

FACTS and TIPS

Young Dual Language Learners (Birth through 5 years)



TOPIC #2.1: How to Use Interpreters Effectively

FACT # 1: *An “interpreter” uses speech or sign language to convert one language into a different language. A “translator” converts one language into another language through the written word* (Castro, Ayankoya, & Kasprzak, 2010). People often use the terms “interpreter” and “translator” interchangeably but they mean two different things and require very different skills. Individuals who are bilingual and bicultural, with training, may be excellent interpreters because they are verbally proficient in both languages being used. However, those same individuals may not be equally proficient in the written expression of both languages. In other words, speaking and listening proficiency does not guarantee writing proficiency in both languages. In fact, writing well is often more difficult than speaking well in another language. Accurately translating the written word requires a high degree of academic proficiency in written language.

FACT #2: *In addition to interpreting spoken language, interpreters act as cultural mediators or cultural “bridges”.* Language conveys more than mere words or grammatical structures. In fact, language cannot be separated from culture (Genesee, Paradis, Crago, 2011). People learn about their world through culture and culture is expressed through language. Expectations and rules for communicating with others are highly influenced by culture although these rules are often unspoken (Castro, et al, 2010). This means that misunderstandings and miscommunications can most easily occur between individuals of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Ideally, the interpreter is skilled in the communication styles and language forms of *both* languages so that miscommunications are minimized. Explaining and clarifying cultural differences and “gaps” is a large part of an interpreter’s role during communications with families, practitioners, and agencies.

FACT #3: *It is best to utilize an interpreter who is proficient in both languages AND has experience in cross-cultural communication” (Castro, et al, 2010).* It is essential that an interpreter be bilingual; however being bilingual does *not* guarantee that a person will make a good interpreter (Castro, et al, 2010). To be truly effective, an interpreter needs to understand the cultural nuances of both language groups in order to communicate the intended meanings of each person’s spoken words. Depending on the language used, it may take fewer or more words to interpret intended meanings. Individuals with only a few courses in another language are rarely able to effectively and accurately interpret communications with families. By the same token, ***it is not considered good practice to use children of any age to interpret for their families***—often children do not have the maturity to understand or convey the meaning of the concepts being discussed (Castro, et al, 2010). In addition, using children to interpret for their parents places too much responsibility on the child, and can seriously disrupt family dynamics (Castro, et al, 2010).



Instructional Tips



- ❖ Consider using interpreters within your program to bridge cultural and linguistic misunderstandings *between practitioners and children* who are dual language learners. Interpreters who routinely spend time in your program can help practitioners understand why children respond or don't respond the way they do during different activities. This information can help practitioners adjust the way they deliver services to better meet the children's needs. It can also help programs and interpreters communicate more effectively with parents.
- ❖ Use interpreters to help children negotiate meaning during routines, different learning activities, and during free play time with other children. Having an adult who speaks their language and understands their culture can help dual language learners feel more at ease and thus be more available for learning.
- ❖ Use interpreters to help deliver specialized services or therapies to dual language learners who have disabilities. The interpreter can work closely with the speech/language clinician, special education teacher, occupational and/or physical therapists, other specialists, as well as the provider to incorporate practices that are linguistically and culturally appropriate.



Connecting with Families

- ❖ Interpreters play an essential role in aiding programs and practitioners build safe, open, and trusting relationships with families. So it is extremely important to use interpreters when communicating with parents and caregivers. Look to your community, local schools, medical facilities, and government agencies to find adults who might be able to interpret for your program. (It is very important *not* to use children to interpret within their family for the reasons mentioned in Fact #3).
- ❖ Use interpreters as cultural mediators to bridge understanding and rapport between families and your program. Obviously, families may feel more comfortable speaking about their preferences, values and beliefs with an interpreter who not only shares their language but also their cultural background. This is vital information for programs to have in order to meet the needs and expectations of the children and families. It is also important for the interpreter to be able to maintain their role when clarifying and communicating the expectations, values and beliefs of your program with the family.
- ❖ The dominant U.S. culture relies heavily on *written messages* for communication. This is not true for all cultures. Some cultures rely more on oral language and face-face interactions to communicate. Make sure that written translated messages are in standard dialect and are followed-up with phone calls or personal visits by an interpreter to ensure that families are aware of your communication.
- ❖ Ideally, any written materials that are sent to English-speaking families should be translated into the home language(s) of families who speak a different language. This may include notes about the child's day or week, newsletters, permission forms, fieldtrip information, etc. Some programs create a translation committee to review translated materials to make sure that they are accurate and readable for families (Nemeth, 2009).
- ❖ Make sure you give translators enough time to do their job! Translation is hard work. Establishing a regular schedule for the translation of materials can help both programs and translators plan for effective and timely communication with families.

FACTS & TIPS Topics #2.1 & #2.2

How to Use Interpreters Effectively

References

Castro, D., Ayankoya, B., & Kasprzak, C. (2010). *New voices, nuevas voces: Guide to cultural & linguistic diversity in early childhood*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.

Guidelines for Working with Interpreters Using Simultaneous Equipment (for larger events):
<http://www.uwex.edu/ces/latino/general/documents/TipSheetWorkingWithInterpreters.pdf>

Nemeth, K. (2009). *Many languages, one classroom*. Beltsville, MD: Gryphon House, Inc.

Paradis, J., Genesee, F., & Crago, M. (2011). *Dual language development & disorders: A handbook on bilingualism & second language learning (2nd ed.)*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.