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Family Engagement Forum

Critical Growth Needs for
English Learner Preschoolers

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About the Author



Sylvia Acevedo has enjoyed a broad business career, serving as an executive for several Fortune 100 companies, such as IBM, DELL, and Apple. Since 2007, Sylvia has used her engineering expertise as a social entrepreneur to create scalable solutions in education and health, especially for English learners and their families. Sylvia created a curriculum for Pre-K readiness used to train Spanish-only speaking mothers and their toddlers. Sylvia created national mobilization campaigns that have drawn over 225,000 attendees and created scalable systems that gave 250,000 books, 25,000 toothbrushes, 15,000 playground balls, and 1,000 pairs of eyeglasses to children in need. President Obama named Sylvia to the White House Commission for Educational Excellence for Hispanics where she serves as Chair of the Early Childhood subcommittee.

Critical Growth Needs for English Learner Preschoolers

The education of English learners (ELs) is a matter of increasing urgency for the early childhood community across the country. Historically, this fast-growing population has been present in only some areas of the country, such as New York, California, Texas, and parts of the southwest. However, ELs have recently emerged in increasing numbers in every state across the nation. The population of K–12 English learners grew by 60 percent in the last decade while the general student population only grew by 7 percent (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

The growth of the English learner student population is an opportunity for early childhood educators to understand and address the barriers many EL families face. These barriers may include the parents' lack of awareness or knowledge of the U.S. education system; limited literacy and language skills; and the influence of poverty, particularly on the health of young children. By helping EL families overcome these barriers, early childhood educators can provide positive experiences in preschool that forge the foundations for lifelong growth, learning, and behavior.

The U.S. educational system is starkly different from other education systems around the globe. Many EL families may come from countries where there may be no early education or Kindergarten programs, nor access to education beyond elementary school. Because of this, EL families may not be familiar with the expectations the U.S. education system has for both parents and students.

Many English learners and their families struggle with a language barrier that limits their participation in and access to educational programs and resources. Preschool is an ideal time for EL families to be introduced to formal educational programs, because both the learning environment and experiences are the most influential in the development of a child's brain (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007).

Educators may be surprised that English language skills are not the only differentiator for many EL preschoolers. With at least one in five EL preschool-age children living in poverty (Child Trends Databank, 2014), other factors, such as undiagnosed vision, dental, or health issues, may impact an EL preschooler's ability to learn in any language. Educators of EL preschoolers must take these potential barriers into account and consider how they may impact an EL preschooler's education and growth needs.



Differences in Cultural Expectations

In many countries outside the U.S., education is managed nationally rather than locally, even as early as preschool. EL parents who have immigrated to the U.S. may not know that their child is expected to start learning basic literacy and movement skills from the moment they are born. Many of these EL families may not know what to teach their child, and instead wait for their child to enter school to begin learning formal educational topics, such as the alphabet, handwriting, vocabulary, colors, shapes, and numbers. Parents who did not complete their formal education, in the U.S. or in their home country, may feel that they do not know enough to teach their children at home. These parents may believe they are doing what's best for their children by delivering them to preschool as a "blank slate."

Low-socioeconomic home environments may not have basic educational tools for young children, such as crayons, pencils, paper, or coloring books. Even the simple act of scribbling can be a challenge for preschoolers if their home life did not include opportunities to color and draw. Early childhood educators may have to take additional steps to introduce these EL children to motor skills that allow them to learn how to scribble before learning to color in the lines, and finally learning to write.

Another consideration is that some EL children have been frequently transported by stroller throughout their formative first five years, missing the opportunity to develop both fine and gross motor skills. These children may not have had ample opportunities to crawl or develop the motor skills necessary to be ready for preschool.

Early childhood educators may also need to introduce the concept of family involvement in preschool. EL parents who did not have the opportunity to finish their own education or who did not experience preschool in the United States may not feel comfortable being involved in the classroom or participating in school activities. Early childhood educators should seek out opportunities for intentional outreach when EL families are dropping off or picking up their children, and utilize these casual interactions to provide information about the importance of participating in their child's preschool. Early childhood educators should take possible barriers into consideration, such as literacy and financial resources. Educators can introduce specific opportunities that are accessible and convenient for all EL families. Group activities with other EL families, for example, may be one way for new families to become comfortable in the preschool environment. Preschool is also a great venue to introduce families to other supportive community resources and even opportunities that support continuing education for all family members.

