

Presentation Handout

Meeting the Needs of English Language Learners and the Preservation of Native Languages

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Head Start embraces a core set of values, including commitments to recognizing that the members of the Head Start community—children, families, and staff—have roots in many cultures. Head Start families and staff working together as a team can effectively promote respectful, sensitive, and proactive approaches to diversity issues.

Many Head Start programs serve children who represent a variety of cultures and a variety of languages. As Head Start programs continue to grow and expand reaching deeper into communities that are underserved or in some cases not served at all, Head Start staff will need to develop creative strategies to meet the needs of children and families in these unique communities. Communities are changing and the faces served in Early Head Start and Head Start programs today may not be the faces we serve in Early Head Start and Head Start tomorrow. The issue of addressing children's language in an early childhood setting becomes increasingly complex.

There are over 130 languages spoken in the United States, and in Northern Virginia 15 languages are spoken in the Head Start programs. The public schools language banks recognize over 75 different languages. The Performance Standard that relates directly to this includes: 1304.21(a) iii Provide an environment of acceptance that supports and respects gender, culture, LANGUAGE, ethnicity and family composition. What does this all mean for a local Head Start program?

There are many challenges and opportunities in working with diverse languages in a Early Head Start – Head Start program, they include:

- Qualified Staff. Attracting and retaining both classroom and non-classroom staff is a challenge, especially in large metropolitan areas. Responses to job announcements within Head Start organizations are generally high. Head Start staff and parents who participate in the selection process will need to fine-tune the selection process. Will the perspective candidate be able to understand and respect the child's culture, social background, religious beliefs, composition and child rearing practices of each family? Interviewing perspective staff becomes critical, you will need to ask questions "As a Head Start employee:
 - How would you work with a new enrollee who speaks another language?
 - How would you incorporate a child's home language into daily activities?
 - Tell us strategies you would use to communicate with a child who speaks no English?
- Attracting resource staff who support the Early Head Start – Head Start program. How do you attract resource staff to support Head Start staff in mental health? Disabilities? Family support services? Resource staff who are bi-lingual and bi-cultural support and enhance Head Start programs in providing comprehensive services to both children and families.



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- “ Surviving the Trial and Error Period. During this period management and line staff try to figure out the most effective plan of action for serving children who speak many languages. Most common questions asked are.... Do we teach English and Urdu? How do I meet the needs of each child when there are six different languages – and I do not speak any of the languages? These commonly asked questions surface during the trial and error period. Programs may purchase costly translation equipment that translates literally and has no flexibility for the many dialects within a particular language. There are a variety of packaged curriculums and educational software available to support staff. Head Start staff needs support during this trial and error period and need to understand that there is no one best approach and that the ‘Band-Aid’ and ‘cookie cutter’ approaches will not work. There are no quick fixes! Head Start programs need to proceed with patience and understanding throughout this trial and error period.
- “ Hiring interpreters. Interpreters and translation services are generally costly and not accessible to local Head Start programs. They can, however support Head Start staff in developing written materials to support classroom and non-classroom staff and support the recruitment and enrollment process. Many of the resources needed to support Head Start programs can be found within the local community. This opens a window of opportunity to collaborate with local school systems and community organizations. Many school systems now require high school students to complete community service hours in order to graduate. High school internships with the local Head Start program is an excellent opportunity for individualized language support.
- “ Working with staff who makes basic assumptions about children and families because of the families cultural beliefs. Staff needs on-going training to keep them “ in check “ when working with children and families with cultural beliefs other than those shared by Head Start staff. Staff development opportunities should be offered for both classroom and non-classroom staff including management staff.

Simple Successful Approaches include:

1. Hire staff reflection of the population served. Parents sense a level of comfort when there are staff in an Early Head Start or Head Start program that’s familiar with their own language and culture.
2. Hiring parents as employees. Parents who meet the educational and experience requirements who are hired as Head Start staff can support preserving children’s native language in both the classroom and in home based options.
3. Collaborate with colleges and universities for intern placements and to serve as training sites. Interns in the classroom increase the child/adult ratios in Head Start and Early Head Start classrooms. This provides staff additional opportunities to research, plan, and coordinate activities that support each child’s language and culture.
4. Maximizing home visits. Early Head Start and Head Start staff are able to obtain additional information regarding the child and family regarding language, culture, and childrearing practices through home visits. The information obtained may be shared with all staff who will work with the family or child throughout the child’s enrollment in the program.

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5. Supporting staff through staff development activities. Staff development activities must be regular and on going.
6. Offering second languages courses for staff. Many Head Start programs invest training resources to support courses for staff offered either at the local Head Start program or at community college. A bilingual staff member can become a valuable resource for the site/center/or organization.
7. Embrace the *Multicultural Principles for Head Start Programs* and use the principles as a starting point in establishing 'HOW WE DO IT' in your local Head Start organization by specifically addresses working with children and families to create that sense of belonging. For example, we do.... learn at least several words in a child's language. We do not... force a child to speak English or over praise the use of English. The development of written training guides can evolve through this process and the training guides support staff who are new to Head Start in your community.

The most common question classroom staff asks is "How do I support a child's first language when I don't speak the language? Some answers listed below may support your local program in addressing the many challenges in working with children and families from many languages and many cultures.

- Value parents diversity and their unique contributions.
- Continue to communicate in a child's home language.
- Use the curriculum to facilitate second language acquisition.
- Establish strong partnerships in your local community.
- Share your strategies and serve as a resource for other local programs.

