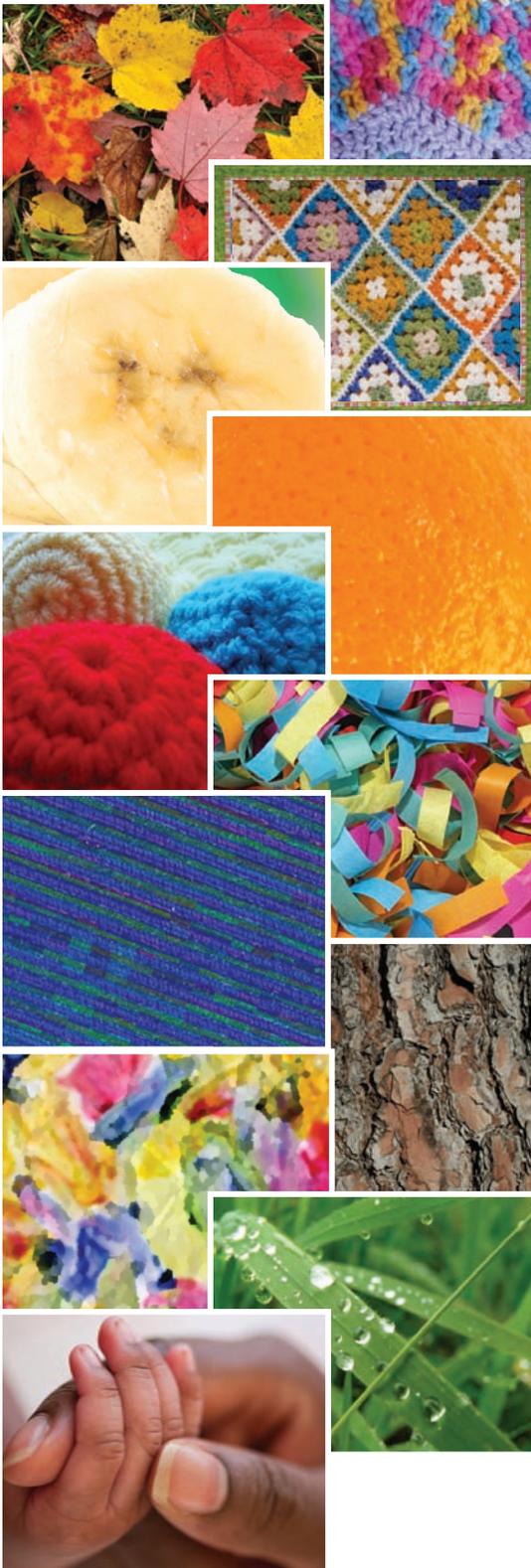




## Developmentally Appropriate Practice for Infants and Toddlers



# Enhancing Practice with Infants and Toddlers from Diverse Language and Cultural Backgrounds

Karen N. Nemeth and Valeria Erdosi

On Meili's first day at the center, her mother carries the 18-month-old into the classroom, whispering in Mandarin to the little girl. As she sets Meili down, the mom nervously smiles and nods to the teacher, then walks out the door. Not surprisingly, little Meili starts to cry. She runs after her mother, but the door has already closed. The adults try to comfort and distract Meili, but she doesn't understand a word they say. Meili has no idea when or if her mother will ever be back.



Photo courtesy of the authors

**M**any infants and toddlers whose families speak languages other than English have similar experiences when entering early childhood programs. While you think about Meili's stressful experience, imagine also what her mother must feel. She will be thinking of her daughter's desperate cries all day. When she returns to pick Meili up, the mother's lack of English skills will make

it impossible for her to get information about how her daughter fared that first scary day. But what if this scenario were approached in a different way?

At The King's Daughters Day School, in Plainfield, New Jersey, Meili, a newcomer to the infant/toddler room, was greeted with a few comforting words in Mandarin, even though the teachers speak mostly English. The teachers had

**Karen N. Nemeth**, EdM, is an author and the founder of Language Castle, LLC, offering consulting and professional development on supporting dual language learners in early childhood education. She is the author of *Basics of Supporting Dual Language Learners: An Introduction for Educators of Children from Birth through Age 8*, published by NAEYC. Karen@LanguageCastle.com

**Valeria Erdosi**, MS, is the executive director of The King's Daughters Day School, in Plainfield, New Jersey. She is a founding member of the New Jersey Coalition of Infant/Toddler Educators and a well-known professional development provider.



asked Meili's parents about a few of her favorite songs so they could use them to help Meili feel more welcome and comfortable in her new surroundings. And when Meili's mother returned to pick up her daughter, a teacher showed her some digital photos of Meili happily playing during the day. A few simple steps can make all the difference in the experiences of children and families who bring different languages to infant and toddler care.

