

Guidance notes for working with children who are bilingual

“Bilingualism is an asset. And the first language has a continuing and significant role in identity, learning and the acquisition of additional languages”

(Supporting children learning EAL: Guidance for practitioners in the EYFS)

Useful definitions

What is bilingualism?

“In England the term is currently used to refer to pupils who live in two languages, who have access to, or need to use two or more languages at home and at school. It does not mean that they have fluency in both language or that they are competent and literate in both languages”

(Shell 1992: adopted by London borough of Tower Hamlets, 1992)

● **Simultaneous bilingualism**

Learning 2 languages from birth at the same time eg. learning Punjabi and English together.

● **Sequential bilingualism**

learning one language at home and another later eg. Bangla at home, English in the setting.

● **Children who are new to the UK and new to English.**

Remember that in the early stages of learning English:

- There can be a silent period before children feel confident to use English. This could last up to a couple of months.
- Children echo single words and short phrases.
- “Chunking”- using language with meaning “mummy come soon” or “my turn”.
- Children join in with songs and refrains in stories.
- Children will understand more than they can say.
- At first children use one-word utterances, mostly nouns to question, respond and name.
- They will then develop phrases of 2-3 words.
- They then extend phrases or simple sentences using nouns, verbs and adjectives.
- This will then lead to longer sentences and oral competence, with some errors still occurring.

When learning a new language it can take children:

- 2 years to develop basic interpersonal communication skills and carry on a conversation (Cummins 1984).
- 5-7 years to think in the second language and acquire a full range of literacy skills needed to cope with the demands of GCSEs (Hall 1995) based on Cummins CALP 1984.

It is essential that we learn as much as possible from the family about the child’s language acquisition. Please use the conversation prompts sheet to obtain this information during your conversations with parents.