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FIRST 5 CALIFORNIA
Dual Language Learner
PILOT STUDY

Research Brief: Engaging Dual Language Learner Families in Their Children's Early Education

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Nearly 60% of California's young children are dual language learners (DLLs), growing up learning their family's home language or languages while also acquiring English.[1] It is critical for the administrators and educators who serve these children in early learning and care programs to partner with children's families to support DLLs' education and development, including language development. DLLs' families represent a diverse collection of linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and from these backgrounds children can draw social-emotional strength as well as foundational skills for learning.[2] Families play a critical role in preserving and passing on their language and culture[3]—which can foster their children's success in school and beyond.

A large body of research has demonstrated the value generated when educators partner with families. These partnerships encourage families and educators alike to nurture students' strengths, interests, and identities, paving the way for healthy social development and academic success.[4] Strong connections between home and school have been shown to contribute to favorable learning and developmental outcomes for children from diverse backgrounds.[5] There are many ways that early learning and care programs can cultivate these partnerships with families, including being intentional about how they communicate with families (and what they communicate about), and being intentional about involving families in their children's learning.

Key Findings

- We found overwhelming endorsement of bilingualism by both families and programs. Most families wanted their children to become bilingual, and most received messages from their early learning programs on the importance of bilingualism.
- Programs were sensitive to families' language abilities and provided language-appropriate resources and on-site activities to help families foster their children's learning and development.
- Most families supported children's learning at home, and programs supported them in doing so by providing materials in English and the home language.
- Families whose programs contacted them more frequently tended to attend more program activities, assign more importance to kindergarten readiness skills, and engage their child in learning activities at home.

Using data from the First 5 California DLL Pilot Study, this brief presents a snapshot of the family engagement strategies used in early learning and care programs serving infant, toddler, and preschool-age DLLs across the state. We explore family engagement from three vantage points: the families of DLLs (represented by a parent respondent); the directors of their early learning and care programs, to set the stage for the family findings; and DLLs' teachers, whose complementary perspective on many of the topics discussed is reflected in gray boxes with gray banners throughout the brief. We also offer snapshots from the field drawn from interviews with program providers and families about their experiences and engagement activities, in gray boxes with lime green banners. The study examined attitudes toward bilingual development, families' goals for their DLL child's learning, programs' efforts to communicate with and engage families, families' engagement in the program and support for their child's learning at home, and relationships among these factors. **The overall picture captured by this brief is one of supportive, sensitive practices carried out by sites, and responsive, nurturing activities led by families—in a diverse pool of families, with diverse skills, backgrounds, and resources.**

The findings reported here are derived primarily from survey responses from 1,791 families in 16 counties that participated in the study of DLL-serving early learning and care programs in the state of California. Participating families completed an online survey in late 2019 or early 2020[i] about their education-related beliefs and activities with their children, as well as interactions with their children's teachers and early learning program (in addition to basic demographic and background variables). The study intentionally included families from four different language backgrounds; 86% of families reported that their child heard Spanish at home, 7% reported Cantonese, 4% reported Mandarin, and 3% reported Vietnamese. In many cases, families used these home languages alongside English in their households. Most of the families (83%) had a preschool child (age 3 to 5) at the time of the survey, and the remaining families (17%) had an infant or toddler (under age 3) in their home. Almost all families (92%) had a child who attended a center-based early learning and care program, and the remaining 8% of families had a child enrolled in a family child care home (FCCH).

Setting the Stage: Early Learning and Care Program Administrators' Family Engagement Efforts

To learn about programs' overall practices and policies to support family engagement, a survey was administered to a state-representative sample of 744 directors of early learning and care programs in 2018 and early 2019. Data from this survey indicate that over half of early learning and care programs communicated with families to identify their cultural and linguistic backgrounds, reflecting a priority to understand children's language and cultural experiences.[ii] The survey responses also show that programs often acknowledged the importance of families' language and cultural strengths. This was done through a variety of efforts, including identifying the family's cultural background (69% of programs) and inviting them to the classroom to lead activities in their home language (51%). Nearly four in 10 program directors (38%)

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[i] See the *Methodological Details* box at the end of this brief for further information about sample construction.

[ii] These findings are reflective of the pattern of findings reported in the recent DLL Identification Quick Facts, which offers more analyses from the same survey.

specifically reported helping families recognize that their home language and culture are strengths that should be cultivated at home and in the program. Fewer programs, though, provided resources to support DLLs' learning at home, such as lending libraries (33%) or home-based activities designed to support children's in-school learning (32%). In sum, directors of early learning programs across California reported valuing bilingualism and taking actions to encourage children's learning and development, even if those values and actions did not always translate into concrete material supports for families.

In light of these contextualizing statewide findings, we now turn to how *families* viewed the supports and experiences offered by their child's early learning and care program.

How Programs Support Families

Early learning and care programs that serve DLLs have a unique charge to support those DLLs' families. Not only do they need to engage and provide materials to families to help deepen their students' learning, they also must do so with an awareness of the varied language skills and abilities that children and families bring to those educational opportunities. Therefore, a critical aspect of family engagement is regular, two-way communication involving a continuous exchange of information between program staff and families—in linguistically responsive ways.[6] Successful early learning programs engage in linguistically and culturally responsive communication with their families by valuing, encouraging, and learning about the home language and culture of families, and being sensitive to their language preferences.[7] Through collaboration and exchange of knowledge, educators can play an important part in helping families promote the home language at home and understand the benefits of bilingualism.[8] Research suggests that exchanging information and setting common goals for children can promote home–school partnerships as well as positive child outcomes.[9] Additionally, educators can foster DLL families' use of language and learning activities at home by offering concrete suggestions and materials for activities. Examples of those activities include selecting books, making their own books in their home languages, engaging in shared book-reading, and singing songs and narrating stories together.[10]

In this section, we explore parents' reports of communication from their early learning and care programs. We discuss their perceptions of the frequency, content, and language of communication, and whether the communication was in line with their language preferences. We then examine communication on two specific topics: the value of bilingualism and encouraging learning at home. We dive into how programs share information with parents about bilingual development and strategies to support it and explore relationships between this information sharing and parents' goals for children regarding their home language skills. We also complement these findings with teacher reports,[iii] from a separate survey of teachers at the same early learning and care programs. We then describe materials that parents report receiving in their home language from their child's program and how this relates to parent engagement with their children at home.

[iii] See the *Methodological Details* box at the end of this brief for further information about the teacher survey.

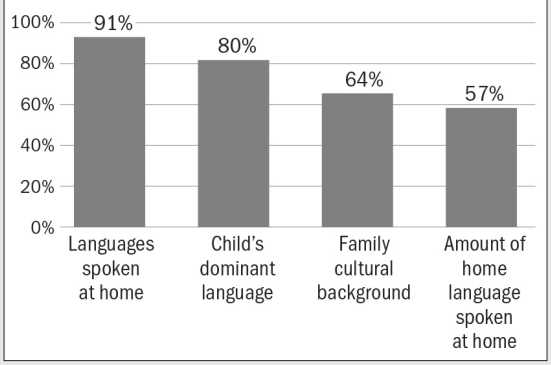
How Do Early Learning and Care Programs in California Communicate With Families?

