

# Creating a Language-rich Environment

By Julie Dotsch

## BRINGING IN THE HOME CULTURE AND LANGUAGE

As educators prepare their programs, they need to constantly be thinking of how to enhance the children's language. One way to do this is to incorporate the home languages into the setting (e.g., by adding posters or alphabets in various languages or by using music from various cultures). Families are a great resource for this. Libraries also provide some variety. When children recognize the script or sound of their first language, it can increase their comfort. It also shows parents that their home language is valued and provides a way for educators to demonstrate their openness to learning a few words or phrases in a child's language. Cultural and religious celebrations can also provide educators with opportunities to learn about and share the families' cultures. Frequently celebrated days in Canada can also be celebrated (e.g., Family Day, Canada Day). This can provide new language stimulation but should not be the core for program planning.

## SET UP

The program set up can be adapted to add a variety of play spaces where children can interact in small groups, as well as areas where they can retreat from language overload and engage in play without the risk of unwanted interference. Activities where children work together, arranging chairs in a cozy corner for two, or bringing in special objects grouped in unique ways for discussion (e.g., a collection of different footwear) can also encourage language development.

## LANGUAGE ADAPTATIONS FOR ESL LEARNERS

### Motivation

When activities are based on children's interests, there is more likelihood of language being used and retained. For example, children may want to know how to say "fast" because they are excited about which car could go fastest down various ramps. When they notice a missing wheel, they learn the word "broken." With younger children, try labeling actions (e.g., "Your car went fast.") If this is accom-

panied by a zooming sound or arm action, it is even more appealing. Make the word or phrase roll off your tongue in an inviting way. "Bounce the ball" can be said in a bouncy voice, for example.

### Listening Skills

When children feel listened to, they are more likely to listen to others. Model listening by giving your full attention to a child. Talk with children having them face you, away from distractions. Do a full squat to get down to their level and establish eye contact if the child is comfortable with this. Repeat some of what you heard to make sure you got it right.

Listening activities might include:

- games where the name of an object is important (e.g., hiding games, "Where is...?");
- sound effects recordings where children match sounds to pictures of objects;
- soothing music at specific times of the day;
- singing—making up songs using a child's name, for example.



**Here are some other tips for helping children learn language:****Simplify your speech and add gestures.**

When introducing a new language, simplify your speech; provide one concept at a time; add gesture, animation and props to make your message clearer.

**Use consistent words and teach children important phrases.**

Instead of using different words to describe the same thing (e.g., toilet, bathroom or wash-room) pick one and use it consistently. It also helps to provide children with simple phrases that can help them get their needs met (e.g., “I want \_\_\_\_\_” or “Can I have \_\_\_\_\_?”) and phrases that help them to socialize (e.g., “No,” “Mine,” “Don’t touch,” and “Can I play?”)

**Be concrete and model simple speech.**

Be concrete with young children. Phrases like “use your words” are confusing, especially when the child may not know the words. Model ways children can enter play or share a toy to encourage them to try these strategies. If a child comes to you for help because someone grabbed their toy, show them how to get it back (e.g., by saying “It’s my toy” or “Mine.”) When you add gestures, such as the stopping gesture or pointing to yourself when saying “Mine,” the meaning becomes clearer.

**Match your language to the child.**

Observe the child interacting with the parent and look for the tone of voice, the rhythm of the home language, the volume and any non-verbal communication. By altering your volume, tone and pitch to more closely match the home language, you can make it easier for the child to listen.

**Increase language requirements gradually and read children’s cues.**

At first it is good to respond to children’s non-verbal cues, such as grunting or pointing, but over time, you can model the appropriate language. Eventually you can ask open-ended questions like, “What do you want?” Children show understanding in different ways including doing the action, nodding or smiling. It is important to look for their readiness through their responses. If children watch you as you are speaking with others or if you hear them singing songs from group time, then they are ready for more language.

**Help children communicate with one another.**

It is surprising how children can carry on conversations when they don’t share the same language. They use gestures and animation, model their play and use shared understandings. It is good to let children communicate in this way; however, when children get frustrated that another child can’t understand them, provide the English words to help.

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