

## Early Essentials Webisode 9

[Music]

[Opening Credits]

Amanda Perez: Hey, I'm Amanda Perez with the Early Head Start National Resource Center, and welcome again to "Early Essentials." A little bit ago, I visited the Port Gamble S'Klallam tribe in Washington state where the community is teaching the S'Klallam language to their youngest children. I asked Marie Hebert, the cultural resources director there, about the meaning of the language preservation work in their Early Head Start program.

Marie Hebert: It's important to keep our language alive, since there aren't very many of us that are using the language. I think it's important that the language is being taught to the babies and the young children, not only to keep the language alive, but also as a sense of who they are, their pride, you know, to make them proud of who they are. This friend of ours, she just spoke only S'Klallam to her daughter, and her daughter grew up knowing S'Klallam. And I think it's important for them to learn when they're young, at an infant age. They wouldn't even have to think about it. They'd just know it. [Chuckles]

Amanda: So, language has a much deeper role than just communication. It's about community, culture, connection. We're here today at a bilingual program in Washington, D.C., thinking about language development. Whether the children you serve are learning one language or two or more, you have such an important role. Today's experts will help us think about how you can support language development. We'll start with Linda Espinosa, a Professor Emeritus in early childhood education and a language researcher at the University of Missouri-Columbia. Linda, it is so great to see you. Talk to us about the importance of language development for young children.

Linda Espinosa: Language is more than just communication. It has significance for so many other areas of development. And I think of it in terms of three big categories -- in terms of the relationship building, the identity formation, and the underlying mechanism through which children start to develop their cognitive processing and learning about the world.

Amanda: So, three categories, three areas that language and communication really support. Let's start with the first. How does language support relationships?

Linda: So, I would say the first part, in terms of relationship development, that when caregivers or parents hold infants and look at them and use certain sounds when they're communicating with them. All of that starts to form that attachment, that feeling of closeness. The babies sense that somebody's responding to them, somebody cares for them. The world is a safe place. The world responds.

Amanda: Really? Those first sounds? Tell us about the second area where language has a big impact.

Linda: That second part is really the identity formation, which tells the child who they are. What is their unique contribution? Exactly how do they fit in to both this family -- this small family, maybe the larger world? So, we vary how we use language when we talk to babies. And through that, they develop a sense of what's important, what's important about them. It's important that I'm smart or big or small or whatever.

Amanda: So, language impacts relationships, identity development, and one other area, you said?

Linda: The third part about that is the language processing that the infant goes through contributes to and really kind of drives a lot of those neurological processes that are related to understanding concepts, even understanding mathematical concepts very early on. How does the parent say things like, you know, "Here are my five little fingers"? All of these things start to -- start that process of the child's cognitive skill development that allows them to understand exactly what's going on in this world. What are objects called? What do we mean by "big"? How do we -- How do we describe actions that we do? So, even though maybe you're just cooing to the child, it means a lot more.

Amanda: So, if we think about those three functions of early language for children -- relationship building, identity formation, and helping them set up a way of thinking about the world, how can adults support language learning in young children?

Linda: One of the things we do know more now about infants is that they initiate interactions. They're not just responding to what we do. They're actually initiating. And if we can see that through both their physical gestures and their attempts at using language -- babbling and cooing and maybe even imitating sounds they've heard -- If we're responsive to that, that begins that -- that eye-to-eye, face-to-face contact and that -- that sense of back and forth. The child maybe coos; we maybe imitate.

And so, I think that -- that sort of innate ability that most adults have to enjoy, listen to, and respond to what they're seeing from the child; it requires that we slow down a little bit, because infants are on their own timetable.

Amanda: As you mentioned, Linda, the attempts that adults make to understand children and respond to them have such important effects for children not just on language development, but on relationships, on the way those children understand and feel about themselves. We asked our experts how they engage in these early language interactions with young children.

Maribel Valencuela: My favorite thing working with infants and toddlers is just, you know, interacting with them 'cause sometimes they're really little, but they got a lot to say and you know that they have a lot on their mind that they would like to share with you. And they do it in their own way, especially, you know, the babies, when -- when you talk to them, they, like, smile at you or, you know, babble words, even though you don't pick up what they're saying. But you -- they're trying to tell you something.