Families reported being contacted in languages that were well aligned with their own language proficiency. About one third of families reported being contacted in their home language, about one third in English, and about one third in both languages as needed, across all communication purposes. It is important to note that most of parent survey respondents (61%) reported that they understood and spoke English well or very well, so communicating in English may not have presented a barrier to parent understanding or engagement. Only 4% of the respondents who did not rate themselves English proficient on the survey reported that their site contacted them only in English. Overall, for parents who did not rate themselves as English proficient, sites were more likely to contact them only in the home language (61%) than in both English and the home language (30%). These findings indicate that programs typically follow highly responsive patterns of communication, which is a notable bright spot of this study: most families were not burdened by a need to seek out translation services or other outside supports to connect and communicate with their child care program. Having linguistically diverse staff who are able to meet these language needs is a critical component of effective two-way communication and helps to establish trust and feelings of belonging.[11]

TEACHER PERSPECTIVES ON TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION WITH FAMILIES

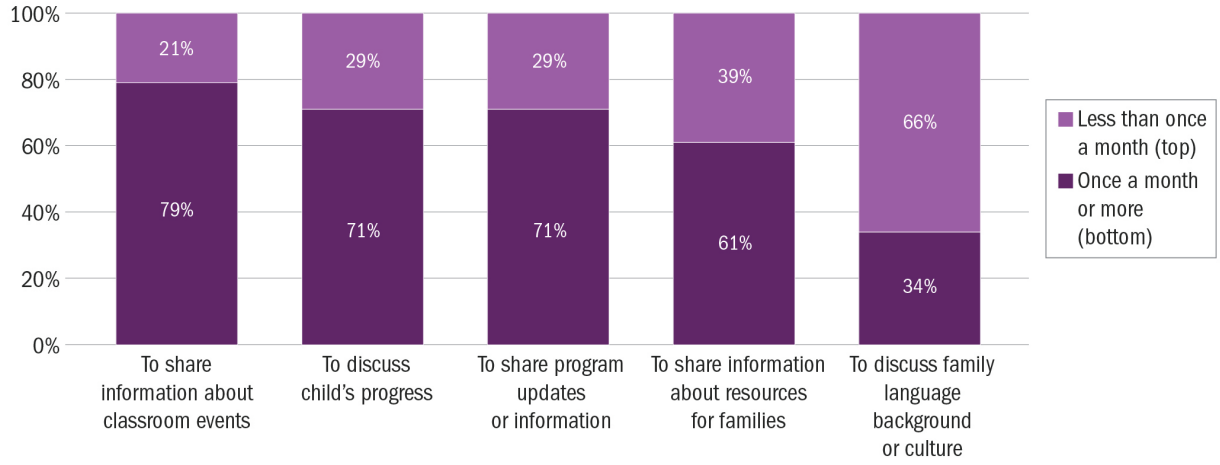
Teachers reported gathering information from families of DLLs that shows their commitment to understanding their students' home language context. Most teachers reported that their program collected information on families' language and cultural background upon enrollment—a strategy we discussed in a larger context in the study's recent research brief about DLL Identification. In almost all classrooms (91%), the lead teacher reported that the site collected information on the languages spoken at home, and 80% of lead teachers reported collecting information about the child's dominant language (i.e., the language the child was most comfortable in). Less common was collecting information on cultural background and amount of the home language spoken at home, but even so, more than half of lead teachers said their classroom or program collected this information.

Exhibit A. Types of information collected about families by the site, as reported by lead teachers



Most families reported being contacted at least once a month by program staff about topics such as discussing their child's progress or sharing information about classroom events. Nearly four in five families (79%) reported that their program contacted them at least once a month to share information about events happening in their child's classroom, and 71% of families heard from their program at least once a month to discuss their child's progress (Exhibit 1). Discussing family language background or culture was less frequent, although this may be an activity that lends itself to only occasional conversation. Still, more than a third of families reported having had language-background- or culture-related conversations at least once a month, indicating a tendency for some programs to continue following up on these linguistically and culturally relevant topics. About 39% of families reported receiving information less than once a month from their child's program about resources and services available to families. This suggests there may be an opportunity for program staff to periodically revisit families' service needs and connect them to community resources, although it is also possible that programs are strategically targeting information about resources to families they believe have the greatest need.[12]

Exhibit 1. Percentage of families that were contacted for various purposes once a month or more, and less than once a month



Note: Ns range from 1,687 to 1,717.

SNAPSHOTS FROM THE FIELD | COMPREHENSIVE SUPPORTS FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Most families in this study reported that staff at their child's early learning and care site communicated with them at least once a month for one or more distinct purposes. In interviews conducted with specialized child care programs as part of the study, the director of one migrant program in Central California explained that interactions between the program's staff and its families involve both engaging the families in their children's education and providing those families with needed supports.

In this program, staff regularly met with parents to discuss their child's early learning and education. This program implemented the Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (PFCE) Framework, which provides staff with a research-based guide for implementing Head Start Program Performance Standards that promote parent, family, and community engagement.

The program's staff–parent interactions begin before the child is even enrolled. Prior to restrictions related to the coronavirus pandemic that began in 2020, the program required that prospective family members meet with the staff at the site to fill out an application together and determine whether they qualified for enrollment. For families that were eligible and enrolled, the program reported providing three formal educational interactions—one teacher home visit, followed by two parent–teacher conferences, either at home or at the center, depending upon the parents' preferences. These meetings provided staff an opportunity to review the program's parent handbook together with the parents, and provided parents an opportunity to get to know the staff, ask questions and discuss needs, and learn the program's expectations of them. In addition, staff also held monthly parent meetings, which involved discussions about their children's early learning and care, including information about the program's dual-language approach.

Staff in this child care program also reported aiming to support other aspects of the families' lives, beyond education. For example, families' physical needs could be addressed during an annual resource fair that provided health screenings and a countywide health week that offered free flu shots. Staff also responded to other types of needs, such as figuring out how to pay bills, schedule medical appointments, find housing, or care for infants. During the first major wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in spring/summer 2020, these supports were expanded to address families' most critical needs, such as providing donated diapers, wipes, and formula for infants.

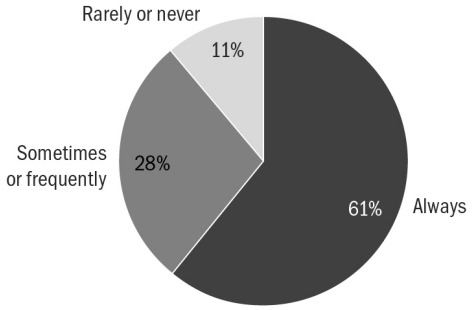
What Messages Do Programs Convey to Families About Early Learning and Development and the Value of Bilingualism?

TEACHER PERSPECTIVES ON LINGUISTICALLY RESPONSIVE COMMUNICATION

There were high levels of language match between teaching staff and families. Teachers in only 19% of classrooms indicated that there were DLLs in the classroom whose parents spoke a language that they themselves did not speak. This suggests that in the majority of our study classrooms—the other 81%—language was not an obstacle to communication with parents for one or more teachers in the room.

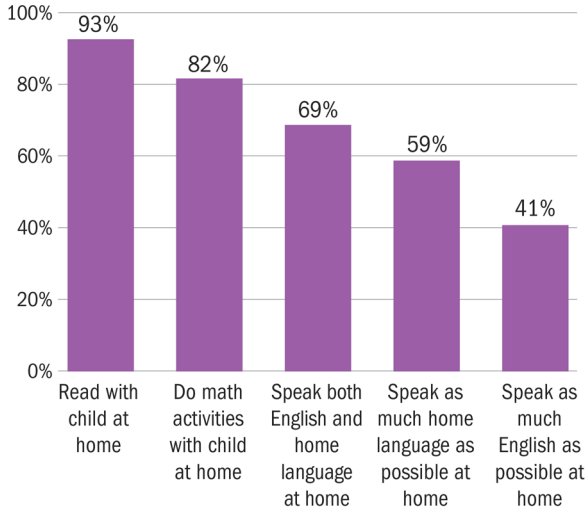
Teachers often communicated with families of DLLs in a language that those families could understand. In most classrooms (61%), the lead teacher reported that they always sent home notes, flyers, educational materials and activities, or announcements to parents in the home language (Exhibit B). This aligns with the high percentage of parents (66%) reporting receiving communication in the home language or both languages as needed. However, just over one in 10 (11%) reported rarely or never sending home notes in the home language; additional supports may be needed for those programs that do not have staff and capacity to send home communication in the home language.