As infant/toddler programs encounter growing diversity, they need to reenvision the impact they have on children and families in all areas of practice, from recruiting new enrollees to stocking classrooms to changing the ways adults interact with children and families with different languages and from different cultures. What happens on the first day can set the stage for a family's involvement in a program.

The director and staff at The King's Daughters Day School, an NAEYC-Accredited early childhood program, take that responsibility very seriously. As one of the oldest child development programs in the United States (established in 1906), it holds a respected position in the small but diverse city of Plainfield. (Learn more about the center at [www.thekingsdaughtersdayschool.org/aboutus/history.html](http://www.thekingsdaughtersdayschool.org/aboutus/history.html).) The day school serves children from infancy through

**Strengthening the bond between parent and child requires continual support of the home language.**

school age, and there are 55 children in its five classrooms for infants and toddlers who can walk. At this writing, 60 percent of these children come from families with first languages other than English, including Spanish, Mandarin, Urdu, and indigenous South American dialects.

When an infant is separated from his parents and left in a new place, in the care of unfamiliar adults who speak a different language, all kinds of adjustments are necessary. A new language is only part of the picture. It is important to remember that "language is a cognitive process that is influenced by all domains of development, including motor, social, and emotional. Language acquisition is also influenced by the context in which the child grows, including family, the community, and the culture in which he or she lives" (Fort & Stechuk 2008, 24). Effective, developmentally appropriate strategies for supporting infants and toddlers who are dual language learners take into account all of these factors.

The home language is a child's connection to the love, nurturing, and lessons learned in the family context. Strengthening the bond between parent and child requires continual support of the home language. There are also cognitive advantages to building the home language while



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the child learns English. Research demonstrates that children who grow up bilingual have advanced self-regulation skills and advanced metalinguistic skills (Yoshida 2008). Growing up with two languages helps a child better understand how language works in general because she has to be more conscious of the features and rules of each of her languages. This understanding makes children more successful as language learners.

Parents and teachers need to share a common understanding and vision for rearing children with all the advantages of the families' rich cultural and linguistic heritage while also exposing the children to English (Notari-Syverson 2006). Teachers, home visitors, family child care monitors, college professors, program directors, trainers, nannies, consultants, therapists, early intervention providers, pediatricians, and social workers need strategies to support the development of very young children with unique cultural traditions in bilingual environments (Nemeth 2012).

All infants and toddlers need experiences that nurture, support, and teach their home language and culture, because research shows that this foundation is an important contributor to children's potential success in learning English. Even for infants, full immersion in an English-only program that reduces their experiences in their home language does not offer learning or developmental advantages (August & Shanahan 2006). Defining a commitment to addressing the language needs of each child in the program must be a team effort involving everyone who works or volunteers at the center, beginning with the leader or director. The developmentally appropriate strategies in this article address these key points.

## Building connections with new children and families

Every building needs a good foundation. The best way to build strong and mutually beneficial relationships with new and diverse families is to lay the foundation before those families enter the program. One way to get started is to build in time for parents to come to the program with their child for a few hours before leaving the child on a regular basis. The King's Daughters Day School asks parents to spend three mornings in the program with their child before the child officially starts. Here are some other ways to connect with diverse families.

**Reach out to diverse families in the community.** Letting families know that your program is prepared to welcome different languages and cultures is good for business. It also sets the stage for a positive relationship with each potential client. The King's Daughters Day School prints fliers in English and Spanish and displays them at cultural festivals, public library branches, and other public locations.

**Present a welcoming first impression that celebrates diversity.** To help families feel they have chosen the right program, pictures and languages on signs and displays should reflect the languages and cultures of the community. The school lines its driveway with small signs that say hello in different languages. Its entry hall displays photos of the diverse children who attend. Information for families is trimmed to as few words as possible, then translated into two or more languages, as the population requires.

**Prepare before the child starts in your program.** When you get to know each new family, be sure to learn exactly what language and dialect the family speaks at home. This will help you add appropriate classroom materials so the child sees himself reflected in the books, displays, and toys. Parents will also be more at ease if they see their language and some familiar images when they drop off their child on the first day. This can be a little difficult, but it evolves over time as families and staff build relationships.

