

Excellent Bilingual Early Childhood Programs



A Parent Guide

Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed.

Recently, at a school meeting, a group of parents shared with each other their vision and dreams for their children. As with most parents IDRA has worked with, these parents said they want their children to get a good education; to have many choices of professions; and to not lose their language, culture, values and faith of the family.

All of these parents want their children to be fully bilingual as adults. They were saddened to think that, without support, their children could lose their home language and culture in their journey to become successful and fulfilled adults.

All families need the support of excellent early childhood programs. For families who speak a language other than English, it is critical that they have access to excellent bilingual, multicultural preschool programs.

Bilingual education teaches English to children and gives them a chance to practice it while they also learn subjects like math and science. Good bilingual programs build on the resources that families offer. Children learn from their parents and teachers, and they have an innate capacity to process and use several languages. Once children have mastered one language, it is easier for them to learn other languages.



Schools must connect directly to children's language and experiences in the home. A high-quality early childhood program respects and draws on the language and culture of the child to further the linguistic, social, and academic growth of that child. It also prepares the child for a smooth transition from being at home to life in kindergarten and primary school.

IDRA founder and director emeritus, Dr. José A. Cárdenas, explains: "In successful programs for the education of at-risk school populations, there is a valuing of the students in ways in which they are not valued in regular and traditional school programs. In successful school programs, the student is valued, his language is valued, his heritage is valued, his family is valued, and, most important, the student is valued as a person" (1995).

A good preschool program also values and involves families in meaningful and respectful ways in the activities of the school.

In one exemplary school that IDRA studied, a teacher described their program: "Parents are really involved in the [bilingual education] program...Parents feel responsible. We let them know that we want them in the classroom. They are not just going to volunteer to clean or run errands...We want them to work with the students and help the teacher" (Robledo Montecel, et al., 2002).

Family participation is twice as predictive of academic learning as is the family's socio-economic status. Parents who feel welcome in schools are a powerful resource that can better their children's education. When schools and families work together, students succeed and communities are stronger.

Here is a checklist of characteristics of a successful bilingual preschool program (a printable version is also available in [PDF](#)). Take a look at your child's center. (A Spanish-language printable version of this checklist is available in [PDF](#).)

- The school allows for children to work in small groups and provides individual attention for each child. Individual temperaments, learning styles and language preferences are respected.
 - The school provides a variety of physical activities (inside and outside) and varies instruction to maintain the interest of each child.
 - The school adapts activities so that gregarious children are engaged and shy children feel safe and comfortable.
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- The language and culture of the family are central to the curriculum and the teaching.
 - Staff members communicate with parents in a language that is comprehensible to them. They respect the parent role as first teacher of the child and prime expert on the child.
 - Families are welcomed and invited to participate in school activities in a variety of ways.
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- The school has clear goals in writing in both English and the family's home language.
 - The program addresses the social, emotional, intellectual, and physical development of the child and is much more than fancy baby-sitting.
 - Children can work alone, in small groups and large groups, with opportunities both for self-directed and teacher-lead activities.
 - Children have restful, quiet time as well as vigorous play.
 - Children have opportunities to express themselves, develop motor skills, and experience literature and communication in their own language, music, science and nature.
 - Children's interests in the world around them are central to the curriculum and instruction.
 - Children's natural interests in reading, writing and counting in their own language are encouraged and responded to.
 - The curriculum and materials reflect cultural diversity and represent women and men in many important roles and professions.
 - Snacks and meals are nutritious, limiting sweets, fried food and junk food.
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- Teachers are trained and certified in early childhood education and are fully bilingual in English and in the language of the child.
 - The director has been a teacher and is fully bilingual in English and the language of the family.
 - The ratio of children to adults is small.
 - Most of the staff members have been there five or more years.
 - The staff welcomes families and visitors, communicates regularly with parents, and views the language and culture of the home as an asset to the school.
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Teachers express care, interest and respect for each child.

Teachers are engaged with the children most of the time.

The classroom space is ample, attractive and scaled to the children, with places for quiet individual and large group activities.

The outside is safe, spacious, attractive and appropriate for vigorous activities, and is well supervised.

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Using this checklist parents can have a conversation with a center director or other key person who can answer questions. They can begin by asking about the strengths of the center and by making supportive comments about those strengths. Parents can speak from a position of wanting the best for their children and assuming that both the family and the school have similar goals.

It is important to be polite but assertive about those issues of language and culture that parents feel are important. If the answers given do not convince them that this is the best place for their child, they should thank the person for the information and continue their search elsewhere.

In addition, parents can talk to other parents whose children attend the center.

If the child is already in a preschool program that does not match well with the above checklist or other standards that the family considers important, parents can talk with the director, teachers and other parents to improve the program.

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Any center that meets licensing requirements should meet the minimum requirements for a good preschool program. Yet parents who desire a high-quality preschool program need to concern themselves not only with the critical elements for any early childhood program, but also the linguistic and cultural characteristics of the center.

A good bilingual preschool program is an excellent way to support the development of children in their native language and also jump-start them toward a future of fully bilingual professional adults.

This article is adapted from "How Can Parents Identify a High Quality Preschool Program?" by Lilian Katz, director of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, 1995.

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