

The following is an excerpt from



The Impact of Language Differences on Preschoolers' Challenging Behavior

Staff can build a blueprint to help second language learners gain confidence and skills.

by Rosa Milagros Santos and Michaelene Ostrosky

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Head Start preschool teachers and other early childhood educators frequently observe the children in their care engaged in child-centered learning and playing with peers in very appropriate ways. At other times, these teachers are very concerned when they observe some children engaging in tantrums, being noncompliant, or retreating into isolated activities. These behaviors might be labeled as challenging.

The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign defines challenging behaviors as, "any repeated patterns of behaviors, or perceptions of behavior that interfere with or are at risk of interfering with optimal learning or engagement in pro-social interactions with peers and adults." However, these behaviors are not always what they appear to be, especially for children who come from homes where a language other than English is spoken.

Since the school year started, Adrian, a 4-year-old, has had difficulties adjusting to his new classroom. Every morning, he clings tightly to his mother and cries when she drops him off at school. Throughout the day, he follows one of his teachers around and participates in group activities as long as the teacher is sitting right next to him. He and his family have just moved to the community from another country. His father speaks some English, while his mother does not speak English at all. None of the teachers in the classroom speak the family's home language. Thus, very little communication occurs among the teachers, Adrian, and his mother.

About 27% of the total number of children enrolled in Head Start are from homes where languages other than English are spoken. There are over 140 languages represented in Head Start; Spanish is the most common language other than English (Administration on Children, Youth, and Families 2000). Interestingly, while Head Start personnel speak 93 of the 140 languages, there are still many children in Head Start programs where there are no classroom staff who speak their languages (Administration on Children, Youth, and Families 2000).

Head Start staff who work with families and children who speak a language other than English at home have many questions. Are children's refusals to interact and communicate with others, frequent tantrums, difficulty in attending, and excessive shyness signs of behavior problems, or are these typical behaviors for young English language learners? Are children behaving this way because their home language is different from the language used in the classroom? Do challenging behaviors represent frustration due to an inability to communicate in the early childhood environment? Head Start staff want answers in order to understand children's behavior and how to support their learning so they will succeed in school and in life. These questions, coupled with Head Start demographics, highlight a critical need for all Head Start staff to understand the impact of language on children's behavior and overall development.



Why Is Understanding the Impact of Language So Confusing?

Learning another language is not an easy task for many children and even for adults! For many, acquiring oral skills in the new language may take 2-3 years and an additional 5-7 years to acquire higher-level language skills for academic or other uses (Brice 2000).

The developmental pattern for learning English is fairly consistent for all young children. This developmental pattern includes

four sequential stages (Brice 2002; Tabors 1997):

- the continued use of the home language
- the silent or nonverbal period
- sound experimentation and use of telegraphic speech (e.g., the use of a few content words as an entire utterance, such as when a child responds to, "What can I get for you?" with comments such as "crackers," "book," or "airplane" in the new language)
- productive use of the new language

Although most English language learners progress through these stages, they move through them at different rates. The ease and the pace at which English is learned depends on the child's age, motivation, personality, knowledge of the first language, and exposure to English (August & Hakuta 1997; Brice 2002; Cummins 1991; McLaughlin 1984). Disabilities, including speech delays evidenced in the primary language, may impact the rate of second language acquisition (Roseberry-McKibbin 1995).

Some of the behaviors that children might demonstrate during these language-learning stages, such as playing in isolation and not speaking in either language, may be misinterpreted or mislabeled as a problem. In fact, children are simply beginning to acquire the new language. These behaviors also are similar to those exhibited by children identified with specific language or speech impairments (Brice 2002; Rice, Sell, & Hadley 1991; Tabors 1997). Thus, it is not uncommon for many of these children to be labeled as having challenging behaviors or communication disorders when in fact they are following a fairly typical developmental progression in acquiring another language.



What Behaviors Might Young English Language Learners Exhibit?

Some common behaviors associated with language acquisition that may be misinterpreted as challenging behaviors include not talking, difficulty following directions, difficulty expressing ideas and feelings, and responding to questions inconsistently (Tabors 1997). For example, during the nonverbal period, staff and parents, too, may be very worried about the child's language development. Roseberry-McKibbin (1995) suggests that children typically go through the silent period for about 3-6 months, which may cause great concerns for professionals when children do not seem to be talking. In fact, at this stage, the child is working actively to gather information about how to communicate with peers and adults in the new language.

