

Language Modeling With Dual Language Learning Infants



Children who learn two languages from infancy are simultaneous dual language learners. They are learning different language systems at the same time. As they hear the sounds of their languages and interact and listen to adults and older children, infants begin to learn and sort out the sounds and sound patterns associated with each of their languages.

Which language should I use with an infant if I don't speak the language his family uses at home?



- ▶ Speak primarily your own strongest language. Speaking a language you know very well provides even the youngest child with a deeper, fuller language experience.
- ▶ Babies will feel more comfortable if they hear their home language sometimes. Hearing their home language may actually support their English language learning. Caregivers can learn from children's families how to sing the children's favorite songs or lullabies and use important words, such as "milk" and "sleep," in the home languages, even if the caregivers are not fluent in the languages.
- ▶ Caregivers can also play recordings to babies of family members singing and speaking in the home language.

When adults provide children with a safe, warm, predictable environment and engaged, attentive, and responsive language interactions, children have the security and motivation to explore, learn, and grow.

Adults support babies' language development by:

- ▶ **Noticing** what draws a baby's attention—what the baby looks at; what soothes or excites him or her
- ▶ **Extending** a child's actions and interests by entering into the child's play and talking about what the adult is doing (self-talk) or what the baby is doing (parallel-talk) in the adult's own language
- ▶ **Using and playing** with sounds and words from a baby's earliest days by rhyming, singing, and talking to help the child learn the sounds associated with the languages
- ▶ **Learning** from the baby's family members what their child likes and does not like and incorporating that knowledge into their interactions with the child to help increase the child's comfort and engagement

The caregiver in the following example applies all of these principles: noticing, extending, using and playing, and learning from and connecting to family life:

Alvin looks up at a red ball, brought from home, that dangles above his infant seat. His caregiver Nan bats it and the ball swings. Nan says, “You like this red ball, Alvin. Here it is again!” He keeps staring, enjoying the movement. Nan smiles and bats at the ball, saying in a sing-song voice, “Here’s the ball!” as the ball swings above him. She continues for as long as the activity holds Alvin’s attention.

Joint attention, which Alvin and his caregiver share as they both watch the swinging red ball, is a very important aspect of learning any language. Note that:

- ▶ Nan notices that Alvin is interested in the red ball.
- ▶ Nan responds to Alvin’s interest by batting the ball and sharing his joy at watching it swing.
- ▶ When Alvin stares at the red ball’s movement, Nan keeps the interaction going, continuing to swing the ball.
- ▶ Nan uses language to engage Alvin—she talks to him, naming the ball and its color.
- ▶ Nan plays with language and sounds, saying “Here’s the ball” in a sing-song voice and linking her language to the movement of the ball.
- ▶ Alvin is learning that his caregiver cares about what interests him and that language can describe what he sees, while he is also learning more about the sounds of words as well as the words themselves.

The caregiver in the next example also makes connections to the infant’s family life and language:

Four-month-old Janjak is lying in his crib after having a bottle. He hears his caregiver Lina singing a familiar Haitian Creole lullaby that his mother taught to her. Having a bottle, then lying in the crib while hearing the song, signals to Janjak that it is naptime. He begins to sleep. When he wakes, Lina cheerily greets him with her favorite wake-up song in English.



Lina has learned Janjak’s napping routine from his family and has incorporated some of it into his routine in her room. While Lina does not speak Haitian Creole, she has learned a Haitian Creole lullaby, which soothes Janjak. Lina speaks English with Janjak, including her wake-up song. The rhyming song exposes Janjak to the sounds and delights of English, especially since Lina clearly enjoys singing it and joyfully picks him up before changing him and starting new activities.

