

FACTS and TIPS

Young Dual Language Learners (Birth through 5 years)



Topic # 5.4 Culturally & Linguistically Responsive Assessment Practices for Determining Eligibility to Special Education



FACT #1: Use of bilingual/bicultural evaluators, practitioners, or interpreters is essential when assessing young dual language learners. Because it is imperative that assessment information be collected in all of the children's languages, programs will want to incorporate bilingual and bicultural professionals on their assessment teams. Ideally, bilingual practitioners or evaluators will help conduct the assessments. However, many programs do not have access to trained and qualified bilingual/bicultural speech/language clinicians, early childhood special education teachers or other potential evaluators so a trained interpreter can be utilized to assist with children's evaluations. Interpreters can help assessors understand children's language, cognitive, and social-emotional skills during play-based assessments as well as help interpret test items and children's responses during more formalized testing situations. Interpreters can also help gather important information during parent interviews and help clinicians interpret children's language samples. It will be very important to provide potential interpreters with training regarding the special education evaluation process, special education terminology, and Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) in order for interpreters to be able to accurately interpret during assessments and IEP meetings.

FACT #2: *Alternative and/or informal assessment measures are critical for obtaining accurate assessment information about dual language learners.* Practitioners and evaluators are faced with enormous challenges in obtaining valid and reliable assessment information on dual language learners, birth-5, when using norm-referenced and standardized assessment instruments. The lack of appropriate norming samples, literal translation of test items, cultural biases, unfamiliar testing procedures, and language used for testing are some of the most often cited reasons for the inadequacy of using these traditional assessment tools with young dual language learners (Castro, et al, 2011; Espinosa, 2010, Frede & Garcia, 2010; Genesee, et al, 2004; Paradis, et al, 2011). For this reason, experts recommend that early childhood professionals rely more heavily on informal and alternative forms of assessing young dual language learners such as play-based observations, parent interviews, language samples, portfolios, child narratives, and curriculum-based measures (Castro, et al, 2011; Espinosa, 2010, Frede & Garcia, 2010; Paradis, et al, 2011). When assessing children for language impairments, it has been suggested that evaluators emphasize "language-general over language-specific measures", especially utilizing those measures that require a "cognitive component" which may tap into children's overall language capacities (Paradis, et al, 2011, p.221).

FACT #3: *Test results need to be interpreted with great caution when using standardized norm-referenced assessment instruments with young dual language learners.* It is imperative that evaluators and practitioners carefully examine the norming sample and procedures of any instrument they use with dual language learners to determine if it is specifically norm-referenced for children of the language groups they represent. For example, if an instrument is standardized on children using U.S. census data that means that the majority of the children in the norming sample are *monolingual* speakers. Dual language learners who are assessed with that instrument will basically be compared with monolingual children, not with dual language learner peers of their specific language group. In addition, test items that are translated literally or test constructs that are not altered according to the language and cultural group of the children being assessed will not necessarily measure what the test purports to measure. Finally, anytime a test item is interpreted in the child's home language by an interpreter throughout the testing period, the validity of the test is altered. This does not mean that practitioners or evaluators should never use norm-referenced assessment tools with young dual language learners in order to gain information about what children are able to do or not do. However, it does mean that assessors need to be aware of the limitations of the assessment instruments they use and that *those limitations and the questionable validity of their evaluation must be officially reported in the assessment results of children who are dual language learners.* It is also suggested that evaluators indicate in their report that children's performance on these measures most likely *underestimates* their true abilities.

Tips Related to Diagnostic Assessment

- ❖ When tests are unavailable in children's home language, consider "informal examination" of that language via spontaneous language samples that are "analyzed for certain morphosyntactic structures known to be specifically delayed with language impairment" (Paradis, et al, 2011; Gutiérrez-Clellen, et al, 2006). This requires that either a practitioner or interpreter who is

bilingual and bicultural be available to record, transcribe, and analyze the language sample to informally assess whether or not it is age-appropriate. Programs might also consider audio and/or videotaping children using their home language in their natural environments. A bilingual/bicultural interpreter could help clinicians and practitioners analyze the results.