Exhibit B. Frequency of teachers sending materials or communications to families in families' home language



Of all the recommendations for engaging with their child that families receive from programs, the importance of (1) reading and (2) doing math activities was emphasized most often. Overall, families received guidance from program staff most frequently about providing their children general academic developmental support (Exhibit 2), such as reading with their child at home (93%) or doing math activities with their child at home (82%). Messaging about language use—that is, advising families about what language or languages to speak with their child—was less frequent. This finding is consistent with longstanding practical guidance for educators and parents that strongly emphasizes reading at home with young children, as well as with more recent guidance around engaging early in math and numeracy-supportive activities.[13] The fact that programs apparently tended to make such recommendations about math and reading more often than they did about specific language use at home may suggest that they focus on supporting the kindergarten readiness needs of all children first, and think about specific supports for DLLs second.

Exhibit 2. Percentage of families that reported their site recommended that they do various activities with their children at home



Note: Ns range from 1,668 to 1,676.

Most families in the study received positive messages about bilingualism and diversity of language and culture from early learning programs. Most family respondents (85%) reported that a staff member at their site had told them about the benefits of their child learning two languages, that their language and culture were important, or both. This tendency did not differ by home language group: Asian-language-speaking families were just as likely as Spanish-speaking families to have received these affirming messages from their early learning program. These patterns reflect widespread encouragement by programs for families to maintain their bilingualism and to cultivate it in their child.

Most families were explicitly encouraged by site staff to speak their home language *and* English with their child. More than two thirds of families (69%) were told that they should speak both English *and* their home language at home. Over half of families (59%) reported receiving a specific message about speaking *as much of their home language as possible* at home, while fewer (41%) heard a similar message about English. Parents who rated themselves as speaking and understanding spoken English well or very well were less likely to report that they had been told by site staff to speak both English and their home language at home (63%) than those whose oral English skills were less developed (78%). These differences could reflect a range of factors. For example, a program with more bilingual staff, or staff with more advanced education and certification, could have personal or professional motivations for encouraging bilingual language use in the homes of their young students. The differences could also reflect varied understanding among providers about crosslinguistic transfer[14] from home languages to English. Experts recommend that programs encourage families of DLLs to speak to their children in the language in which they are most proficient.[15]

TEACHER PERSPECTIVES ON SHARING INFORMATION ABOUT THE BENEFITS OF BILINGUALISM

Some teachers reported explicitly sharing information about bilingualism with families. Although most parents reported hearing at least informally from program staff about the benefits of their child learning two languages, lead teachers in just under a third of classrooms (31%) reported that they provided parents of DLLs with reading and information such as online resources on the benefits of bilingualism. The fact that these teachers reported having formally distributed concrete information to parents about the benefits of bilingualism indicates their commitment to educating families in addition to the students themselves.

SNAPSHOTS FROM THE FIELD | ENCOURAGING USE OF THE HERITAGE LANGUAGE

Families in the study were often told that they should use both English and the home language at home, and many also reported receiving encouragement to speak as much of the home language as possible at home. Some households, though, customarily use their home language only among adults—making it a heritage language for children, who may understand it well but speak it only to a limited extent.

In the interviews conducted with select sites representative of languages beyond the study's four target languages, many programs shared that they routinely encouraged use of the heritage language with children. One early learning and care program in a rural county in Central California that uses a dual language approach in Hmong and English in the classroom routinely encouraged families' use of Hmong in the children's homes, even in those homes in which the parents had in the past spoken little to no Hmong. One staff member in the program explained:

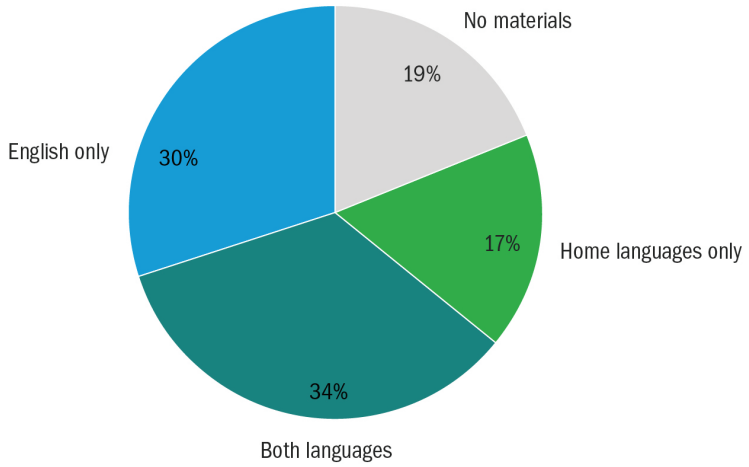
> We want parents just to know how important it is to keep their home language, and we want to support that, and that it's good to build that bond with grandparents and within their community. We really want to just show them how important it is to keep the home language and not let it go away.

Program staff reported addressing parents' frustrations when children spoke English at home, even when they were encouraged to speak Hmong. Parents had told staff that even though the children were learning Hmong in the classroom, they tended to speak English at home, unless monolingual grandparents spoke to them. But the program also experienced successes: According to one staff member, some children were beginning to speak more Hmong at home. She shared that one "big success" was when a parent came to her, visibly excited, and said, "Oh, my child never spoke Hmong before, and he counted to 10 at home!"

What Do Early Learning and Care Programs Share With Families to Encourage Learning at Home?

According to families, most programs provided learning materials like word and number games and conversation starters for families to use with their child—and most often the materials were provided in both English and the family's home language. More than four out of every five families (81%) reported receiving learning materials from their site (Exhibit 3). Specifically, 34% got materials in both English and their home language. Three in 10 (30%) only received English-language home learning materials from their site, while 17% only received materials in their home language. Respondents of different English proficiency levels reported receiving materials in English and the home language at different rates. That is, more parents who did *not* report being English proficient received materials only in their home language (31%), and they were less likely to receive only English-language materials (15%). Fully 89% of parents who reported speaking and understanding spoken English well or very well received home learning materials in English, or in English and their home language, while just 11% of these English-proficient respondents reported receiving materials in their home language only. This is another example of how sites communicate with families in ways that are sensitive to the families' language skills.

Exhibit 3. Percentage of families that received learning materials from their site in different languages



Note: N=1,352. Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Most families received learning materials to use at home with their child, but those at centers were more likely to receive materials only in English than those at FCCHs. More than eight in 10 families (83%) whose child attended a center-based program reported receiving learning materials from their program to take home, while fewer than two thirds (63%) of families with children enrolled in FCCHs said the same. Similar proportions of families at both types of programs received learning materials in only their home language (17% at centers, 15% at FCCHs) or in both English and their home language (35% at centers, 32% at FCCHs). However, the rate of receiving materials only in English was higher at centers (31%) than it was at FCCHs (18%). That is, among families that did receive learning materials to use with their child at home from their program, those served by FCCHs were more likely to receive at least some materials in their home language than those served by centers, though families served by FCCHs were also less likely to report having received any materials at all.

