

Frequently Asked Questions

ASL/English Bilingual Programming and Early Childhood Education



A. What is an ASL/English bilingual program?

An American Sign Language (ASL)/English bilingual program supports the acquisition, learning, and use of ASL and English to meet the needs of diverse learners who are deaf and hard of hearing.

B. Why consider an ASL/English bilingual program for young deaf and hard of hearing children?

- It is important for deaf and hard of hearing children to develop early linguistic competence.
- It is important for deaf and hard of hearing children to establish early communication with their parents and families, develop their cognitive abilities, acquire world knowledge, and communicate fully with the surrounding world.
- It is through language that children develop social/emotional and cognitive abilities that are critical to timely development in all areas.
- Prime language learning time may potentially be lost while waiting for a child to “learn to listen” through his or her hearing aids and/or cochlear implant(s).
- Not all children demonstrate expected spoken language outcomes with their hearing aids and/or cochlear implant(s), even if they have “auditory access.”

C. Is there research that supports ASL/English bilingual programming in early childhood education?

- Brain imaging suggests that the brain can readily handle dual language development (bimodal-bilingual). (Petitto, Katerelos, Levy, Gauna, et al., 2001)
- “Being exposed to two languages from birth—and in particular, being exposed to a signed and spoken language from birth—does not cause a child to be language delayed and confused.” (Petitto & Kovelman, 2003)
- “Having to wait several years to reach a satisfactory level in oral language that might never be attained, and in the meantime denying the deaf child access to a language that meets his/her immediate needs (sign language), is basically taking the risk that the child will fall behind in his/her development, be it linguistic, cognitive, social, or personal.” (Grosjean, 2008)
- Early access to language (spoken or signed) is the best predictor of positive spoken language outcomes. (Yoshinaga-Itano & Sedey, 2000).

The Clerc Center, a federally funded national deaf education center, ensures that the diverse population of deaf and hard of hearing students (birth through age 21) in the nation are educated and empowered and have the linguistic competence to maximize their potential as productive and contributing members of society. This is accomplished through early access to and acquisition of language, excellence in teaching, family involvement, research, identification and implementation of best practices, collaboration, and information sharing among schools and programs across the nation.

D. What are the components of an ASL/English bilingual early childhood program?

- ASL and English are each developed, used, and equally valued.
- Deaf and hard of hearing children with varying degrees of hearing levels and varied use and benefit from listening technologies (hearing aids, cochlear implants) are educated together.
- Teams of deaf and hearing professionals work together to support the development and use of both ASL and English. The team may include para-professionals and other support service professionals who provide purposeful use of each language based on the individualized goals of each child.
- Assessment to document each child's development in ASL and spoken English. An individualized bilingual plan for ASL and spoken English use is designed for each child.

E. What should be included in the development of an individualized bilingual language plan?

- Documentation of a child's proficiency in both ASL and spoken English.
- Recommendations to address strategies, materials, and resources to facilitate early language acquisition and literacy development.
- Recommendations to address family supports to promote language acquisition and language learning.

F. How is ASL development addressed in a bilingual program?

- Through the use of observational checklists and language samples, each child's development in ASL is documented as a component of an individualized bilingual language plan (baseline data and progress monitoring).
- Professionals proficient in ASL work collaboratively with teachers to provide instruction in the development of ASL as a language (i.e., ASL classifiers, grammar, facial expression, etc.).

- Children are provided with accessible and consistent ASL adult and peer language models to foster language acquisition and learning.
- Children are exposed to daily story signing.
- ASL is used for all activities when working with a group of students with varied levels of access to spoken English.

G. How is spoken English development addressed in a bilingual program?

Spoken English can be an active and integral part of an ASL/English bilingual program. With purposeful planning, spoken English can be addressed specific to the goals of individual students. The following strategies to facilitate spoken English should be incorporated:

- Assessment to document each child's development in spoken English as a component of developing an individualized bilingual language plan (baseline data and progress monitoring).
- Speech-language specialists work collaboratively with teachers to facilitate the development and use of spoken English skills (i.e., listening, speaking, speechreading, phonics)
- Children are provided with accessible and consistent spoken English adult and peer language models to foster language acquisition and learning
- Opportunities are available to use spoken English in a natural context with adults and peers during structured spoken English activities
- Listening activities are integrated into the classroom (i.e., oral read aloud, Internet-based activities, DVDs, music, and tape recorded activities)
- Audiology services
- Daily hearing aid/cochlear implant troubleshooting

H. How is literacy addressed in a bilingual program?

- By ensuring early linguistic access
- Story signing for all children
- Oral read aloud specific to an individual child's access to spoken English
- Incorporation of literacy strategies recognized and used with all children
- Use of visual strategies to make letter/sound connections using fingerspelling and/or use of a visual-based phonics system such as Visual Phonics¹
- Use of listening-based strategies when appropriate to individual child characteristics

¹ See-the-Sound Visual Phonics is a system of 45 hand signs and written symbols that helps to make the connection between written and spoken language less confusing.

I. Are children encouraged to use amplification (hearing aids/cochlear implants)?

Yes, use of hearing aids and/or cochlear implants is encouraged. Audiological information related to amplification benefit is shared with families and incorporated into a child's Individualized Family Service Plan/Individualized Education Program and individualized bilingual language plan. At school, teachers are responsible for encouraging children to use their hearing aids and/or cochlear implants and conducting daily amplification checks.

J. How can deaf families support their child's development of spoken English?

Teachers and speech-language specialists can work with families to provide strategies and materials that can be incorporated into the home (for carryover of spoken English skills). Some strategies include:

- Use of a card reader with recorded listening activities
- Internet-based listening activities
- Books on tape/DVD
- Visual Phonics

K. How can hearing families support their deaf or hard of hearing child's development of ASL?

- Attend family ASL classes
- Participate in the Shared Reading Project²
- Collaborate/connect with other families

² The Shared Reading Project at the Clerc Center is designed to teach parents and other caregivers how to read to their deaf children using American Sign Language. The Clerc Center works with programs nationally to establish Shared Reading Project sites in their areas. For more information, visit http://clerccenter.gallaudet.edu/Clerc_Center/Information_and_Resources/Info_to_Go/Language_and_Literacy/Literacy_at_the_Clerc_Center/Welcome_to_Shared_Reading_Project.html

References

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