

Family Language Planning with Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children: Fostering Multilingual Development

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Families who live in the United States or migrated here from other countries and who do not speak English often feel pressured to stop using their home language with their children and to focus on learning English (Fillmore, 2000). This is true for hearing families and for families of children who are deaf or hard of hearing. Parents report that their decisions about language opportunities for their deaf or hard of hearing child reflect a multitude of factors. These include:

- **Pressures from society**—Parents report pressures to use the dominant language of the culture—spoken English—as that is the language of higher status within American culture (Batamula, 2016; Curdt-Christiansen, 2009; Kite, 2017; Mitchiner, 2014).
- **Information about communication**—Parents report that the information shared by professionals has a strong impact on their language choices (Humphries et al., 2015; Kite, 2017; Li et al., 2003; Young et al., 2006).
- **Families' own experiences**—Parents note that their pre-existing attitudes and beliefs affect their language choices (Batamula, 2016; Kite, 2017; Mitchiner, 2014).
- **Families' knowledge about language development**—Knowing that the most important language learning tends to occur in the first years of a child's life affects parental decision making (Mitchiner, 2014).
- **Deaf or hard of hearing child's listening and language abilities**—Parents report that the degree of a child's hearing and his or her language abilities affects their decision on language choice (Crowe et al., 2014).

Photos courtesy of Norma Morán and Franklin C. Torres



Above: Developing a family language plan allows families to plan when to use which language throughout their child's day.

Approximately 95 percent of deaf children are born to hearing families (Karchmer & Mitchell, 2003), and 71.6 percent of family members do not consistently sign with their deaf children (Gallaudet Research Institute, 2010). Yet learning American Sign Language (ASL) ensures the child's cognitive development and reduces family frustration (Kushalnagar et al., 2007). As a visual language, ASL is the most accessible language for a deaf or hard of hearing child; this gives the child a solid foundation in literacy, both in reading and writing, and helps ensure academic success (Chamberlain & Mayberry 2008; MacSweeney, 1998; Padden & Ramsey, 2000; Strong & Prinz, 2000).

Grosjean (2001) states that the linguistic rights of deaf children are to acquire sign language as their home language. Families who choose ASL as a language for their deaf or hard of hearing child now need to figure out how to add ASL to their household language. This should not necessarily mean removing the language of the children's parents, whether or not that language is English. Too often "experts" tell parents from other countries to use only English and ASL with their children. Whatever language a child's family uses, removing it from their child's life can negatively affect the connection between the

child and his or her family and lead to a loss of cultural knowledge and identity for the child. Holding on to the language of the child's family is important and complex—and it can be even more complex for multilingual families.

Family Language Policy

Family language policy is a relatively new field of research that integrates language acquisition and language policy and focuses on the study of the relations between language policy and family language choice and use (Spolsky, 2012; King, Fogle, & Logan-Terry, 2008). During the last 10 years, family language policy studies have described how bilingual and multilingual families navigate and support their children as the children develop two or more languages. All bilingual and multilingual families, whether hearing or deaf, have similar challenges. One way to face some of these challenges is to develop a family language plan. A family language plan allows families to plan when to use which language throughout a child's day. The goal is to maintain balanced input from each language and to ensure mastery in both.

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The authors welcome questions and comments about this article at Christi.Batamula@gallaudet.edu, Bobbie.Kite@gallaudet.edu, and Julie.Mitchiner@gallaudet.edu, respectively.

Family Language Plan For Families and Professionals

The family language plan should be drafted collaboratively with a professional who works with deaf and hard of hearing children and their families. This specialist may be an early childhood education teacher, an early intervention specialist, an ASL specialist, a speech-language pathologist, a Deaf Mentor, or a professional who works closely with families. Work on the plan begins when the family and the professional sit down together to discuss the linguistic goals of the family for their child. It will likely take several meetings. To ensure communication between the professional and the family is accessible, including a translator or an interpreter can be valuable. The time necessary to develop a family language plan varies depending on many factors, but it should happen over the course of several visits and never in one visit. It is critical for the professional to spend time with the family and get to know the family members well to be able to recommend the most helpful and natural family language plan.

Family Language Planning The Steps

Family language planning begins with the following six steps:

- 1. First meeting**—Ideally, first meetings take place in the family’s home. It would be beneficial for the professional to consult with a professional who is part of the family’s community to become conscious of the family’s cultural beliefs and practices. The family and the professional discuss the child’s typical day during the week and on weekends. The professional may tour the child’s home and assess the environment, identifying strengths pertaining to language development in the home environment. The professional may share his or her experiences with languages, information about language development, and general research; the family may share the languages used by the family members both inside and out of the home and the languages the family wants the child to learn and use.
- 2. Observations and evaluations**—The professional, teachers, ASL specialists, speech-language pathologists, and family members identify the child’s strengths and areas of need. Using the results of the evaluation and assessment of



Above: Planning can help families become conscious about when and how to use which languages, ensuring the child has a balanced input of two or more languages.

the child’s languages, the family and the professional work together to develop goals in each of the child’s languages.