TEACHERS PROVIDING LANGUAGE ACTIVITIES

Teacher reports about providing activities for families to do with their child were mixed. According to teacher surveys, about half (50%) of classrooms sent home activities and/or suggestions for how parents of DLLs could support their children's English language development. Somewhat fewer (44%) provided similar resources on supporting children's home language development, although both of these rates suggest fairly widespread program efforts to help families cultivate their child's language skills at home, whether in English, the home language, or both.

Families served by programs that received federal or state public funding were somewhat more likely to report that their program provided learning materials for them to use at home with their child. More than nine in 10 families (91%) whose child's program received Head Start or Early Head Start funding reported receiving materials, while fewer than eight in 10 families (79%) affiliated with programs without that funding did so. A similar pattern was observed for programs that received California State Public

Preschool (CSPP) funding: 85% of families whose child attended a CSPP-funded program reported receiving learning materials, while nearly 10% fewer families (76%) whose child's program did not receive CSPP funding reported that their program offered those materials. Families at Head Start/Early Head Start programs were also more likely to say their program had offered home-language materials, either alone (22%) or along with some English-language materials (50%), than families at programs that did not receive Head Start funding (21% home-language only; 40% English and home-language). In sum, both of these public funding sources are associated with families receiving learning materials to use at home with their child at higher rates. This suggests that funding may be put toward the purchase of beneficial materials in a way that could have encouraged at-home learning activities, an express goal of those funding programs and therefore a bright spot among the findings described in this brief.

Family Practices With Their DLL Children and How Program Practices Relate

In addition to ongoing communication between programs and families, family engagement involves specific efforts to foster school-based and home-based engagement. School-based engagement,[16] which includes attending activities and meetings, volunteering at a child's school, and serving on parent committees, for example, has been shown to be predictive of child outcomes.[17] Beyond the school setting, home-based family engagement presents an additional opportunity to purposefully use and develop a child's home language[18]—through learning activities that parents engage in with their children at home, such as reading, asking the child questions, and teaching basic concepts.

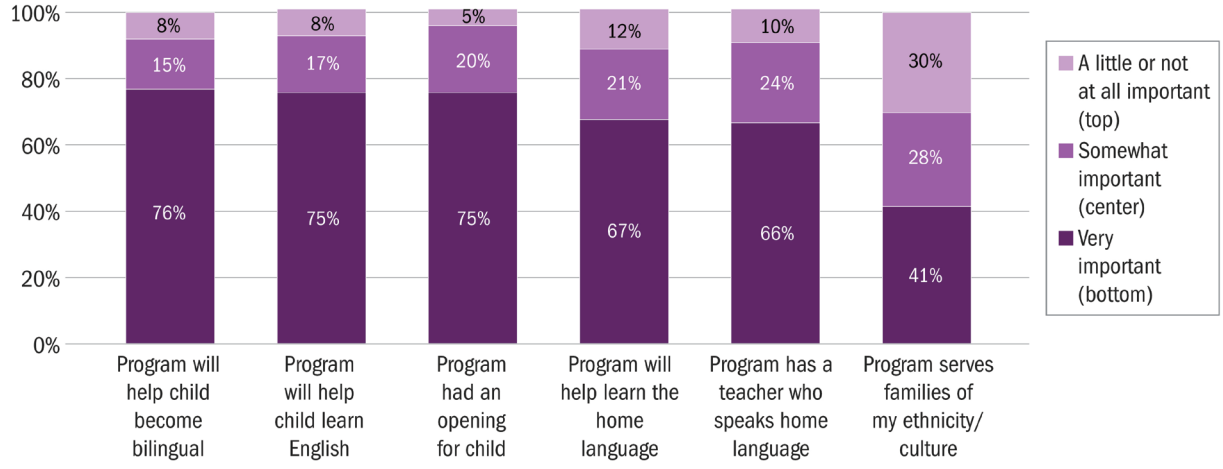
In this section, we explore how often families in our study reported engaging in on-site activities, as well as barriers and facilitators associated with that engagement. We then describe parents' goals for their DLL child's early learning and development, and how these relate to their early learning and care program choices. Finally, we describe how parents engaged in educational activities at home with their child, what language or languages they used in those interactions, and how their own language proficiency may have played a role in those activities. For each of these topics—families' beliefs, their activities at their child's site, and families' educational activities with their child at home—we also explore associations with program efforts and activities.

What Do DLL Families Believe Is Important for Their Child's Early Learning and Development?

Families' goals for their children were reflected in how they chose their child care program. Although families reported many reasons for choosing their child's early learning program, many specifically valued its support for their family's home language and the development of their child's bilingualism (Exhibit 4). About three quarters of respondents (76%) said that it was "very important" that their site help their child become bilingual, compared with about two thirds of respondents (67%) reporting it was "very important" that their

site help their child learn their home language. The fact that becoming bilingual was more frequently rated important than learning the home language itself (on a par with the importance of learning English; see Exhibit 4) may reflect a desire among families for their children to learn English at their child care site, particularly if the home language is spoken at home—the result of which, after all, would be a child's becoming bilingual.[19]

Exhibit 4. Reasons shaping families' choice of their early learning and care program

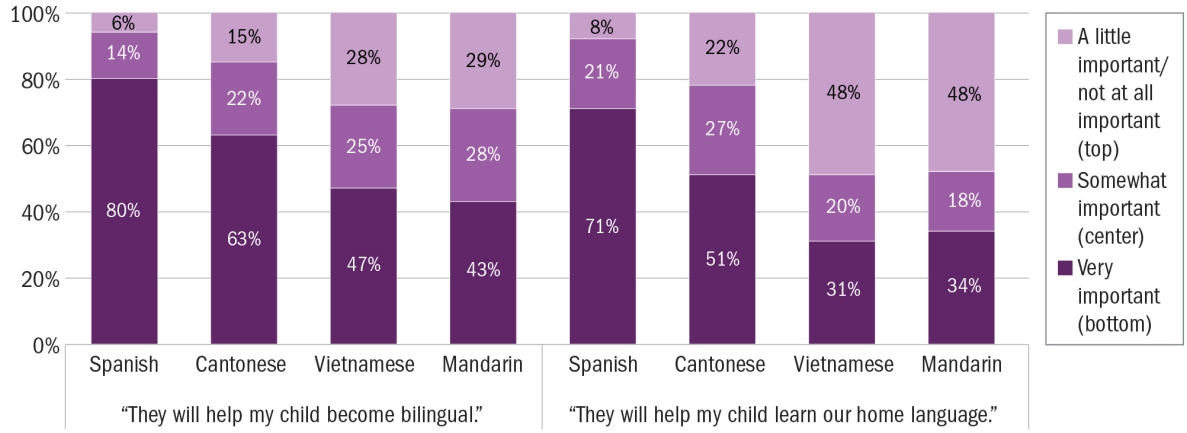


Note: Ns range from 1,661 to 1,696. The six items presented in this exhibit were part of a longer set of 21 total items that parents responded to in the survey about reasons for child care site selection. Five of the items presented here are those related to language and culture. The sixth ("Had an opening for child") is included because it was the item most often selected across the full set of 21 as either "very important" or "somewhat important."

Families that spoke different languages at home chose early learning and care sites for different reasons. Spanish- and Cantonese-speaking families were more likely to assign high importance to programs that provide bilingual and home language support than Mandarin- and Vietnamese-speaking families (Exhibit 5).[iv] The strongest tendency to rate bilingual and home language support as important was found among Spanish-speaking families, although over 70% of families from all four language backgrounds said that it was at least somewhat important that their child's program help the child become bilingual. There was more variation in how important families from different backgrounds thought it was that their child's early learning and care program cultivate their child's home language: while nearly all Spanish-speaking families said this was at least somewhat important, and over 75% of Cantonese-speaking families said the same, barely more than half of Mandarin- and Vietnamese-speaking families endorsed this statement. These disparities could have a range of sources, including parents' beliefs about who can or should teach their child their home language, parents' goals for their child's home language development, the mere availability or not of home language supports in the program, or others.