A new child's primary caregiver should learn at least a few words in the family's home language before the child starts. Some programs send home a list of 10 to 15 key words and ask parents to make an audio recording in their home language or spell the words phonetically. If this does not work out, search online for translations. *Hello, up, down, change, diaper, clean, eat, juice, bottle, gentle, yes, no, more, hurt, mommy, daddy, outside, shoes, coat, and buckle* might be some words for your list. Knowing these words means that the teacher can say them to the child and recognize them if the child tries to communicate in his home language.

Help the family start in your program with confidence. Provide a list of items they should send in with their child—

**The best way to build strong and mutually beneficial relationships with new and diverse families is to begin to lay the foundation before those families enter the program.**



Courtesy of the authors

## Practicing with Chopsticks

At The King's Daughters Day School, teachers plan a number of activities around the use of chopsticks. This is a wonderful example of helping all children become comfortable with a utensil that is commonplace in some cultures yet unheard of in others. All children benefit from practicing fine motor skills with chopsticks, pinching them to pick up small items and later using them to eat. Toddlers can easily use chopsticks if the sticks are attached at the top with small rubber bands. Other utensils from different cultures, such as a *tostonera* (a plantain press, for making *tostones*) from Cuba, help toddlers build skills and cultural awareness at the school.



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Have diverse faces and skin colors in the doll area, the puzzle rack, and the small toy shelf. Represent familiar ethnic foods and cooking tools or other artifacts in the kitchen area. Labels in key areas of the room should have the words in the languages the children use. Even better, post phonetic spellings of key words in the different locations to remind teachers how to talk about play using the children's home languages.

### Linguistically and culturally appropriate practices

When teachers care for children who speak different languages they must think deeply and intentionally about how they use language with infants in general. Because the home language is so important to each child's family

strength, identity development, and language/literacy learning, teachers have to learn how to support both the home language and some English learning. Here are some developmentally appropriate strategies to support all of these aspects of multilingual learning.

**Foster a close teacher-child relationship.** With different languages in an infant/toddler group, it is especially important that each child have a primary caregiver. Helping a child to navigate the learning of two or more languages requires the teacher to have a close relationship and a deep understanding of the infant or toddler. The teacher needs to be expert at reading the child's nonverbal signals, and the child has to be close enough to the teacher to understand the teacher's nonverbal signals as well.

**Schedule home language and English use around routines.** Be clear about separating the use of the two languages in a predictable way. Plan how and when you will use the child's language and how and when you will use English each day. Some programs use English during play

represent the items by photos to make sure the message is clear. Take the family on a tour of the center so the parents, other family members, and the child will feel at home.

**Give a special welcome on the first day.** It is most important to pause and focus on welcoming a new family with uncertain English skills, no matter how hectic sign-in time is. Say hello in the family's language, and be sure to pronounce the child's name correctly. Take a moment to hold the child and look at her. Does she have a runny nose you need to ask about? Does she appear sleepy or hungry? With a little extra effort and some nonverbal communication, a teacher can make important connections with the child and the parents. The teacher can demonstrate a successful drop-off experience—not too abrupt and not too drawn out. This is much easier to achieve if a parent or other family member has spent a few mornings in the program. A happy drop-off eliminates the infant's and family member's anxiety and the loneliness of not being able to communicate.

**Equip the environment for diverse infants and toddlers.** Representing each child's language and culture throughout the room is consistent with developmentally appropriate practice. This is important for children's self-esteem, and exposure to images from diverse cultures is valuable for all children. Visit the public library to find board books in the languages you need. Create posters using photos of the children's recognizable surroundings, such as their homes and families, the corner grocery, or the local park.

**With a little extra effort and some non-verbal communication, a teacher can make important connections with the child and the parents.**

and use home languages during meals and snacks. Some programs use one language in the morning and the other in the afternoon. Even if a teacher is not fluent enough in the child's language to be able to devote half the day to its use, it is still important for him to learn key words—for example, the vocabulary needed to always use the home language at changing time and for morning greeting.

