



Quick Facts: Engaging Dual Language Learner Families in Their Children’s Early Education

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Family engagement is an important part of high-quality, effective early learning and care programs—especially for the nation’s many young dual language learners (DLLs), who are best served through culturally and linguistically responsive services.¹ Key components of effective family engagement practice for families of DLLs include valuing, encouraging, and learning about families’ home language and culture; being sensitive to their language preferences; and providing them with materials and resources that they can understand and use to support their child’s education.² This *Quick Facts* brief presents a snapshot of family engagement strategies and approaches used in early learning and care programs serving DLLs across California,³ as reported by the families themselves. The findings are derived from a survey of 1,791 families about their experiences with early learning and care programs (92% in centers, 8% in family child care homes) across 16 California counties, conducted as part of the [First 5 California DLL Pilot Study](#). Please see [the full brief](#) for a larger set of findings and more detailed discussion.

Families’ Beliefs About Bilingualism

Most families want their child to become bilingual—a value reinforced by programs’ messaging to families. Most families (88%) reported that they wanted their child to grow up to speak two languages, and the same percentage of respondents said they wanted their child to be able to read and write in their home language as well as English—sentiments that were especially likely to be expressed by higher-income families. In line with these goals, most families (85%) also reported receiving messages from their early learning and care program about either the benefits of their child learning two languages or the importance of their language and culture. Programs serving DLLs should continue to emphasize the benefits of bilingualism for children’s development.

Programs’ Support for Families

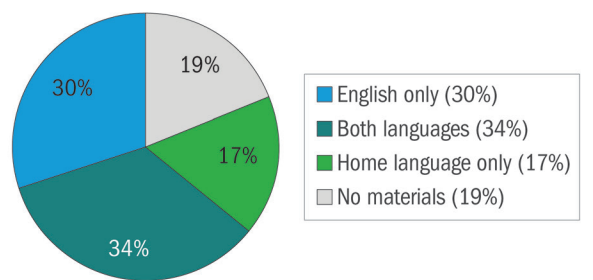
Many programs were responsive to families’ language abilities, though only half of families received materials to foster their children’s learning and development in the home language. The languages families reported being contacted in were well aligned to their own language skills, and only 4% of respondents who did not rate themselves as English proficient reported that their site contacted them only in English. Most families (81%) also said their programs provided learning materials like conversation starters and word and number games for them to use with their child—and families served in programs receiving Head Start/Early Head Start funding or California State Preschool Program funding were especially likely to receive such materials. However, only 51% of families reported receiving these home learning materials *in their home language*, though families from all four of the study’s language groups—Cantonese, Mandarin, Spanish, and Vietnamese—reported receiving at least some home-language materials. By increasing these linguistically supportive practices, programs could even further encourage children’s bilingualism.

Many families interacted somewhat often with their child’s program, but two-way communication between programs and families was far from universal. Most families reported being contacted at least once a month by program staff about topics such as their child’s progress (71%) or classroom events (79%). But this contact did not extend to

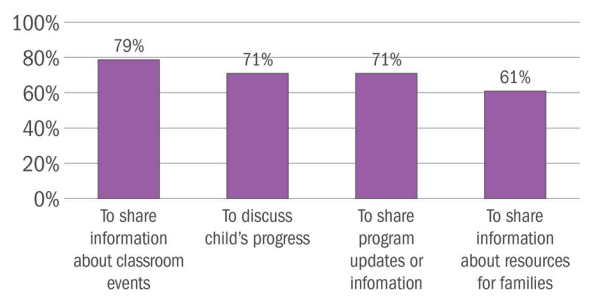
Families’ beliefs about their child’s home language development

- 88%** reported wanting their child to grow up to speak their home language *and* English
- 76%** said helping their child become bilingual was a “very important” reason for choosing their early learning program
- 71%** said it was “very important” that their child know their home language by kindergarten

Percentage of families that received learning materials from their program in English or their home language



Percentage of families whose program contacted them once a month or more for specific reasons

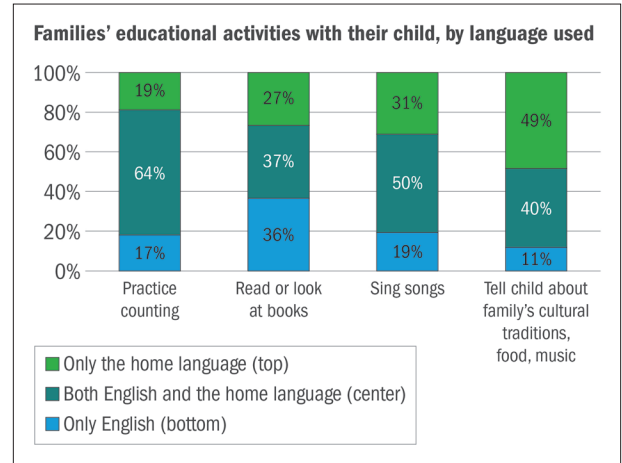


frequent face-to-face interactions, even before the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, as of early 2020, less than half of respondents (48%) said they met in person with program staff once a month or more to talk about their child’s progress. Many families (39%) cited scheduling challenges as a barrier to participation in on-site meetings and activities. These findings indicate there is room for programs to expand their efforts to engage and communicate with families, removing barriers when possible.

