children speak are closely attached to their culture, family and identity. They learn to understand emotional concepts through their home tongue, and to filter their understanding of life through it. For children to move

forward in English, they must first feel comfortable in their home language.

Meet the parents

It is important to build a relationship with the parents before getting to know the child. This can present a challenge if the parents have limited English, although certain nurseries may have the luxury of bilingual staff or children who can help out.

Make sure you have specific details about the home language(s) spoken (for instance Chinese Mandarin, rather than just Chinese) and if necessary find out a few details about the language, such as whether it is written in our Roman script, before meeting the family. There are various online translation programs such as www.babelfish.yahoo.com, which might help you get the gist of a few phrases across to parents. But don't rely on such a tool for extensive translations as it can churn out inaccurate and sometimes highly amusing phrases.

Some parents may push for you to speak nothing but English to their children, but reassure them that the children will feel more at ease if allowed to feel comfortable in the home tongue first. Encourage parents to speak to their children in their home language in the childcare setting, perhaps giving them time to talk through the layout of the rooms or garden so that the children feel secure.

As the children begin to settle in, be sure to provide feedback to parents. This could mean passing on painting or craft work the children have done, or even miming the activity details. One childminder I spoke to described a picture timetable where each child could choose

pictures of their daily activities to attach to the wall next to their name or photograph.

Early days

You may find the first few weeks frustrating, but prepare yourself as much as possible. Avoid a constant stream of English chatter and questions that may scare the child, instead focus on pictures and objects. Smile whenever you can, make eye contact and give clear facial expressions. Signing can also be a useful tool at this stage, as children who speak different languages can understand each other this way.

Perhaps with the help of the parents, or the children themselves, compile a list of common words and phrases in the home language. English speaking children will also have different ways of referring to certain personal things, such as sleep, private parts, bathroom routines, which are peculiar to their families, so why not learn the community language words for these things too? Draw on them when necessary, but use sparingly to avoid confusing the child. It is generally better for everyone, including staff, to stick to their own home language, partly so that children pick up the accents correctly.

If there are other children who speak the child's home language, let them play together and talk to each other. Don't be alarmed if your efforts are sometimes met with complete silence or your community speakers mix words from their home language and English. You may also find English speakers picking up community language words, and this is one of the many benefits of a culturally diverse setting.

Try to relax and be prepared for anything. Remember that the more

comfortable children are, the more readily they will eventually move forwards linguistically.

Resources

A range of resources is available, often through local councils, but they can be expensive. CDs with stories, songs and nursery rhymes, DVDs, posters, books and flashcards can all be useful and will help children feel you value their culture. Look out for bargains in charity shops and on Internet auction sites. Try making your own resources sometimes, perhaps, writing words and getting children to decorate them, before laminating.

Some bilingual books are available with notes on pronunciation of the foreign language. This is particularly useful if the language uses a different script, but if you are an English speaker try to avoid reading in the child's community language. Instead, invite the parents to stay for a few minutes at drop-off or pick-up time to read some books to their children in your setting, perhaps encouraging the other children to listen in.

Some childcare settings also offer additional elementary language tuition in the form of a private teacher or an online or DVD program such as *Muzzy*. This may be in a language that is new to all the children, developing their language skills while giving them a shared interest. Or, depending on numbers and resources, tuition could be provided in the community language. As well as stretching the English children's linguistic skills, this encourages the community speakers to feel proud of their language and culture.

Celebrating culture

Try to consider the child's whole culture, rather than just the language. You could find out a few details about the country or area in which the community language is spoken and perhaps locate it on a map. Some families may come from areas of poverty or political unrest, so be sensitive if parents do not wish to discuss their history. Remember that whatever you

hear on the news, each country and race has its own unique blend of beauty and riches.

Be aware of different dietary requirements, which may include different tastes and routines, as well as religious observances. Children are naturally observant and curious about any differences, so allow them to question and comment on different hairstyles and clothes, encouraging them to celebrate difference rather than criticise. Be sure to explore festivals and celebrations too, so that the community language speakers feel their culture is valued, and the other children and staff can learn from the experience.

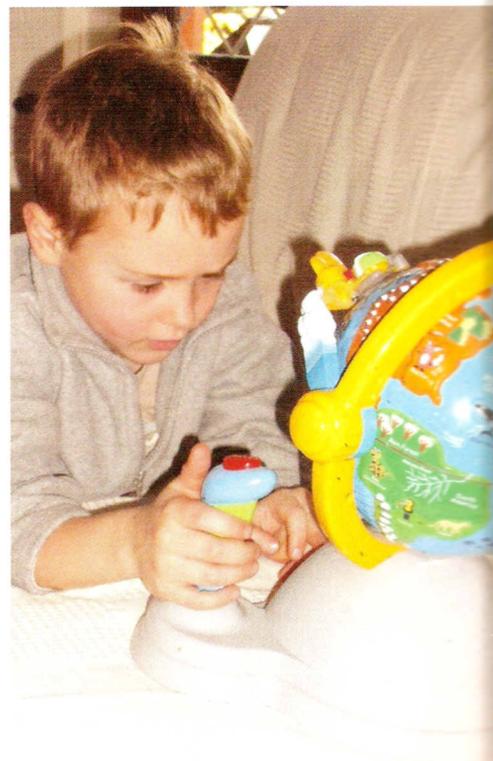
Developing English

Whatever efforts you make to value the child's culture and encourage use of the community language, children in Britain cannot escape from English language and culture and will enjoy learning about English festivals, customs and food too.

You shouldn't need to 'decide' when children are ready to learn English. If they have settled in well and feel comfortable, they will naturally start to copy English words in a British setting. They probably won't make much distinction between the languages spoken, but will just notice that different people call things by different names.

To begin with, you probably used gestures to ask if children wanted milk or juice. Now you can show them the items and say the English words, while they nod or shake their heads. After a while they will copy the word, before long you can put the question into a phrase: 'Would you like milk or juice?' and later give an open question: 'What would you like to drink?'. This process may take a few days or weeks and you can always go back to gestures if you feel the child is starting to feel anxious or frustrated.

Even if the children say very little in English, they always understand more than they speak, as receptive skills develop earlier than expressive skills. Eventually, in much the same way as the



home language was allowed to develop, the children will hear and repeat more and more English words, as they seek to communicate with their English speaking playmates and are exposed to English songs and nursery rhymes.

Moving forwards

Although childcare professionals receive training about bilingualism and multiculturalism, it is still down to the individual childcare setting to decide to rise to the challenge and promote cultural diversity.

Sadly, many ingrained beliefs and patterns can still cause obstacles and it is the children who lose out. Ultimately it is only through meeting different cultures and encouraging interaction that the barriers can be broken down and each culture truly valued.

References

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