Chad Sullivan: I really try to respect what the kids have to say. And -- and the more you respect them, the more they're gonna talk to you and bring it out and expand it and grow from it. And the kids, you know -- if they don't feel comfortable, they're just gonna shut right down. So, if you really take time and get down to their level and talk to them and let them, you know, initiate the conversation, it just brings out a lot more language. And, you can just keep asking, building onto those questions.

Amanda: That first step, as these experts tell us, is to celebrate, respect, and try to respond to children, even in their early attempts at language. For home visitors, this is an important message for families, as well.

Brenda Jones Harden: Pre-verbal babies really are learning language all the time. So, you're helping babies, even when they're neonates, to learn about the language of their culture. So, helping parents to know even when they're holding a very young baby and looking at them face-to-face that they should be using words.

And certainly when the baby's doing cooing and all those wonderful noises and vocalizations that they do early on, that parents should match those. So, I envision, you know, my best idea of a home visit is when, for a young pre-verbal child, is when the home visitor's sitting a little far off, so that the baby can't see them 'cause you know the baby's gonna get distracted by the home visitor's face and voice. But the home visitor just whispering in Mom's ear, "Oh, she's cooing. Could you respond now? Could you do the same kind of cooing the baby's doing? Can you call the baby's name?" One of the first words that babies learn by six months of age is their own name. How do they learn that? Because, Mom is constantly saying that name to them.

Amanda: Helpful tips from those experts, Linda. What other strategies do you have for staff for supporting language development?

Linda: As the child gets older, one of the things that we do to help expand their language is introduce them to things, to objects, to words, to books.

Amanda: So, what you're telling us is that as adults and others in the child's life are helping them learn language, they're also sharing things about the world that surrounds them, including the values of their own individual family and community.

Linda: That's exactly right. I mean, that -- that these are the relevant -- culturally, within their family, practically, in their day-to-day function, these are the things that are important. And we help them understand what they are and how you use them and what you call them and how you ask for them.

Amanda: We talked with our experts about the ways that they find opportunities to expand children's language, add words to their vocabularies, and as a part of that practice, just through that language, really give them a rich sense of their own unique environment.

Janna Wagner: Well, children learn language within relationships with caring, responsive adults. So, it's essential the family child-care providers are talking a lot and singing and responding to vocalizations and babbles of infants, even if it feels weird or silly.

It means singing songs, even if you think you have a bad voice. It means reading more than one book a day, doing lots of finger plays, lots of music and movement activities. It really means using language at every opportunity that you have. After reading, before reading, when you're on a walk, asking questions, labeling things in your environment.

Matika Laxson: We just talk constantly. We just -- we talk about what we're doing. We talk about what they're doing. And just use really basic words. And we have some picture books. If you have, like, just really clear picture books with real objects, and you can point to the objects and just make sure you actually touch where the object is. And these kids are starting to say some of these -- some of the words in this book that we read on a regular basis. And that's it, too. We also read the same one over and over.

Lilana Weissman: For building a language, I repeat a lot. And I use -- I try to use the correct words. If they are asking for something and they didn't use the correct words, I repeat, but in correct words, so they can hear the correct words to start to repeat the correct words. Like, when they ask for water, maybe they are babbling or something, and I repeat, "Oh, you want water? Get us some water." And they repeat.

Eileen Wasow: I think it's really important for us to take seriously our role in fostering and nurturing language development with children. I think there's got to be an intentionality with which we do it in. The intentionality part is, how can we name the world? How can we be curious about the world? How can we ourselves go out and see the buds in spring or look at a worm on the sidewalk? So that -- that excitement about language really opens the world up for children.

Amanda: Lots of ways to really help children build their language skills. We do it through lots of talking about the world around them, right? And Eileen reminds us that when we do that with joy and excitement, we engage the children's interest in communication and learning. So, we know what it means to support children in language development. Let's consider what happens when children are learning more than one language.

Here's Sarah Merrill talking about the Office of Head Start's expectations around support for a child's home language.