Words in the Air

All parents want the best for their child. However, not all parents know the importance of growing a robust vocabulary from infancy. In some cultures, children are supposed to be “seen and not heard” and are discouraged from expressing themselves verbally, especially around adults. Some EL children have only limited interactions with adults who talk with and respond to them directly. For these EL children, essential opportunities to learn vocabulary are dependent on listening to adults converse with each other.

Families may believe that the child is being exposed to language and vocabulary by watching television, listening to the radio, or overhearing adults on the phone. They may need support in understanding that active and intentional conversation with children that expands on their early attempts at language, is an important growth foundation for language development in infants and preschoolers; and that learning language is a dynamic, active process, rather than passive retrieval of “words in the air.”

Early childhood educators may find EL preschoolers that lag behind in vocabulary and language development in English as well as their home language. Some EL preschoolers may not know the words for shapes, numbers, colors, or the alphabet in English or their home language. Early childhood educators may need to start with these basic concepts to grow and develop the EL preschooler’s basic language vocabulary. For example, in one EL preschool classroom, the teacher used photos of the children to help the preschoolers identify their personal chairs and belongings. The preschoolers in her classroom were unaware of even the letters that comprised their own names, while the teacher across the hall used simple nametags, which children learned to identify when attached to their chairs and belongings.

Poverty

Poverty is an important social determinant of health and contributes to child health disparities in the United States, where almost half of young children in the United States live in or near poverty. Children who experience poverty, particularly early in life or for an extended period of time, are at risk of a host of adverse health and developmental outcomes throughout their lifetimes. This challenge is exacerbated by the fact that EL students are more likely than English-speaking students to attend high poverty schools with limited resources (Institute of Education Sciences, 2010).

- 1.** Poverty has a profound effect on specific circumstances, such as birth weight, infant mortality, language development, chronic illness, environmental exposure, nutrition, and injury.
- 2.** Poverty also influences genomic function and brain development through exposure to toxic stress, a condition characterized by “excessive or prolonged activation of the physiologic stress response systems in the absence of the buffering protection afforded by stable, responsive relationships.”
- 3.** Children living in poverty are at increased risk of difficulties with self-regulation and executive function, such as inattention, impulsivity, defiance, and poor peer relationships.
- 4.** Poverty can make parenting difficult, especially in the context of concerns about inadequate food, energy, transportation, and housing.

Early childhood educators may find that to be more effective with English learners in the classroom, they must include a multifaceted approach, including preventive health services, age-appropriate learning opportunities, and socio-emotional support for parents. Program evaluation has supported this approach in multiple countries and settings (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2016). Analyses by Nobel Prize–winning economist James Heckman reveal that early prevention activities targeted toward disadvantaged children have high rates of economic returns, much higher than remediation efforts later in childhood or adult life (Heckman, 2006).

Even though the rates of children covered by insurance programs has improved, the effects of poverty can exacerbate the ability to monitor important physical aspects of a child’s well-being, and these can greatly impact the ability to learn. Programs such as Head Start/Early Head Start include health components such as dental, nutrition, and mental health based on the evidence that low-income and/or EL families may not be aware of the impact these health concerns can have on their child or cannot provide access to certain types of medical care. For example, regular quality vision, hearing, and dental screenings are very important for EL preschoolers. Children with dental pain are three times more likely to miss school than students with healthy teeth and gums (Jackson et al, 2011). Unless there is obvious physical injury or trauma, families may not know whether their child has vision or hearing issues. In one school in Austin, Texas, a young preschooler, whose vision was corrected with eyeglasses donated by a community vision services program, was so excited with his improved vision that he exclaimed, “There are leaves on the trees!” (Kids Vision for Life Central Texas, 2011).

Path Forward

Early childhood educators see potential in all of their students, but may struggle to understand and address the particular barriers ELs may face. EL preschoolers are a growing group of children who can benefit significantly from the care, instruction, and support of their earliest classroom teachers. As more classrooms fill with preschoolers whose home language is not English, early childhood educators have the unique opportunity to create an environment for growth and learning that provides a foundation for a lifetime of curiosity and a love of learning that transforms every child's life, as well as their families and their communities.

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