[iv] Findings should be interpreted with caution given the small sample sizes for non-Spanish languages.

Exhibit 5. Importance of bilingual and home language support in the selection of an early learning program, by language group

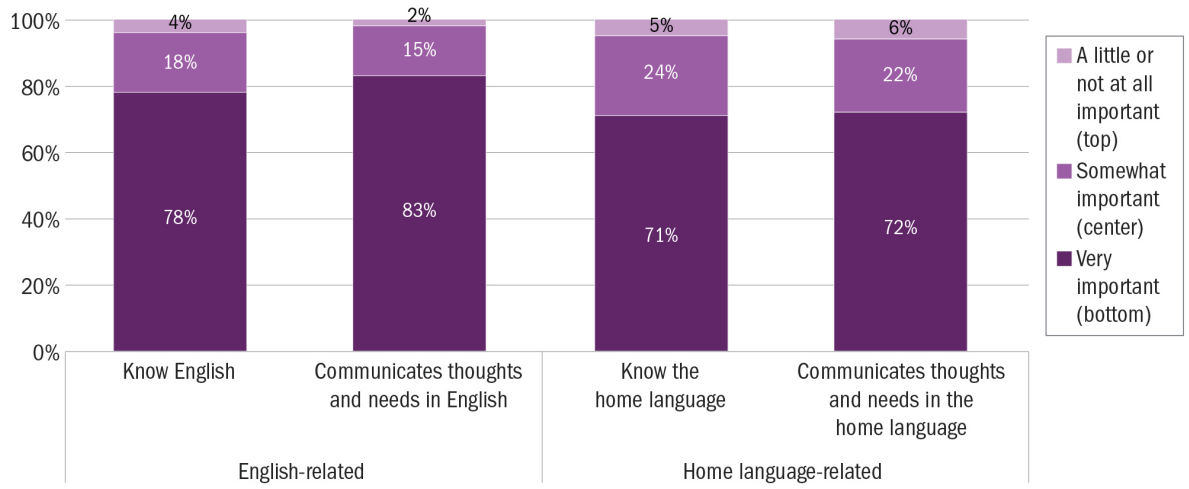


Note: N=1,692 for "They will help my child become bilingual" and N=1,686 for "They will help my child learn our home language."

Families overwhelmingly reported wanting their children to grow up to be bilingual and biliterate. Almost nine out of every 10 family respondents in the study (88%) reported wanting their child to grow up to be able to speak both their home language and English. This sentiment was especially likely to be expressed by families with higher household incomes: 97% of families with a household income of over $100,000 per year reported wanting their child to become bilingual, compared to 87% of families earning $50,000 per year or less. Similarly, 88% of all respondents wanted their child to be able to read and write in both their home language and English, again with somewhat more higher-income families (96%) expressing this desire than lower-income families (87%). Very few respondents favored one language to the exclusion of the other: only 5% wanted their child to speak English but not their home language when they grow up, and another 5% wanted their child to speak their home language but not English when they grow up. Parents who self-rated their English language skills as lower were less likely to want their child to cultivate their home language in the long term.

When it comes to being kindergarten ready, however, parents tended to prioritize English skills. Most families (83%) thought it was "very important" for their child to be able to communicate thoughts and needs in English when the time comes for them to enter kindergarten (Exhibit 6). Somewhat fewer respondents (71%) said that it was "very important" that their child enters kindergarten knowing their home language. Very few respondents indicated that the home language was not at all important or that English was not at all important. However, while more respondents favored English, families also highly valued the home language.

Exhibit 6. Parent beliefs about the importance of having English and home language skills by kindergarten



Note: Ns range from 1,324 to 1,330. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

How Are Programs' Efforts Connected to Families' Beliefs About Their Child's Early Learning?

Receiving affirming messages about bilingualism and cultural diversity from their child's early learning and care program predicted families' tendency to value home language skills as an aspect of school readiness. Families that received affirming messages about cultural diversity and bilingualism were significantly more likely to rate having home language skills by kindergarten as "very important" than families that did not receive such messages (p=.002), even when accounting for demographic characteristics like child age and family income.[v] It is possible that, for some families, their program's positive messaging led to the family placing more value on their child's expressive home language skill development. On the other hand, some families may have *chosen* their child's program specifically because they valued their child's home language development and wanted to see it cultivated by their early learning and care program.

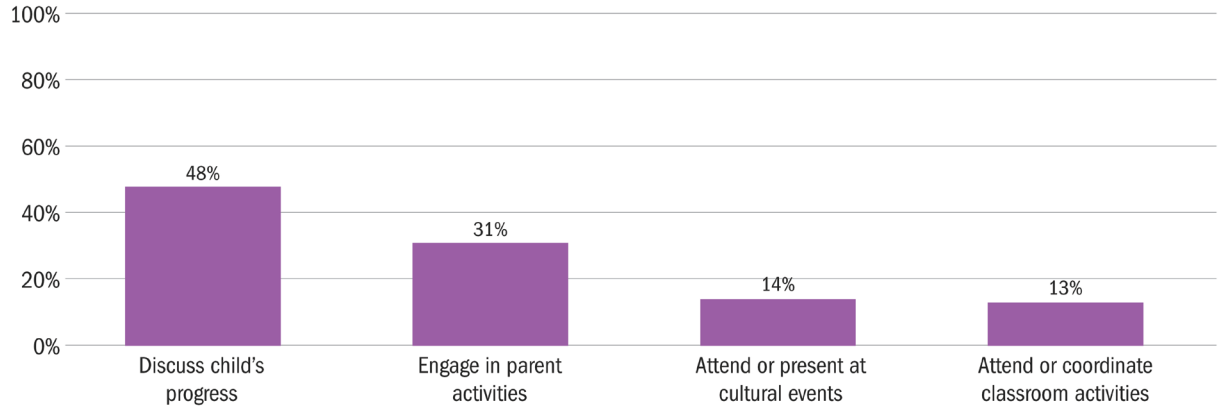
How Do Families Participate in Early Learning and Care Program Activities?

Families reported regular engagement with their child's program site, primarily to discuss their child's learning and development, though reasons varied by parent language skills. Almost half of respondents (48%) said that they attended meetings with program staff at least once a month to talk about their child's progress, including seeking help from staff about a particular concern about their child's learning or

[v] See the *Methodological Details* box at the end of this brief for further information about the teacher survey.

development (Exhibit 7). Just under a third of respondents (31%) engaged in adult-focused activities, such as workshops or classes, at their site once a month or more. Families less often attended or coordinated classroom activities or attended or presented at events that highlighted their cultural background. Furthermore, fewer than half of respondents who said they spoke and understood English well or very well (46%) attended their site to discuss their child's progress at least once a month, while just over half (52%) of respondents who were not English proficient did so. On the other hand, while 33% of English-proficient respondents reported attending *parent* activities at their site at least monthly, only 28% of non-English proficient respondents did. These differences are small but statistically significant, and they may be suggestive of different barriers and facilitators that language and cultural familiarity present to different types of families as they consider participating in activities at their child's early learning and care program. They may also reflect different rates, across programs, of offering various types of on-site activities for parents.