Sarah Merrill: The important message that the Office of Head Start would like to get -- get out there, and we know research is backing us up, is when children have a strong foundation and a strong competency in their home language, they can learn a second language much easier.

So, when we're working with infants and toddlers, particularly, it's extremely important to validate for the family that they will learn English, especially if that's your -- your -- your goal. And that's a wonderful goal, and that will be a great gift for the children to know two languages. But first and foremost, they need to master their home language, and we want that to happen for language development, but also for social-emotional development; because, it's in the context of family we want them to be able to communicate well with Mom, Dad, siblings, grandparents, and extended family.

Amanda: So, Linda, hearing that from Sarah, what tips would you offer to folks who are supporting learners of more than one language in their programs?

Linda: The first thing you need to do is find out about the earliest language experiences of these children. I really try to encourage people to be very systematic and intentional around language goals, so that the providers will know what their roles are. We don't always clearly define what our language goals are, how we'll work with the family to achieve those goals, and what my -- as an adult -- what my individual role is to promote those goals.

Amanda: So, you're suggesting that staff talk with families to identify both what languages their children are speaking at home and what the family's language goals are for their child. Linda, in some cases, we know that programs have done everything they could to incorporate staff who speak a family's primary language, but that is just not always possible. So, what can staff do in those situations?

Linda: The desire and need to represent and include that language, both how it's spoken, how it looks, and how it's used within the context of that classroom or setting, whatever it is, is very important, and we can do that through simple acts. And you can find someone, ideally, the family, but someone who can have that language spoken in that center during -- you can do it during book reading. You can do it during little small-group activities, you know. And the teacher, by valuing that language, says to everybody, "Look, here's a language most of us don't know, and isn't it exciting to learn a few words of this?" That's a huge affirmation of the role of that language as the child's in a center where everybody really speaks English.

Amanda: And staff can use the environment and materials to support language that they don't know, too.

Linda: If you have small picture books, you can -- if there are words on them, you can get somebody to write out those words and tape it to the pictures. You can send the picture books home and ask the parents just to create a story in their home language from this picture book. If there's a grocery store or a market, sometimes if we can get those empty containers and they have the language and they also represent the foods, you know, that are typical in families and cultures, put them in our dramatic play areas.

Amanda: Linda, you've given us some helpful ideas to start us in supporting home languages. We asked a few of our experts to offer their insight on supporting home language for the children and families they serve.

Cleo Rodriguez, Jr.: We, as teachers and caregivers, need to recognize the value of home language. And we need to recognize it as the foundation from which we are going to build other languages on. It is so important that we keep that as a solid foundation. It is an asset. It is an asset that the parents bring to the program. It is an asset that the children bring to the program. And what are we doing to build upon that asset that our families and our children are bringing to our programs?

Maria Mottaghian: We talk about dual language with the parents. We give trainings on the importance of dual language on brain development, how their infants and toddlers are quite capable of learning one, two, three -- you know, who knows how many languages? And parents get excited about that.

Amanda: So, important to engage families, right? Recognizing the benefits of dual language learning for children, for families, and for our programs. What other tips do you have for staff who don't speak the language of a child they're serving?

Linda: As a provider, I can learn a few words. I can start practicing this language. Children love that. And it -- it so empowers them and deepens their respect and value for their own language. If we're the English speaker, then what we do is provide that English language model. And if I -- I'm a monolingual English speaker, my job is really to promote that foundation.

Amanda: So, Linda, when adults use the languages they're most fluent in, they provide those crucial rich language models for children, and they can also find ways to enrich the environment with words and songs and phrases from the child's home language as much as possible. Let's take a practice moment to think about how we might apply what you, Linda, and our other experts have been sharing with us throughout this webisode.

We've got three short clips to share. Let's start with Alicia and Matthew at Alicia's family child-care home in Frederick, Maryland.

[Video begins]

How does Alicia promote language development during this one-on-one time with Matthew during diapering?

