

HOW CAN I DO MY JOB WHEN THE CHILDREN DON'T SPEAK ENGLISH?

Blog

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We live in a multilingual society, a multilingual world, yet it can still feel an enormous challenge when children in early years settings don't speak English.

What I'm hoping to achieve here is to present another way of looking at this concern.

Introduction

I'm Christine Parker and I have been working in early childhood for over 40 years. I have predominately worked in urban and ethnically diverse localities. Here I aim to encapsulate some of my learning over time, that is, my learning alongside children, their families, colleagues, and local communities. My learning is not only through direct experience but is also informed by reading the literature, studying, and researching.



My first experience of supporting a young child new to English

My first experience of learning alongside a young child learning English as an additional language was in an Infant school and the child spoke Mandarin at home. She was alone in the key group in terms of all the other children spoke English, they were monolingual in terms of spoken language. However, she soon settled and because there was sufficient time for play in areas of continuous provision, she was able to access the role play, small world play, mark making and art areas with confidence. Through gesture, facial expressions, and a calm persona she soon made friends and other children included her in parallel and small group play.

What did I learn?

- The child benefitted from feeling safe, secure and settled in the setting. **This had to be my priority.**
 - I had to observe, reflect and respond to the child's needs as I discovered the areas of provision she loved the most.
 - The enabling environment, including responsive adults, ensured she could be active in her learning and make choices that were meaningful to her.
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What is the early years' educator's role?

When a child speaks a home language different to that of the early years' educator, the educator can feel they don't have the relevant skills, knowledge and understanding to support the child. The challenge of a child's English acquisition can seem insurmountable.

So, what can be done to change those adult perceptions of insecurity, lacking in knowledge and maybe even inadequacy?

I encourage all early years' educators to recognise and articulate what they do know about young children, so let's put spoken language to one side for a moment. I have no doubt that many of you reading this can observe a young child and know what they're doing, surmise what they're feeling, learning and even attempt a guess at what the child is thinking.

Most human communication is non-verbal. Hold onto that thought, it's a powerful one.



"Acknowledging - The adult acknowledges the child's presence, emotions and capability by: being physically close to them including using touch if appropriate to make contact tuning in to the child's facial expressions and vocal intonation, including playfulness and teasing."

An extract from Pen Green's Adult Pedagogic Strategies (2015)



The young child settling in

Let's imagine a young child, 3-years-old, in your setting who appears to have no spoken English. Hopefully you will have home visited and will already have knowledge of the child's likes, preferred toys, what they enjoy doing. The child brings in a transitional object from home, a soft toy.

You will observe the child in the setting and see what they settle to do, either outdoors or in. In my experience the role play area is often a favourite place for children new to English, they are seeking out what's familiar to them. It could be their preference is for small world play, construction, natural materials, the outdoors ... **Give the child time in that area of provision, they need to feel safe, secure and confident.** Avoid unnecessary expectations, be gentle, patient, and responsive in your approach.



“Subtle Intervention - The adult watches and listens to what the child is doing before intervening

Linking Experiences - The adults are aware of the child's experience with other adults at home and in the setting.”

An extract from Pen Green's Adult Pedagogic Strategies (2015)



Some pedagogical approaches to build on;

- ***Describe your actions as you play alongside the child acquiring English***
- ***Gently recast their attempts at speaking English, that means repeat what the child has said in the correct form***
- ***Revisit what the child loves to do, again and again and again.***



The young child acquiring English

Some young children acquiring English immediately want to vocalise and try out this new language. They recognise what they hear and experience around them and will attempt to say words and phrases very quickly. Other children will spend a longer time listening before attempting to speak in the new language. And this can be a matter of months.

However, children who are not yet speaking English will show their understanding through their body language and facial expressions. If the child appears happy in every other way the trick is not to worry, and I know that's hard. If the child shows you that they are troubled in other ways then some close observation is necessary to figure out what would help the child to feel more safe, secure, and settled in your setting.

“Advantages of being multilingual; Research tells us that maintaining at least 2 languages is an advantage for later academic achievement. It’s desirable for children who are potentially bilingual and multilingual, to be supported in all the languages available to them.”

Help for Early Years Providers (2021)

<https://help-for-early-years-providers.education.gov.uk/get-help-to-improve-your-practice/english-as-an-additional-language-eal>

“For children whose home language is not English, providers must take reasonable steps to provide opportunities for children to develop and use their home language in play and learning, supporting their language development at home.”

Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (2023)

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1170108/EYFS_framework_from_September_2023.pdf

Summary

- Be confident in what you know about young children
- Observe, reflect and confirm with others how best to respond to the child and their needs
- Do what you know works for all children.
- Remember the thought I said to hold onto, most of human communication is non-verbal. If you do not share a spoken language with a child you are still communicating through gesture, through your facial expressions. The young child will need plenty of reassuring looks.

To find out more about multilingual childhoods and how to support children who are new to English please sign up to our webinar.

Supporting multilingual learners and their families

Thursday 12th October 2023 6–7pm