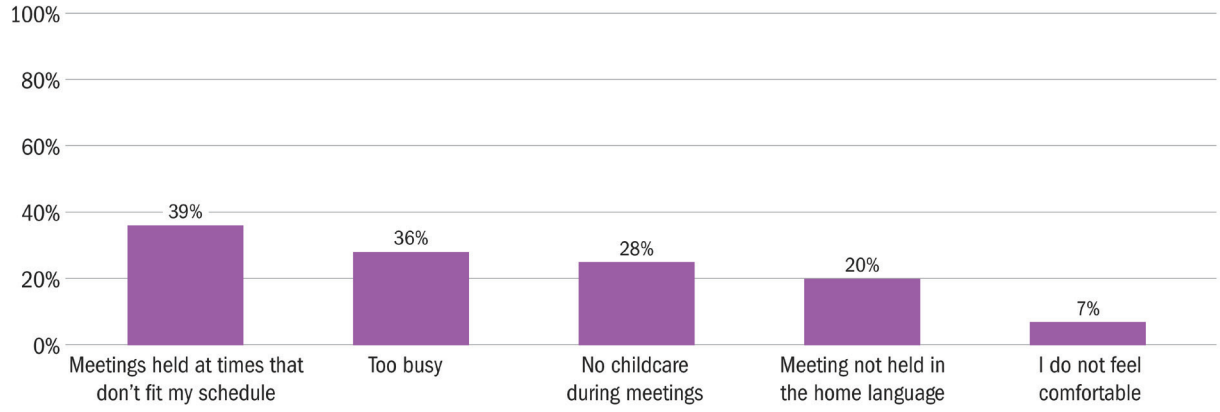
Exhibit 7. Percentage of families that attended their early learning site once a month or more for different purposes



Note: Ns range from 1,655 to 1,685.

Sometimes families encountered barriers to attending site activities, but feeling uncomfortable at the site was rarely cited as an issue. Over a third of respondents said that they did not attend meetings or activities because they are held at inconvenient times (39%) or because families are too busy (36%) (Exhibit 8). The language that meetings were held in was a barrier only for one in every five respondents (20%), indicating that sites largely met families' language needs. In addition, parents in the study felt comfortable at their site, with only 7% reporting that they did not attend site activities because they did not feel comfortable doing so. These findings indicate that logistical challenges were the main impediment to families engaging on site at their child's program—challenges that programs could overcome by taking simple, actionable steps such as offering virtual activities or multiple event times.

Exhibit 8. Percentage of respondents who selected various reasons for not attending meetings or activities at the site



Note: Ns range from 1,610 to 1,678.

How Are Programs' Efforts Connected to Families' Participation in Site Activities?

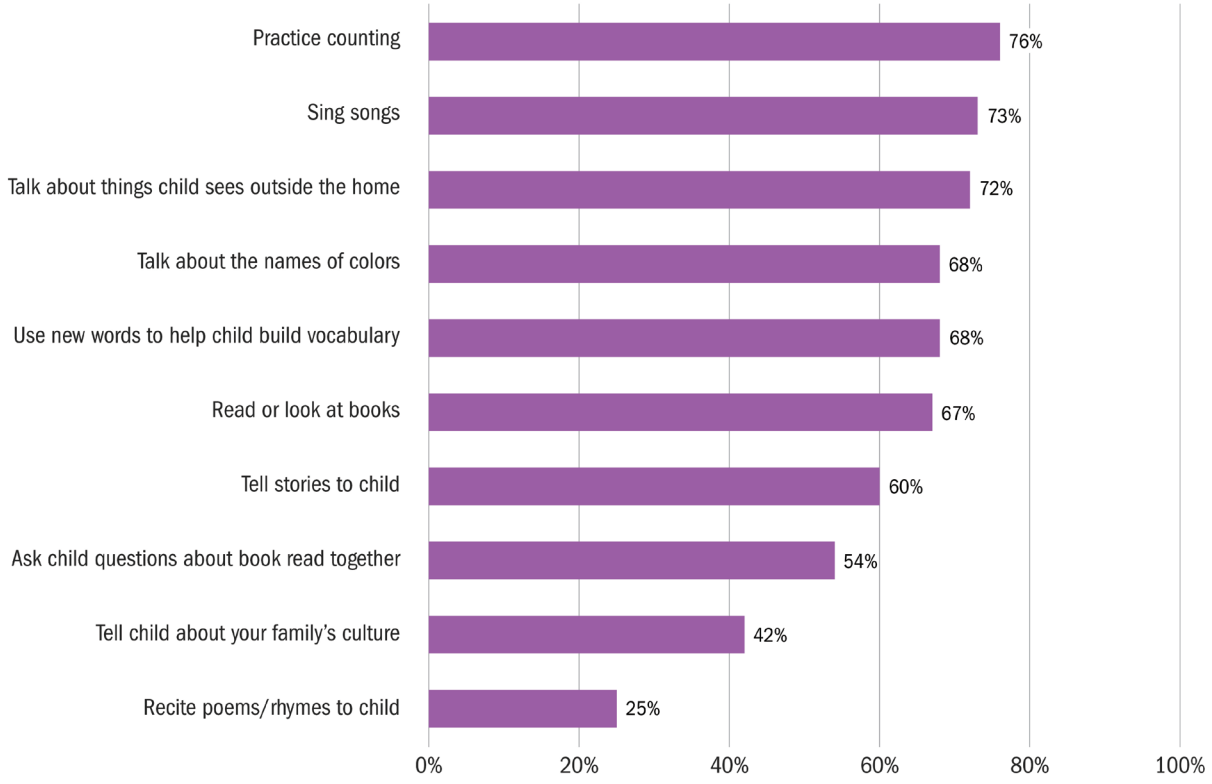
Families that reported being contacted more frequently by their program attended on-site activities more often. There was a strong positive association between how regularly programs contacted families and how often those families attended site-based activities ($p<.001$). This relationship held both for overall average attendance at on-site activities and for the four individual subcategories depicted in Exhibit 7 above. Families that were contacted by their program more than once a month attended activities at their site more than twice as often, on average, as families that were contacted by their program once a month or less. This relationship was roughly equivalent for activities related to a family's own child (e.g., being contacted more frequently to discuss the child's progress was associated with attending the site more often to do so) as well as for adult- and classroom-focused activities (e.g., being contacted about information on school activities more frequently was associated with attending more classroom events). This finding suggests that sites' communication efforts may have the effect of encouraging or increasing family attendance at on-site activities—which may in turn have important consequences for their engagement in and positive beliefs about their child's education.

More frequent family attendance at site activities had a strong positive association with the importance families ascribed to their child having home language skills in place before kindergarten. Controlling for a host of demographic characteristics, we found that families that rated home language skills as a more important aspect of kindergarten readiness attended site activities or meetings more often ($p=.005$). It is not clear just why these beliefs and behaviors are linked; it could be, for example, that attending those activities or meetings caused families to adopt certain beliefs about home language skills, but it could also be that families that already had those beliefs were more inclined to attend site activities. Or these activities and beliefs could be mutually reinforcing, encouraging both on-site interactions for families and home language maintenance beliefs about their child.

What Do Families Do *at Home* to Support Their Child's Learning and Development?