Families’ Support for Their Children’s Learning

Families engaged their child in a range of learning activities at home, often in two languages. Most families reported engaging their child in things like counting or singing songs two to three times per week, on average. And a large majority (89%) reported using both English and their home language during at least some of these home activities. Counting was the activity most often practiced in both languages (64%), and over a third of families (37%) reported reading with their child in both languages.

Families with stronger connections to their child’s early learning program reported greater engagement in their child’s learning at home. Specifically, families whose programs communicated with them more often or offered them home learning materials engaged more frequently in learning activities like reading and counting with their child at home. This was especially true when the materials were offered in the family’s home language. These positive associations point to a notable opportunity for programs to encourage continued learning at home for their DLLs through regular communication and by providing learning resources for families.



DLL FAMILY ENGAGEMENT FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF PROGRAM PROVIDERS

We supplemented the family survey findings with additional data from the study’s site director survey, administered to a state-representative sample of 744 directors of early learning and care programs, and its teacher survey, completed by 714 teachers in DLL-serving programs across the state. Highlights of those findings include:

Site Directors. According to site director report, over half of early learning and care programs communicated with families to better understand and incorporate their linguistic backgrounds, including by identifying the family’s cultural background (69% of programs) and inviting them to the classroom to lead activities in their home language (51%). Directors from about four in 10 programs (38%) indicated that staff helped families recognize that their home language and culture are strengths that should be cultivated at home and in the program. Somewhat fewer programs offered resources to foster DLLs’ learning at home, such as lending libraries (33%) or home-based activities designed to reinforce children’s in-school learning (32%).

Teachers. Almost all lead teachers (91%) across classrooms reported that their site collected information upon enrollment on families’ languages spoken at home, and 80% reported collecting information about the child’s dominant language (i.e., the language the child was most comfortable in). Teachers also reported that they often communicated with families of DLLs in a language those families understood; in the majority of classrooms (61%), the lead teacher reported that they always sent home notes, flyers, educational materials and activities, or announcements to parents in the home language.

Overall, the study’s findings show that many early learning and care programs in California and the DLL families they serve place a high value on bilingualism, tend to communicate in linguistically sensitive ways, and support their young learners in a variety of ways. However, such beneficial beliefs and practices were not as widespread as they could be. The findings particularly highlight linguistically sensitive communication as an important aspect of effective family engagement; the messaging that families receive can and should be tailored to families’ language needs and preferences. The success of the next generation of Californians—and of learners across the country—will depend in part on having a consistent and responsive approach to serving young DLLs and their families. Early learning and care programs should be intentional and systematic about engaging families of DLLs, to fulfill their commitment to giving all young children equitable and supportive learning opportunities.

¹ Barbarin, O. A., Downer, J., Odom, E., & Head, D. (2010). Home-school differences in beliefs, support, and control during public pre-kindergarten and their link to children’s kindergarten readiness. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 25(3), 358–372; De Gaetano, Y. (2007). The role of culture in engaging Latino parents’ involvement in school. *Urban Education*, 42, 145–162; McWayne, C. M., Melzi, G., Schick, A. R., Kennedy, J. K., & Mundt, K. (2013). Defining family engagement among Latino Head Start parents: A mixed-method measurement development study. *Early Childhood Res. Q. Jly*, 28(3), 593–607; Sabol, T. J., Sommer, T. E., Sanchez, A., & Busby, A. K. (2018). A new approach to defining and measuring family engagement in early childhood education programs. *AERA Open*, 4(3), 1–12.

² González, N., Moll, L. C., & Amanti, C. (Eds.). (2006). *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities, and classrooms*. Routledge; Halgunseth, L. C., Peterson, A., Stark, D. R., & Moodie, S. (2009). *Family engagement, diverse families, and early childhood education programs: An integrated review of the literature*. National Association for the Education of Young Children.

³ Espinosa, L., & Crandell, J. (2020). Early learning and care for multilingual and dual language learners ages zero to five. In California Department of Education (Ed.), *Improving education for multilingual and English learner students: Research to practice* (Ch. 4). <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/el/er/improvingmleeducation.asp>; Halgunseth, L., Jia, G., & Barbarin, O. (2013). Family engagement in early childhood programs: Serving families of dual language learners. *California’s best practices for young dual language learners: Research overview papers*, 119–171.



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