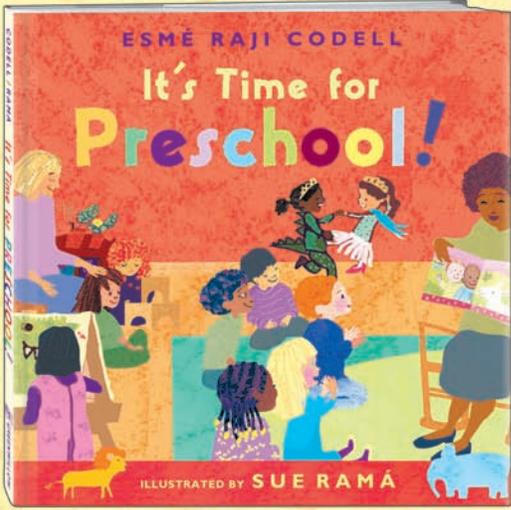
**Stick with one language at a time.** When you say a word in two languages, a child usually focuses on one language or the other. Instead, rely on tone of voice, body language, pictures, gestures, and props to make sure the child understands the words in the language you are using.

Staff at The King's Daughters Day School often use American Sign Language (ASL) as a gestural support to enhance spoken language. Teachers learn the signs from the many websites, books, and DVDs (available commercially and in libraries) that feature baby sign language. The advantage of using ASL signs is that one teacher's gesture for *eat* or *more* or *drink* is the same as the next teacher's, so the child can understand and use the same signs no matter where she is—in the program or beyond (Goodwyn, Acredolo, & Brown 2000). As a child tries to make sense of the words you are saying about changing his diaper, signing *change*

helps him see the links between the English words and the home language words connected to the same activity.

**Specialize in rich home language experiences.** When an adult is fluent in the home language of a child, he should plan times to use that language—and then use it with all the richness and interest that we know is critical to building early language and literacy. In some classrooms, bilingual staff use their other language only to manage the behavior of the young dual language learners, and all of the “teaching” occurs in English. Instead, staff should use their other languages in positive, engaging ways. Research shows that a strong foundation in the home language contributes to the successful acquisition of English (August & Shanahan 2006). The better you support the home language, the more you are building a foundation for effective learning of English.

**Be creative and imaginative.** If a primary caregiver does not speak a child's home language, she can still support it by bringing in CDs (don't be afraid to ask parents) and singing songs in the language. Try using simple recorded stories or apps for smartphones or tablets that tell stories in different languages. It is essential to interact with the infant or toddler while listening to and watching



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media. Hold the child in your lap and repeat the interesting words and comment on the pictures. Welcome classroom volunteers—family members or community helpers—to spend time with the children. (If you do so, first give the volunteers a little training about how you expect them to interact with the infants and toddlers. See “Provide an Orientation for Classroom Volunteers.”)

Based on the research of Patricia Kuhl (2010), we know that infants as young as 6 to 8 months can benefit from just a few hours a week of language support if it is delivered in person by a nurturing and familiar visitor. Kuhl’s research shows that if that weekly language interaction is replaced by video or audio recordings of the same language, infants in that 6-to-8-month age range learn none of the language. With infants and toddlers, the only effective way to use televised or recorded language is for the adult to use it with the child or for the adult to use it for herself, as a tool to learn the words she can use with the child.

**Support English.** A solid foundation in language and preliteracy skills is critical for the development and school readiness of every child. What is important is that each young child grow, learn, and play every day in an environment filled with interesting words, one-on-one nurturing interactions, expression, wonder, discovery, and patience. In the first three years, it is possible that having this environment completely in a non-English language will help the later learning of English (August & Shanahan 2006). Having this environment almost entirely in English does not make English learning quicker or better in the long run (August & Shanahan 2006). Exposing young dual language learners to

English takes advantage of the brain’s early language-learning openness. Still, remember that much of what a child knows has been stored in his brain in his home language. You may use a number of strategies to support his learning of English, but that doesn’t mean he will know the same concepts in English if he first learned them in, say, a Spanish-speaking environment. For example, a child who has a pet cat at home will learn words and concepts about that cat—its care and habits—in her home language. If there are pet fish in the classroom, she may learn more about fish in English. The child might learn some related concepts, like eating and sleeping, in both languages, in both contexts. Other words and ideas may be picked up in one language but not yet transferred to the other language.

It is best not to turn language learning into a lesson. Just as we support a child’s home language development by following her interests and engaging with her in exploring, repeating, and pretending, so we provide the same kinds of supports for the new language. Establishing communication skills is paramount in the first three years, as the child learns to get his needs met. Words add meaning to that communication as the child develops skills in one or more languages. Infant/toddler teachers need to share the experiences of the children in the here-and-now rather than preparing in advance activities or vocabulary lists.

### Working effectively with diverse families

Working with parents is one of the most important responsibilities of an infant/toddler teacher. When the parents don’t speak your language, it is harder to build an effective partnership. As populations change and diversity grows in all areas of the country, strategies for overcoming this obstacle are vital for everyone who works with infants and toddlers. Strategies that help you interact with non-English-speaking parents also help improve your communication with all families.