DLL families engaged in a range of activities with their child that research indicates should support their learning and development—two to three times per activity per week, on average. Of the 10 activities we surveyed families about, families reported having engaged in about nine on average in the previous week, with 53% of respondents saying they had done all 10 of the activities at least once that week. Some activities were more common than others, however (Exhibit 9). Over three quarters of families (76%) practiced counting with their child at least three times in the week leading up to the survey, and nearly as many sang songs with their child (73%) and talked about things their child saw outside the home (72%) that often. Over two thirds of respondents (67%) reported reading or looking at books with their child at least three times in the prior week, and a similar proportion (68%) talked about the names of colors that often. These frequent practices are consistent with a large body of research on early practices that can promote children's early language, literacy, and numeracy development.[20]

Exhibit 9. Percentage of parents reporting engaging their child in various activities three or more times over the past week

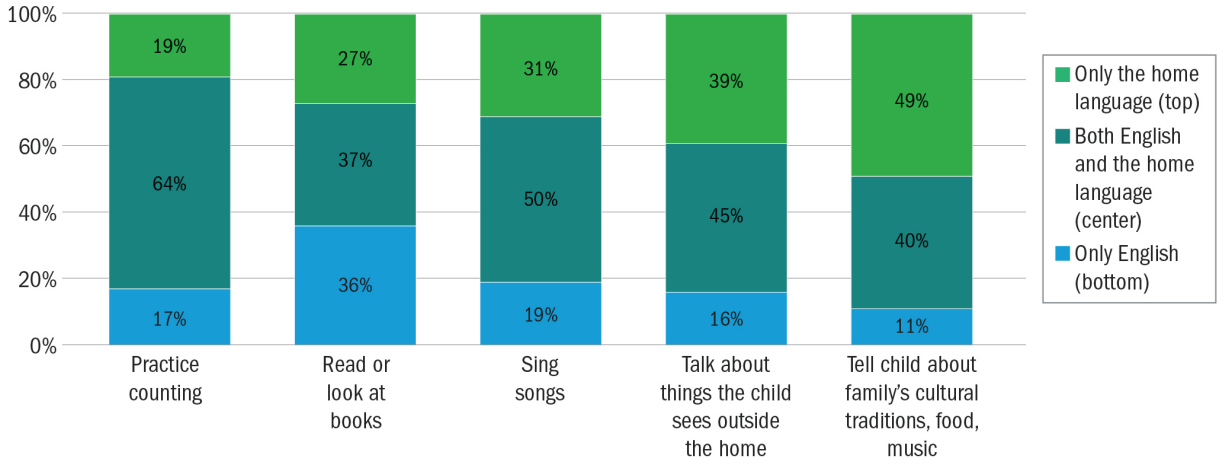


Note: Ns range from 1,294 to 1,307.

Most families reported using both English and their home language while engaging in learning activities at home with their child. Fewer families reported using only English or only the home language (Exhibit 10), except in their reports about reading or looking at books with their child: the percentage of families that reported reading with their child only in English (36%) was approximately equal to the

percentage of families that reported reading with their child in both English and their home language (37%). Combined, this means that nearly three quarters of families in the study reported reading with their child in English at least some of the time. Some of the more common activities that occurred in both languages included counting (64%) and singing songs (50%). Interestingly, when families talked about cultural traditions, almost half (49%) did so in the home language only, while just 11% reported doing so only in English. The findings reflect a favorable tendency to use and foster the home language at home among participating families.

Exhibit 10. Selected activities families reported doing at least once in the past week, by the language in which they reported doing them



Note: Ns range from 1,294 to 1,303.

Respondents who rated their language skills as strong—whether in English or in their home language—reported engaging more often in learning activities with their child. Respondents' self-reported language skills predicted the frequency with which they engaged their child in learning activities. This association held for language and literacy skill in English (p=.002) and for language and literacy skill in their home language (p=.02). In addition, respondents who did *not* report speaking and understanding English well (regardless of their English reading and writing skills) were more likely to use only their home language during these activities. However, many of them also incorporated at least some English into those interactions. Findings related to respondents' language skills should be interpreted with caution, due to their imprecise, self-assessed measurement and their potential to be influenced by sociocultural and personality factors (e.g., higher self-confidence could lead to a more favorable assessment of one's language skills).

How Are Programs' Efforts Connected to Families' Support for Their Child's Learning and Development at Home?

There was a strong positive association between families' attendance at site activities and the frequency with which they engaged their child in learning activities at home. More frequent engagement with their child in the week leading up to their completion of the survey was positively predicted by the frequency with which families reported attending site activities or meetings (p<.001), even when controlling for a

range of demographic characteristics including parent education level: on average, families that attended site activities once a month or more tended to have engaged in learning activities with their child at least three times in the past week, while families that attended site activities less often did so between two and three times. These associations could reflect the fact that certain parents have more available time than others—both to engage in activities at home with their child and to attend events at their child's early learning and care program. But they could also be an indication that parents are picking up ideas or skills during these program activities that facilitate their engagement with their child in learning activities at home.

Families in programs that provided learning materials to use at home reported engaging more frequently in learning activities like reading and counting with their child at home, especially when those materials were available in the home language. Controlling for demographic characteristics, families' receipt of learning materials positively predicted more frequent engagement in home-based activities that could support the child's general learning and development (e.g., practicing counting, talking about colors; p=.008). And the language in which sites provided those materials was also associated with the frequency of the learning activities: compared with families that did not report that their site gave them any learning materials to use at home, those who reported receiving materials in their home language (p=.004) or in both English and their home language (p=.001) reported more frequent engagement with their child in learning activities at home. Receiving materials only in English, however, was not associated with more frequent engagement in general educational activities like talking about colors, reading together, or practicing counting.

Families in programs that contacted them more frequently reported assigning more importance to school readiness skills and engaging their child more often in learning activities at home. Families that said it was important for their child to have school readiness skills (not tied to a specific language) before kindergarten—like counting to 20 or having good problem-solving skills—reported that they had been contacted by their site more often (p=.008). In addition, the more often families were contacted by their program, the wider the range of activities they reported having engaged in with their child in the last week (p<.001), and the more often they reported engaging in those activities (p<.001). These findings are consistent with trends reported in the research literature on children from Spanish-speaking backgrounds indicating that families' active engagement by and with their child's early learning and care program can catalyze the child's learning and development.[21] That is, these findings suggest that more frequent communication between programs and families may result in benefits to children's at-home learning opportunities as well as to their families' goals for their early learning and development.

Conclusions and Considerations for Policy and Practice

Overall, the study's findings show that early learning and care programs in California and the DLL families they serve place a high value on bilingualism, communicate frequently, and support their young learners in a variety of ways. We found that:

- *Nearly nine in 10 parents placed a high value on bilingualism for their child.* Even though families prioritized English skill development in the context of kindergarten readiness, most parents placed a high importance on developing the home language as well. These values were also related to how parents chose early learning and care programs for their children.

- *Programs frequently communicated positive messages about bilingualism to families.* Many parents reported receiving positive messages about bilingualism, and those parents who received those messages also placed more importance on their children's development of home language skills. Additionally, when families received guidance from their program about language use at home, most often they were advised to speak both the home language and English.

- *Programs engaged in frequent and varied communication that was well aligned to the parents' own language skills.* Survey responses revealed that sites communicated with families frequently and that this communication was largely carried out in a language that families understood. More frequent communication was associated with parents' school readiness goals for their children and more frequent engagement in home learning activities with their children.

- *Programs provided a variety of materials, in both English and the home language, to support families in engaging with their children.* Many early learning and care programs—especially those receiving federal or state public funding—provided learning materials for families to use with their children at home. Over half of families reported receiving at least some of these materials in their home language. Programs also provided general guidance to families; most often this guidance was about the importance of reading and engaging in math activities with children.

- *Parents were generally engaged with their children's learning and development at home.* Families across the study's language groups reported engaging in a variety of educational activities with their DLL children multiple times per week, and they often reported doing so in the home language *and* English. Parents who rated their own language skills more highly tended to engage their child in these learning activities more often. Importantly, families who received learning materials from their program also reported engaging more frequently in learning activities at home with their child. For those that received those materials in their home language, this association was particularly strong.

