

*The Bicultural Inclusion Support Services (BISS) team at GoodRun Solutions has researched the information provided in this publication through the referenced sources. The materials have been developed to supplement BISS strategies.*

## INCLUSION IN PRACTICE

### *Bilingualism – Myths and Facts*

There are some misconceptions surrounding bilingual children and what may or may not confuse them and be good for them. Research shows that the “in at the deep end” approach whereby in order for the child to learn the dominant language (English in this case) they must only speak English and their minority language (often home language) must be discouraged is now discredited.

It is helpful to look at the dominant and the minority language as two whole but separate areas of knowledge. What is important is the quantity and quality of exposure in both languages separately.

Here are some recommendations based on current research about bilingualism to help you understand how children in your service are speaking and relating to people around them.

#### ⦿ **Language development**

Assessing bilingual children’s English development can only be done in the context of their minority or home language. It cannot be assessed with the same measuring tools as other children. First we must look at the quantity and quality of exposure of each language.

How much of which language at home and by whom?

How much interaction with adults and children?

How long and how often are they in the dominant language setting?

- ⦿ Research shows that on the whole, early *simultaneous* language acquisition in bilingual children reach language goals at similar stages to other children
- ⦿ Where the minority language is only spoken at home, expect a “silent” period of language absorption (passive knowledge) before the child uses the language actively (productive knowledge)

#### ⦿ **Cultural Identity**

It is essential for children’s identity and interdependence with others to maintain a strong relationship with the language and culture of their family. Very young children who spend large amounts of time in the dominant culture in a child care setting, for example, may have a reduced cultural and emotional attachment to their family. It is recommended that the minority language is maintained at home to assist in the formation of the child’s identity and self-image, supporting their sense of belonging.

### ⦿ **Linguistic competence**

In order for both languages to flourish and maximise their growth and development, it is recommended that the minority language at home mirrors linguistic development in the dominant language. Early childhood professionals and families should share information on how language and social interaction are being introduced to the child in the different environments and aim to support the use of social formula (e.g. taking turns) in both languages with similar activities. This will enhance the development of the dominant and minority language.

### ⦿ **Mixing the languages**

Despite the fact that some mixing of language can occur for children between 2 – 3 years of age, this is normal. Children are extremely competent in separating two or more languages. Their cognitive ability equips them with metalinguistic knowledge (knowledge about language systems). There are a number of different approaches that assist the correct cognitive “filing” of each language. Two of the main methodologies are:

#### ⦿ Single-parent, single language:

If one parent is a native English speaker, he/she should only speak to the child in English at all times. If the other parent speaks the minority language, he/she should speak only the minority language to the child at all times. This simultaneous learning of languages has a complementary effect on the child linguistically.

#### ⦿ Minority language at home, dominant language in care and education settings:

Where both parents speak the minority language, this should be maintained by both parents at home. This is particularly true if the children are attending child care service in the dominant language – English.

The main aim of both these strategies is to provide consistent use of the language in particular settings. How these settings are defined can vary and should be based on the natural composition of the child’s environment. To minimise confusion it is encouraged to maintain a structure of ‘language use’ once it has been established.

## **References**

- ⦿ ‘Raising Bilingual Children: Common Parental Concerns and Current Research’ Kendall King and Lyn Fogle, Georgetown University. CAL Digest April 2006
- ⦿ Bilingual Families Perth Website: [www.geocities.com/bilingualfamilies/bilingualism.html](http://www.geocities.com/bilingualfamilies/bilingualism.html)
- ⦿ ‘Preparing the ground for partnership. Exploring quality assurance for Aboriginal Child Care’. Kathryn Priest. Literature Review and Background Paper for the Department of Families and Community Services. Australian Government. December 2005