### Provide an Orientation for Classroom Volunteers

When parents or other community members who speak a second language decide to volunteer in the classroom, it is important to provide an orientation session. They may never have seen a working infant/toddler classroom before. They need guidance about the value of using their home language to talk, describe, ask questions, read, sing, and pretend with the children.

**Offer activities to involve diverse parents—think outside the box.** The King's Daughters Day School offers families several options to participate, so the program can be responsive to families' schedules. Families may participate in planning the annual international festival, or they may bring some of their talents into the classroom, like writing Chinese characters for classroom labels.

Involving parents in the program offers multiple benefits: (a) parents see teachers model interactions and activities that can benefit their child; (b) teachers see parents and children interact and can offer support as needed; (c) teachers can learn to use some of the same strategies that a child's family uses for approaching, comforting, caregiving, and interacting; and (d) parent involvement supports family strength and the parents' bond with the child—knowing and understanding what the child does all day helps parents feel confident and connected.

Some parents may prefer to help outside of the classroom—for example, making photocopies or cleaning toys or making furniture for the program. Offering options like these makes it more likely that you will find a way for every parent to get involved in the program and you will get to know those parents.

Another tip for bringing parents into the program is to offer them something they feel they need, such as English as a second language classes, cultural cooking groups, or workshops on applying for jobs. These types of services can be more effective than offering parents something

you think they need, such as a workshop on parenting. If you offer parent workshops and rarely get enough parents to attend, it's time to broaden your thinking.

**Create a family area.** Create a welcoming area that encourages families to stop and sit a while, so they have time to talk to the teachers and each other. Some comfortable chairs, a pot of coffee and some cookies, and decorations related to the children's activities can create that kind of atmosphere. This may seem like a simple idea, but it actually is a very effective strategy in diverse programs because it encourages parents to slow down and get comfortable with the program, staff, and other families. Learning to communicate across language barriers takes a lot of time—time spent together—and plenty of opportunities to interact in pleasant, low-pressure situations to build the kind of rapport needed when you don't speak the same language as the family. Families rushing in and out to drop off or pick up their children, or families that only interact

## Demonstrate Interactive Reading

Reading to infants and toddlers may not come naturally to all parents. They may not see the point in reading to children who do not yet talk. They may lack confidence in their own reading abilities. Or they may not know or remember how much fun active, interactive reading can be. Programs need to show parents how to read and tell stories with their young children. To make it easier for parents who don't speak your language, make a brief developmentally appropriate reading video to post on a site such as [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) or the program's website. Staff at The King's Daughters Day School provide a workshop to demonstrate to all parents how to read stories that capture their child's attention and build language skills.

with staff during stressful times such as reminders about overdue bills or parent-teacher conferences, are less likely to overcome communication difficulties.

**Support home literacy practices.** This is one of infant/toddler teachers' most important strategies for involving parents in their children's learning! When programs do not have staff who speak the languages needed to read to all the children, it is particularly important to help families build home literacy practices. Establish a classroom lending library of age-appropriate books—wordless, bilingual, or written in the families' languages. Encourage families to bring in books in their home language to share. If the books are hard to find in the United States, families might obtain them during visits to or from relatives or on vacations. Two sources for books and materials in a variety of languages are [www.languagelizard.com](http://www.languagelizard.com) and [www.chinasprout.com](http://www.chinasprout.com).

## Handling difficult conversations across a language barrier

A number of challenging topics may come up in parent-teacher meetings, so it is best to establish a positive rapport with families before the need arises for a difficult conversation. Developing a trusting relationship across a language barrier takes a bit of extra effort. Sharing pictures and videos of their child's activities and accomplishments can help you and the parents begin to bond. The more time you spend together, the easier it will be to understand each other and to use nonverbal cues effectively.

**Establish a classroom lending library of age-appropriate books—wordless, bilingual, or written in the families' languages.**

**Have an interpreter on hand.** Ideally, when the time comes for an important conversation, a certified interpreter should be present. When this is not possible, ask a trusted staff member or a member of the family to help. Sometimes it is tempting to use another child in the family to interpret. Unless there is an emergency and no other choice, avoid this option, because this may place undue pressure on the other child, who may not have the maturity or fluency to interpret complex information. Programs need to find qualified staff who are bilingual, even if such teachers are not in every room where children speak their language. When staff at The King's Daughters Day School encounter an unfamiliar language, they seek help from community organizations and agencies, such as the local child care resource and referral agency or nearby communities of faith, to ensure that they are doing everything possible to communicate effectively with every parent. Remind conference participants about confidentiality.