- *Programs offered, and parents participated in, a variety of on-site activities.* Many parents reported that their programs offered a range of opportunities to engage in activities at the site, and that they took advantage of those opportunities frequently. However, parents did report obstacles to their engagement in site activities—mostly around practical considerations like scheduling and finding child care during meeting times. When parents were able to attend, there were strong positive associations between participating in site-based family events and beliefs about the importance of cultivating their child's home language skills, as well as engaging in home-based learning activities with children.

With these findings in mind, we close this brief with a series of practical takeaways for stakeholders in young DLLs' education—program administrators and educators, policymakers, and, of course, families.

- *Communicating with families is an efficient and effective way of supporting children's learning outside of the classroom.* Overall, parents received consistent messages about how to support their child's early learning and development in general, in addition to specific messages about the value of bilingualism. This is important, because we know that information shared by trusted messengers like educators and care providers is often well received by families. Reaching out to families in sensitive ways to share critical information and to learn from them—through two-way communication—is a generally

low-cost practice that programs can adopt more intentionally to communicate important messages. For instance, just a few brief communications to DLL families to let them know that their child's home language learning will not impede their English development may be sufficient to change parents' understanding of (and practices to support) their children's language development.[22]

- *Program staff can do more to help families understand the role of their home language in their child's linguistic development.* Results suggest that some practices, such as offering scientifically grounded guidance about language use at home, were broadly but not universally adopted. Programs that are already incorporating these strategies can build on the many strong practices they are already using, and others should begin efforts to incorporate them as well. Beyond just offering verbal recommendations, programs can point families to resources that lay out the benefits of a linguistically rich environment for young children, including emergent bilingual children. In particular, early childhood educators can help clarify that it is highly beneficial for children to hear *fluent* speech, no matter in what language, and encourage families to talk with their child in the language in which they are most fluent—whether that language is commonly in use outside the home or not.

- *Learning about the diversity of DLLs' families can help programs better meet their needs.* The families of DLLs are diverse in many ways. They may have different strengths in their language skills, and in response programs should consider using multiple strategies to connect and communicate with families. For example, over half of parents in the study rated themselves as proficient in English. While this pattern may not represent all DLL families across the state or the country, it somewhat contradicts the common narrative that educators serving DLLs *always need* to be able to use a family's home language to reach their students' parents. It is crucial, of course, that programs be able to communicate with all families served in a language they can understand. This study points to an opportunity for programs to spend more time understanding families' perspectives and backgrounds, including their language skills and their goals for their child's language learning, and then to work collaboratively with families to communicate according to those skills and goals.

- *Programs should explore ways to lower barriers to participating in site activities, including by considering online programming.* Program leaders should be mindful of the many barriers DLL families may face in engaging in site activities and consider how they might help mitigate these (e.g., through providing transportation or child care). Counties and the state can also provide support to programs through professional learning opportunities or grants to enable programs to cover child care during parent activities. Parents reported that scheduling was the most formidable barrier to participating in site activities. Now that so many families are accustomed to conducting much of their life online in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, sites might consider offering family engagement opportunities in virtual or hybrid modes rather than holding them only in person at the site. Sites can also poll families before scheduling activities or request generally preferred times and durations for activities and meetings.

Beyond these conclusions and practical takeaways, the findings of this brief point to questions still unanswered. For example, how can state policy evolve to further foster mutual engagement between DLL families and their children's early learning and care programs? Another important question is about how the COVID-19 pandemic may have affected relationships between families and programs. All the data analyzed for this brief were collected before the pandemic or asked about families'

pre-pandemic experiences. But with more than a year of disruptions in access to usual early education opportunities, families' perspectives may well have changed in ways that may require programs to adjust their expectations and approaches to serving them (for more on this topic, please see our series of briefs on the impact of COVID-19 on early learning and care in California). Encouragingly, the findings of this brief suggest that many California programs already have a range of tools to engage and inform the families of their DLLs. An upcoming brief from this project will describe the experiences of DLL families over the course of the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet no matter the circumstances, further fostering responsive communication aligned with families' language skills and educational values promises to enhance students' early learning experiences, both in their program and at home.

METHODOLOGICAL DETAILS

Parent *survey respondents and sample construction:* Each parent respondent completed a survey about one child, who was identified by name in the survey, even if the family had other children (within or outside the program). Families were recruited through 177 early learning and care programs in 16 counties selected to be representative of the state; more information about these programs can be found in our project's Sitewide Approaches brief. The data analyzed for this brief were gathered from two survey administrations: about one quarter of the 1,791 survey respondents (470) completed the survey only in the second administration, answering the relevant questions in summer 2020. The questions asked of this group of 470 parents differed from those asked on the first survey only in that they instructed respondents to answer about their experiences prior to COVID-19 disruptions. Accordingly, we consider the responses to be comparable, and combined them for the purposes of analysis. Some of the survey questions discussed in this brief were answered only by the initial set of parents; the number of respondents is correspondingly lower for those.

Teacher *survey respondents and administration:* The teacher survey was fielded between March and July of 2020. All questions reported on in this brief, asked about pre-pandemic practices. The sample included 714 classroom educators in child care centers and family child care homes—the same ones attended by the children of the families that were surveyed for the family survey. Data were aggregated to the classroom level, focusing on the "lead teacher" where possible. About 14% of classrooms did not have a teacher with the "lead teacher" title respond to the survey, either because the room did not have a designated lead teacher or because the lead teacher did not return a survey. In these classrooms, we consider the responding teacher with the next highest title to be the lead teacher; in nearly all cases, this was a "teacher or co-teacher."

Statistical model construction: Statistical models exploring relationships between program activities and family practices and priorities controlled for the following factors: respondent's self-rated English skills (aggregating listening, speaking, reading, writing), respondent's self-rated home language skills (aggregating listening, speaking, reading, writing), child's age group (infant/toddler vs. preschooler), child sex, number of months at their child care program, average hours per week attending the child care program, parent language preference, child home language, family structure, respondent education level, household income, family race/ethnicity, site type (center vs. family child care home), Head Start/Early Head Start funding, and CSPP funding. Values were imputed for control variables that had missing data (means for continuous variables; dummy variable imputation for categorical variables), with additional variables in the model as indicators of missingness. Three-level mixed-effects linear or logistic (depending on the type of outcome) regression models were fit in Stata using these control variables and predictors of interest, nesting students in classrooms in sites.

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About the First 5 California DLL Pilot Study

In 2015, First 5 California committed $20 million for the DLL Pilot Study to support effective and scalable strategies in early learning and care programs to promote learning and development for DLLs and their families. A key component of this overall initiative seeks to describe and evaluate the range of strategies to support DLLs, including three strategies of particular interest: instructional practices, PD for early educators, and family engagement. The study is examining the range of practices, by age, setting type, and diverse language groups, and how various practices are supportive of child and family outcomes. The study includes 16 counties selected to be broadly representative of the state's DLL population: Butte, Calaveras, Contra Costa, Fresno, Los Angeles, Monterey, Orange, Riverside, Sacramento, San Diego, San Francisco, Santa Barbara, Santa Clara, Sonoma, Stanislaus, and Yolo. The study is being conducted by AIR and its partners at Juárez & Associates; CRI; School Readiness Consulting; Allen, Shea & Associates; and Stanfield Systems, Inc.; with guidance from the DLL Input Group, which comprises stakeholders, advocates, and state and national experts on DLLs.

For more information about the study and to read other study briefs and reports:

https://californiadllstudy.org/

www.ccfc.ca.gov/

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