

Many Languages, Many Cultures: Respecting and Responding to Diversity

Adapted from the 1995 position statement *Responding to Linguistic and Cultural Diversity: Recommendations for Effective Early Childhood Education*.

Young children and their families reflect a great and rapidly increasing diversity of language and culture. NAEYC's recommendations emphasize that early childhood programs are responsible for creating a welcoming environment that respects diversity, supports children's ties to their families and community, and promotes both second-language acquisition and preservation of children's home languages and cultural identities. Linguistic and cultural diversity is an asset, not a deficit, for young children.

Recommendations for working with families

- **Actively involve families in the early learning program.**

Links between school, home, and community are important for all young children, but forging them can be challenging when families and program staff differ in culture and language. Ties to the community, respectful relationships with families, and encouragement of active, culturally meaningful family involvement are essential.

- **Help all families realize the cognitive advantages of a child knowing more than one language, and provide them with strategies to support, maintain, and preserve home-language learning.**

Families may think that speaking to their children only in English will help them learn the language faster. But home-language preservation benefits children's cognitive development, and families with limited English proficiency provide stronger language models when they emphasize their home language.

- **Convince families that their home's cultural values and norms are honored.**

Continuity between home and the early childhood setting supports children's social, emotional, cognitive, and

language development. Though not always identical, practices at home and in school should be complementary.

Recommendations for working with young children

- **Ensure that children remain cognitively, linguistically, and emotionally connected to their home language and culture.**

Children's positive development requires maintaining close ties to their family and community. If home language and culture are supported, children, families, and communities stay securely connected.

- **Encourage home-language and literacy development, knowing that this contributes to children's ability to acquire English language proficiency.**

Research confirms that bilingualism is an asset and an educational achievement. When children become proficient and literate in their home language, they transfer those skills to a second language.

By 2050, Hispanic and African American children under age five will outnumber non-Hispanic Whites in the United States.

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Screening and Assessment of Young English Language Learners

As an expansion of its position statement on curriculum, assessment, and program evaluation, and in response to needs in the field, NAEYC has developed recommendations on the screening and assessment of young English language learners. For more, go to www.naeyc.org.

- **Help develop essential concepts in the children's first language and within cultural contexts that they understand.**

Although some children can seem superficially fluent in their second language, most children find it easier to learn new, complex concepts in a familiar language and cultural framework. Once established, these concepts readily transfer into a second language and contribute to later academic mastery.

- **Support and preserve home-language usage.**

Whether or not staff are proficient in a child's home language, programs should make every effort to use children's home languages and create classroom environments that reflect children's languages and cultures. Within that context, teachers can model

By the year 2010, more than 30 percent of all school-age children will come from U.S. homes in which the primary language is not English.

appropriate use of English and provide many opportunities for children to learn and practice a new language.

- **Develop and provide alternative, creative strategies to promote all children's participation and learning.**

Creativity and collaboration are needed to ensure that all children, whatever their current language proficiency or culture, have the opportunity to participate fully in the program's learning opportunities. Collaborative work groups, including teachers and families, can develop flexible approaches that are developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate.

- **Provide children with many ways of showing what they know and can do.**

Children have already learned a great deal before they enter an early childhood program, even if this learning has been in a different language and culture. Effective curriculum and assessment systems do not underestimate children's abilities. Instead, they create multiple, often nonverbal ways for children to demonstrate interests, knowledge, and skills.

NAEYC Interest Forums

Interest Forums are organized by groups of NAEYC members who share an interest in a particular early childhood issue. Interest Forums focused on the issues in this position statement include Latino Caucus, Black Caucus, Children's Global Issues, and Diversity and Equity. To learn about joining a forum, go to www.naeyc.org/community.

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Recommendations for preparation of early childhood professionals

- **Provide professional preparation and development in the areas of culture, language, and diversity.**

By examining their own cultural background, educators come to see how young children's culture and language influence responses, interactions, and approaches to learning. Competence is further enhanced by professional development in language acquisition, working with diverse families, cross-cultural communication, and other critical content.

- **Recruit and support educators who are trained in languages other than English.**

Individuals with multilingual and multicultural backgrounds can be advocates and crucial support for diverse young children and families. We must recruit more bilingual educators, give them appropriate professional responsibilities, and link them in collaborative relationships with others in the field.

For More on Diversity

The Early Childhood Research Institute on Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services

identifies, evaluates, and promotes effective and appropriate early intervention practices and pre-school practices that are sensitive to and respectful of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. <http://clas.uiuc.edu/links.html>

The National Association for Bilingual Education

is devoted to representing both English language learners and bilingual education professionals. www.nabe.org

The National Association for Multicultural Education

fosters the understanding of unique cultural and ethnic heritage and promotes the development of culturally responsible and responsive curricula. www.name.org

The National Task Force on Early Childhood for Hispanics

endeavors to enhance educational achievement and opportunities for children of Hispanic descent and to influence education policy. www.ecehispanic.org/about.html

The National Black Child Development Institute

seeks to improve and protect the lives of children, recognizing the pivotal role that all members of the community must play if equity and access are to become a reality. www.nbcdi.org

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