During this non-verbal phase, researchers also note that children may isolate themselves as they take on the role of spectator or observer (Brice 2002; Tabors 1997). In "safe" environments (such as solitary play), they may rehearse new words they have heard. Although a teacher might interpret this tendency to keep to themselves as problematic, the English language learners are often watching classmates and adults and attempting to figure out how to communicate.

Additionally, Tabors (1997) notes that some children use cognitive and social strategies in acquiring a new language that may be misinterpreted as "challenging behaviors." One strategy is "pretending" to understand interactions or activities, such as large group play, when they do not grasp clearly what is going on. In these situations, English language learners may be inconsistent in responding to directions given by their peers or adults and, therefore, appear to be non-compliant.



How Can I Tell if There Is Really a Behavior Problem?

Assessment is the key to pinpointing a child's strengths and needs and then designing instructional programs that facilitate the child's development. When assessing an English language learner, Head Start staff should look at (1) the child's abilities in terms of cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development (referring to the eight Domains in the Child Outcomes Framework); (2) the child's abilities in his/her first language; and (3) the child's capabilities in his/her second language (Brice 2002; McLean 2002; Ortiz & Maldonado 1986).

These researchers note that because cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development are involved in and affected by the process of second-language acquisition, it is important to assess these areas. Knowing the child's abilities in his or her first language is critical in gaining a complete picture of the child's skills and knowledge, as is gathering information about how a child is progressing in the development of the new language (McLean 2002). Similar to assessing children who are monolingual or speak one primary language, conducting authentic performance-based assessment helps teachers understand how a child

uses language during day-to-day interactions (Brice 2002; McLean 2002).

It is always important for the teaching team to work with the Head Start disabilities coordinator, the mental health consultant, and other specialists to assess any situation where there are concerns about a child's development. These personnel should be well-informed about the impact of language differences on child behavior. For example, in Adrian's situation, his inability to adapt to his new classroom is due in large part to his inability to communicate with others in that environment. Crying is his way of communicating the frustration and anxiety that he is unable to verbalize in the new language.



What Can I Do to Support the Children in My Program?

Head Start teachers and other staff should understand the process by which children learn language, whether it is their home language or a new language. It is also important that they gather information from a variety of sources and not rely on one assessment tool to ensure that they have a complete picture of a child's skill development. Additional sources of information include observations of the child in different settings, interviewing adults who provide care to the child, and collecting a sample of the child's work (e.g., art work, writing, etc.).

Professionals can learn from families about their children and also about the families' cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. With this knowledge and understanding of the children and their families, staff will be better able to distinguish between a challenging behavior and behaviors associated with the acquisition of a new language. They also will be able to effectively support children's overall development. The teaching team will want to individualize instruction, because even two children from the same cultural background might show different patterns and rates in learning English. Thus, it is critical for Adrian's teachers to find means to communicate with his parents and with him to be able to support his transition in the new classroom. Strategies such as using pictures to communicate the classroom routines, rules, and expectations may help alleviate some of Adrian's anxiety about being in the classroom.

The *Program Performance Standards* require that programs provide a supportive and safe environment in which children can use their home language while learning a new language. Teachers can develop a systematic plan to promote meaningful participation and inclusion of English language learners in routines and activities in the classroom. They can build upon what the children know and engage them in situations that at the beginning may not require them to give specific responses (e.g., low-demand situations). For example, teachers might get children more involved in group activities by having them help carry materials such as books, name cards, and musical instruments to circle time. The intentional use of instructional strategies--such as pairing new words with gestures, pictures, and cues; commenting on what a child does; expanding and extending upon children's words; and repeating what children have said--are effective in young children's successful acquisition of a new language.

Collaborating with families and other professionals, creating a supportive early childhood environment, and using evidence-based communication strategies are key ingredients to working effectively with English language learners. Not only will using these strategies help in distinguishing between challenging behaviors and behaviors associated with acquisition of a new language, but it will also enable adults to effectively support young children's overall development.

This article is adapted from the What Works Brief series produced by the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (www.csefel.uiuc.edu). The What Works Brief is a continuing series of short, easy-to-read, "how to" information packets on a variety of evidence-based practices, strategies, and intervention procedures. The Briefs are designed to help teachers and other caregivers support young children's social and emotional development. They include examples and vignettes that illustrate how practical strategies might be used in a variety of early childhood settings and home environments.



See also:

[English Language Learners: Head Start Bulletin #78](#)

"The Impact of Language Differences on Preschoolers' Challenging Behavior." English Language Learners. Head Start Bulletin #78. HHS/ACF/ACYF/HSB. 2005. English.