Alicia: [Buzzes lips]

Matthew: [Buzzes lips]

Alicia: [Laughs, buzzes lips]

Matthew: [Buzzes lips]

Alicia: [Buzzes lips]

Matthew: [Buzzes lips]

Alicia: [Buzzes lips]

Matthew: [Buzzes lips]

Alicia: [Laughs]

Amanda: How is Matthew responding to this interaction?

Alicia: [Buzzes lips]

Matthew: [Giggles]

Amanda: How does Alicia ask for Matthew's input?

Alicia: You ready to get up? Up? Up? Yes, up. Up.

[Video ends]

Amanda: Now let's watch this clip from a center-based Early Head Start program in Salem, Oregon. How does this teacher use language to follow this child's interest?

[Video begins]

How does the teacher let this toddler know she's interested in this conversation? How does she use language to extend his learning?

[Video ends]

Finally, let's check in on this home visit in Alexandria, Virginia.

[Video begins]

Home Visitor: The song that you sang at play group in Uyghur -- in your language?

Mother: Yeah, it was about star.

Home Visitor: Yeah, yeah. Will you sing that with us?

Mother: [Speaks Uyghur]

[Singing in Uyghur]

Amanda: How does the home visitor support this interaction?

Mother: [Continues singing]

Amanda: What is this baby's response?

Mother: [Continues singing]

Amanda: What is Mom's?

Home Visitor: Yay! Clapping.

[Video ends]

Amanda: So, three clips highlighting three different aspects of language development. What did you hear?

[Video begins]

This family child-care provider is making the most of this routine one-on-one time with this baby. Listen to the way she follows his lead, echoes his sounds. He's learning the give-and-take of communication and the pleasure in it. Notice how she asks for his input and waits for his non-verbal response before she acts. She's telling him that his communication is important. This teacher uses language to engage this toddler in learning. She follows his curiosity about what is happening in their environment, uses simple language to respond to his interest. She bends down to talk with him face-to-face, asks him questions to engage him in deeper observation and learning. Using words and interest, she honors his curiosity, helps him broaden his understanding of his world. On this home visit, the child sits between her mother and her home visitor facing her mom.

As Mom sings, she is clearly in the lead. Notice how Elanore watches both the mother and home visitor for cues. The home visitor echoes the hand movements and expressions of the mother as she can. In this short interaction, the home visitor celebrates the importance of this family's home language and Mom's important role in sharing it. [Video ends]

Before we end, Linda, would you just briefly speak to the value of revitalizing languages that are at risk of being lost?

Linda: These heritage languages are part of ancient traditions and cultures that have, again, contributed to a sense of pride, a sense of identity, a sense of accomplishment because they have woven down through the ages and provided that sort of cultural solidarity, that community of, "Here's who we are. This is the language we use for our traditions, for our ceremonies, for our important rites of passage."

Amanda: Linda, thank you so much for sharing your expertise with us today. We've heard about the really broad importance language takes in a child's total development.

Before we go, some closing thoughts from Karron McGrady and Calvin Moore.

Karron McGrady: I feel it's important for us to teach the language to the children just so they know -- know it, use it, learn it, grow up just knowing it 'cause we didn't have the opportunity to learn it when we were growing up -- when I was growing up. So, I think it's just great that they are getting the opportunity to learn it here in the center and everywhere. Just to be a part of their history, to have something that their ancestors did and used and, you know, like, something for them to be part of and just know.

Calvin Moore, Jr.: When I speak about children learning language and language development in general, my message has always been that it is a two-way process. For example, children can't learn language by watching television. They learn language by interacting with a more competent peer and listening to language. This is like a dance for me, a dance between the provider and the child. And so, sometimes the provider is taking the lead in the conversation, and sometimes -- sometimes the child is taking the lead.

So, it's important that this language be a part of the environment, but also that it's rich and meaningful, that it's more than just talking about, "What color is this?" or, "What shape is this?" But it really is a meaningful exchange, where the adult is responding to the child and bringing up meaningful things in the child's life that the child can connect to.

Amanda: So, not only is language learned through relationships, language strengthens relationships, as well. Talking and listening to young children, sharing your joy and communication with them, and respecting and responding to their communication with you is such an important element of your work in preparing children for school and for life.

[Music] [Closing Credits]