- 3. Goals**—With help from the professional, family members identify the child’s goals. Goals are targeted for the child but also pertain to the family. For example, if the child is using ASL and the family is new to ASL, support and resources are provided to the family to increase their ASL skills. The goals should be monitored and reviewed periodically.
- 4. Daily routines**—The family members begin by identifying their daily routines, from waking up in the morning to going to sleep in the evenings. Each routine should be listed.
- 5. Language matched with routine**—The family identifies which language is the most natural to use in each routine that occurs throughout the day. For example, if a family chooses to include spoken language with their child, the child and family members may choose to use spoken language in the morning when they turn on and test the child’s assistive listening devices. Mealtimes, when family members come together, may be ideal opportunities to use sign language so each person has full access to the conversation. The language use during a particular time

should be intentional and natural. At the same time, the family needs to be mindful about maintaining a balanced input of two or more languages throughout the day to accomplish fluency in two or more languages.

6. Written plan—The whole family, or as many family members as possible, should be included in drafting the family language plan. The family can also include any caretakers, roommates, or other people routinely engaged with the child. The family language plan is based on the professional’s recommendation from his or her observations and evaluations, the child’s daily routine, and the goals the family has identified. The family language plan should identify language-learning opportunities throughout the child’s day.

Planning can help families become conscious about when and how to use which languages, ensuring the child has a balanced input of two or more languages. Family language planning can include bringing resources to the child, such as sign language classes for parents, Deaf Mentoring services, heritage language classes and programs, cultural and community-based support groups, speech-language therapy, connections to associations and organizations for families with deaf children, information about schools and programs that serve deaf and hard of hearing children, and family support groups. A living document, the family language plan can be revised and improved periodically to meet each family’s needs.

Families in which English is not the language of the home should not be told to abandon their home language. Instead, professionals should help these families balance the use of their home language with ASL and English to further their deaf or hard of hearing child’s acquisition of all languages in the child’s life. This allows deaf and hard of hearing children to maintain connection with their parents and their parents’ community, their family’s heritage, and their peers while fostering the development of English literacy skills.

Authors’ note: We are members of the ASL and English bilingual and multilingual community who value working with families. We recognize our position and power of white privilege and welcome any input and feedback on our research. Additionally, we are early childhood and deaf educators and researchers at Gallaudet University. This article and its companion article, “Grandparents, Parents, Children—and Four Languages: A Deaf Family’s Story” by Norma Morán and Franklin C. Torres on page 4, are the result of a working collaboration between researchers on family language planning and a family from the community.

Carlos’s Day

A FAMILY LANGUAGE PLAN

Carlos* is a 3-year-old boy whose parents arrived in the United States from El Salvador the year before he was born. The following shows how his family attempts to balance use of three languages—Spanish, English, and ASL—throughout the day.

Activity	Language Used
Wake up	Put on cochlear implants, sing the “Good Morning” song in Spanish
Breakfast	ASL used with his family
Outdoor play	Spoken English used with friends at the playground
Crafts	Spoken Spanish used with family members
Lunch	ASL used at lunch with his family
Nap/quiet time	Read aloud a book using ASL
Indoor play	The child’s choice—caregivers ask Carlos which language he prefers
Watch TV	Educational TV programs watched in spoken English with captions
Dinner	ASL used with family
Bath time	ASL time
Bedtime	Spoken English used to read aloud a bedtime story
Additional supports and exposure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early intervention services—spoken language support 2x a week for 30 minutes • Family ASL class 2x a week for an hour • Attending Spanish-speaking church on Sundays

*Carlos is a pseudonym.

Bilingual and Multilingual Resources for Families with Deaf or Hard of Hearing Children

E-BOOKS AND BOOKS IN SIGN LANGUAGE:

- **ASL Tales**, <https://storiesbyhand.com/tag/asl-tales/>
- **Pointy Three in Apple Books** by Adam Stone and Joyce Hom, <https://books.apple.com/us/book/pointythree/id538361566>
- **Scholastic Storybook Treasures in Sign Language**, www.newkideo.com/titles/scholastic/sign-language-scholastic/
- **Shared Reading Project**, Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center, <http://clerccenter.gallaudet.edu>
- **VL2 storybook apps** (available in other languages), <https://vl2storybookapps.com>

VIDEO STORYTELLING AND SONGS:

- **Educational Resource Center on Deafness**, Texas School for the Deaf, www.tsd.state.tx.us/apps/pages/outreach
- **Hands Land** (ASL Rhymes and Rhythms), www.handsland.com
- **Rocky Mountain Deaf School YouTube videos**, www.youtube.com/user/RMDSO/videos

WEBSITES:

- **Early Intervention Network**, Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center, <http://clerccenter.gallaudet.edu>



- **Multicultural Considerations**, Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center, <http://clerccenter.gallaudet.edu>
- **Multilingual Early Childhood Deaf Education: ASL/English & LSP/Spanish**, www.facebook.com/ASLE.LSPS/

ASL INSTRUCTION:

- **The ASL App**, <https://theaslapp.com>
- **ASL Connect**, Gallaudet University, www.gallaudet.edu/asl-connect
- **Sign On**, American Society for Deaf Children, <https://deafchildren.org/sign-on/>

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