**Plan ahead.** Prepare a message board with key phrases in English and in the family's home language, so that you

**Sharing pictures and videos of their child's activities and accomplishments can help you and the parents begin to bond.**

and the child's family members can point to the items you want to communicate. Photographs of the child that show examples of the behavior or situation that led to the conversation may help parents understand what you are trying to say about

their child. Google Translate is an online tool that lets you type your message and hear it spoken in another language. However, a computerized translation system may use words that are more applicable to businesses or tourism and not technically accurate for an early childhood discussion, so do not depend on it for everything. Ask the parents for permission to record your meeting so you can ask an interpreter to clarify what was said, even if the interpreter cannot be present during the initial meeting. This also allows you to make additional notes about the conversation and to notice any areas that did not seem clear and need to be addressed further.

**Be aware of personal or cultural issues.** Keep in mind that there may be personal and/or cultural differences with regard to holding a parent-teacher meeting. Some cultures give less attention to on-time arrivals than others. Some parents may bring their whole family to a meeting with the teacher, and others may be so embarrassed that they won't



even tell their family about the meeting. Do not assume that the parents will be comforted by a hug or by taking their hand. It is usually best to ask first.

**Keep the message clear and brief.** One of the hardest yet most effective strategies for holding conferences with parents who speak other languages is to say a lot less than you usually do. Prepare in advance by carefully reducing your messages to only the most critical and factual information. This makes it easier for translation and interpretation and more likely that the parents will come away with some real understanding. If you need to ask the family to do something, such as pick up their child earlier or take the child to the doctor or seek an evaluation, try to state that goal as simply and clearly as possible, then stick to a very few clear observations to explain your concerns.

**Allow time to digest the information.** Difficult messages are never easy to hear. They can be even more challenging for people who are not sure they understand everything you say and are not sure how to ask important questions. For these reasons, it may be best to plan the conversation over two meetings, allowing time for the family to absorb and think about the information. Then the parties can get back together to plan ways to resolve the issue. Keep in mind that a parent-teacher conference is a two-way conversation, not a lecture. Leave enough time for the parents to ask questions before asking them to take action.

**Resolve differences based on language or cultural issues.** As well as being culture based, some childrearing differences "may result from a family tradition, an individual experience, specific kinds of training, and philosophical ideals" (Gonzalez-Mena 2009). It is not essential that you know every cultural belief and practice for each group represented in your care. Rather, it is important that you get to know each family and what is important to them.

A family enrolls their 2-year-old in an early childhood program. The director places him in the older toddler classroom, where he seems to adjust well. The mother spends several hours in the room with him on the first day. On the second day, and for a number of days thereafter, the mother leaves the child but returns at lunch-time to spoon-feed him his entire meal.

The teacher has a strong negative reaction to the child's being fed. She feels it is critical for a 2-year-old to practice self-help skills, and she voices her reservations to the parents. The parents stand their ground, explaining that in their culture, feeding a young child is a sign of love and caring.

Over time, the teacher and parents learn to listen to each other. Everyone takes a step back and arrives at a compromise: the parents will gradually reduce the number of days a week they arrange to feed their son, and the teacher will help the family find activities that the child can use to develop self-help skills in other ways.

## Conclusion

It may take practice to become comfortable with varied cultural and familial practices—especially the ones that seem counterproductive to you. A strong sense of self-awareness will help you detect whether you are really looking out for a child's best interests or whether you are just trying to make the family do things your way. Mutual respect between you and the children's families will help you know and understand them as individuals and as family units, including all the unique characteristics and cultural practices that make them who they are. Knowing the child, his interests, his family context, his culture, and his language is important in implementing developmentally appropriate practice.

Fort and Stechuk remind us that young children need support for their home language for social-emotional reasons as well as for cognitive reasons: "In a place where no one speaks the child's language and knows very little of his culture, a child could feel lost, misunderstood, and alienated" (2008, 24). Early care and education professionals can use developmentally appropriate practices that encompass a child's social and emotional needs in the context of facilitating the development of both English and the home language. According to Rebecca Parlakian, "Social-emotional skills are an integral part of school

readiness because they give very young children the skills they need to communicate, cooperate, and cope in new environments" (2004, 39). Infant/toddler teachers can develop skills, learn strategies, and find resources that greatly enhance their success with diverse children and families. It may take extra work, but the benefits can last a lifetime.

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