- ❖ Parent questionnaires conducted with bilingual/bicultural interpreters regarding children's home language development have been found to yield moderate or higher results for discriminating between children with typical and impaired language development (Paradis, et al, 2011). Paradis, et al (2011) recommend using parent questionnaires which include information regarding early milestones, current home language abilities, current behavior, current activity preferences, and family history as part of a battery of assessment tools to gather information on home language development.
- ❖ Be careful when administering and interpreting vocabulary tests with young dual language learners as children will invariably look delayed in both languages (Espinosa, 2010). Consider alternative scoring for these tests which combines children's vocabulary knowledge in both languages to yield a "conceptual vocabulary" score (Paradis, et al, 2011). Conceptual vocabulary includes the words children know across all of their languages after translated equivalent words are subtracted. Studies have shown that dual language learners often score at the same level or higher as monolingual speakers when total conceptual vocabulary is considered (Bedore, et al, 2005; Paradis, et al, 2011).
- ❖ Make sure that all test scores are interpreted within the context of children's dual language learning history. Factors such as when and how children have been exposed to both their home language and to English are critical. This includes the quantity and quality of input in both languages over time, the presence or absence of language scaffolding in English if the child is receiving programming in English, the presence or absence of home language support if the child is receiving programming in English, etc.
- ❖ Consider offering ongoing training and technical assistance on special education terminology, the IEP process, and assessment protocol to interpreters. Remember, interpreting and translating is involves more than the literal translation of words and sentences into another language. Interpreters need to be able to convey the meaning of terms and the process which they are often not able to do by simply translating a word or concept. The field of special education uses very technical, legal terminology that practitioners take years of study to learn and understand. Interpreters cannot simply "pick up" the meaning of all of these technical terms and processes without some professional development.
- ❖ Develop glossaries of commonly used special education terms and simple informational handouts on the IEP process for interpreters to study before having them become involved in the assessment process. Allow time for special educators to review terminology and assessment protocol with interpreters before meeting with children and families.



Connecting with Families



- ❖ Bilingual/bicultural professionals will play a key role in connecting with families *before, during, and after* the assessment process to ensure that parents understand every step of the way. It is difficult for any parent to understand the special education process that is involved around assessing children for a potential disability. Imagine how much more difficult it is for parents who speak little to no English and who may have a different cultural context for understanding the term "disability". In many cultures, the term "disability" is immediately equated with a "cognitive disability" or "mental retardation"-- even if the child is found to have a disability that is solely related to speech/language, motor skills, or emotional-behavioral skills. In addition, parents or caregivers of other cultures may have beliefs of what will happen or become of their child if found to have a disability based on the beliefs and practices of their culture of origin. For some families these beliefs entail their child being excluded from society and school with no hope of a productive or happy future. This can cause great anxiety and fear for parents when their child is being assessed for special education services. This can also lead to the misrepresentation of their child's abilities. Remember to:
 - ✓ Explain the process every step of the way in person or via the telephone using parents' strongest language—not just through the formal IEP written process (even if translated).
 - ✓ Explain what you are assessing and why.
 - ✓ Ask parents to convey back to you what they have understood so that any misunderstandings can be corrected.
 - ✓ Explain to parents that if their child is found to have a disability and is found to be eligible for special education services what that may look like in terms of their child's day. How may it affect their child's well-being and future?
 - ✓ Ask parents what they think of when they hear the term "disability". Ask them about their beliefs, values, and fears for their child. Discuss how this may or may not be different in the U.S.
 - ✓ Make sure parents fully understand their rights regarding the evaluation process including if their child is found to have a disability.
- ❖ Explaining the assessment process to parents and getting information on their child's development will take more time than with families whose first language is English. Taking the extra time that is required to mediate linguistic and cultural differences with families of children who are dual language learners is essential, however, if programs are to obtain accurate assessment findings. Programs will need to plan accordingly.

TOPICS #5.3 & 5.4
Culturally & Linguistically Responsive Practices
for Determining Eligibility to Special Education

References and Resources

- Bardige, B. & Bardige, M.K. (2008). *Talk to me baby! Supporting language development in the first three years*. Washington, DC: Zero to Three.
- Bedore, L., Peña, E., García, M. & Cortez, C. (2005). Conceptual versus monolingual scoring: When does it make a difference? *Language, Speech and Hearing Services in Schools*, 36, 188-200.
- Castro, D., Ayankoya, B., & Kasprzak, C. (2011). *New voice, nuevas voces: Guide to cultural & linguistic diversity in early childhood*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing, Inc.
- DEC Position Statement (2010). *Responsiveness to ALL Children, Families, and Professionals: Integrating Cultural and Linguistic Diversity into Policy and Practice*. Missoula, MT: Division for Early Childhood.
- Espinosa, L. (2008). *Challenging common myths about young English language learners*. Foundation for Child Development Policy Brief No. Eight. Available online at <http://www.fcd-us.org/sites/default/files/MythsOfTeachingELLsEspinosa.pdf>
- Espinosa, L. (2010). *Getting it right for young children from diverse backgrounds*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc.
- García, E. & Frede, E. (Eds.), (2010). *Young English language learners: current research and emerging directions for practice and policy*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Gutiérrez-Clellan, V. Restrepo, A. & Simon-Cerrejido, G. (2006). Evaluating the discriminant accuracy of a grammatical measure with Spanish-speaking children. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 49, 1209-1223.
- NAEYC (2009). *Where we stand on assessing young English language learners*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- NAEYC (2009). *Where we stand on responding to cultural and linguistic diversity*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Paradis, J., Genesee, F. & Crago, M. (2011). *Dual language development & disorders: A handbook on bilingualism & second language learning (2nd ed.)*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brooke Publishing, Inc.
- Windsor, J. & Kohnert, K. (2004). The search for common ground: Part I. Lexical Performance by linguistically diverse learners. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 47, 877-890.