



LATINO INFANT INITIATIVE:

Crucial Conversations: Discussing Early Dual Language Development with Speech/Language Therapists

Introduction

In July 2022, UnidosUS conducted two focus groups in San Antonio, Texas. Participants were Latina parents of children under the age of three years, enrolled in the AVANCE program. There were 19 total participants; all identified as female and Latina, ranging in age from 22-44 years. Eleven participants were born in Mexico, eight in the United States. One focus group was conducted in Spanish and one in English.

Established in 1973, AVANCE is a national, non-profit organization, that creates pathways to economic mobility for predominately Latino families through high quality, culturally responsive, two-generation programming that ensures school-readiness for young children and opportunities for parents to build social and economic capital. Since 2019, AVANCE has been one of almost 300 community-based organizations affiliated with UnidosUS.

The Latino Infant Initiative (LII)

is a collaboration between UnidosUS and Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors. Our purpose is to create and develop a national network that:

- Strengthens program capacity to provide high-quality services for Latino infants (PN-3) and their families
- Infuses the voices of Latino parents and family members, advocates, and program staff in the policy arena
- Disseminates relevant research evidence to policymakers, programs, parents and family members
- Advocates for informed policies, campaigns, and investments at the federal, state, and local levels.



Listening to Latino Parents: Early Childhood Intervention for Speech Therapy

Of the 19 focus group members, three participants told us that their child receives speech therapy. The children receive early childhood intervention (ECI) services from community partners for a variety of conditions, including speech delays, language impairments, physical, social/emotional, or other conditions. AVANCE teachers observe and screen all children for potential delays using the Ages & Stages Questionnaire (ASQ-SE+). Based on these results, AVANCE refers children to early intervention agencies to evaluate and diagnose.

Once the program connects a child with an ECI therapist, the therapist meets with the parent(s) at their home, observes the child at their ECE center, consults with their teachers, and develops a comprehensive intervention plan.

Key features of the services include:

- Services are free
- AVANCE establishes written memoranda of understanding (MOUs) with their early intervention partners
- Therapists speak both Spanish and English
- Parent-teacher check-ins are conducted as needed

For over 40 years, ECI providers have been important partners with AVANCE, providing accessible, bilingual, and free services to families and their young children with developmental delays or disabilities. AVANCE administrators state their program enjoys good working relationships with the therapists. There is a broad, strongly held goal of working together to benefit enrolled children. AVANCE teachers report that families look to ECI therapists for guidance regarding their child's growth and development during the first four years.

Photograph courtesy of UnidosUS Affiliate, AVANCE.

Listening to Latino Parents: What Did We Learn?

Each of the 19 focus group participants told us that they “strongly agree” with the statement that “my goal is for my child to become bilingual.” All parents informed us they firmly believe in the importance of their children developing bilingually. Parents expressed the belief that bilingual development is valuable from a long-term perspective, for example: that bilingualism will be “beneficial to their future” and “help them to get better jobs.”

Further, parents told us that they do not simply want their children to be able to *speak* both languages but to be capable of reading and writing Spanish and English. In addition, several parents told us that they want their children to “*speak with confidence*” and “*not be timid.*”

Each of the three parents whose children receive speech/language therapy shared that their child’s therapists had told them to reduce their use of Spanish with their child, to “focus” on English (Spanish group), or to “only use one language” (English group).

UnidosUS asked: “Have you ever heard a teacher, counselor, or anybody at school say: ‘Don’t speak Spanish to your child, so they don’t get confused?’”

- Participant [English group]:
“To say to you exactly what she [the speech therapist] said:
‘Try speaking to him [the child] in English. Don’t bring in any Spanish right now.’ So, he can hear...because he had tubes in his ears so he couldn’t hear...She’s like, *‘right now, you don’t want to bring in any Spanish...you don’t want to confuse him* since he’s just starting to hear.”
- Participant [Spanish group]: “my two-year old, he has a speech therapist that sees him, and I’ve heard from other people, other moms say that like, the speech therapist will say *‘it’s better to talk one language, instead of confusing him with both.’*”
- Participant [Spanish group]: [Interposing] *“I was told the same thing.”*

As the focus group comments make clear, the speech therapists recommended parents stop speaking Spanish to their child. The therapists’ recommendation, in turn, reflects their understanding of dual language development, one shaped by certain assumptions, including:

- Young children can be “confused” by more than one language
- Multiple languages may compete with each other in the child’s brain
- Latino children with disabilities are “better off” if parents stop speaking Spanish in favor of speaking English.

AVANCE program administrators credit the speech therapists with having the best intentions for their children's learning and development. However, there are several significant implications when parents are advised to stop speaking Spanish to their child.

Latino Parent Voices: Implications

First, the therapists' advice runs counter to expressed desires of the parents: each of the focus group participants told us that they 'strongly agree', intending to support their children to develop both Spanish and English. Parents strongly believe their child will benefit from developing both languages, including the ability to read and write in both. Several parents expressed their thinking from a long-term perspective, stating that their child would have "better jobs" or "better employment opportunities" by being bilingual.

Second, the advice is contradictory to the goals of the AVANCE program. AVANCE implements a comprehensive, 26-week Parent-Child Education Program (PCEP) that promotes strong child development, including early literacy and emphatic support for dual language development from infancy. AVANCE's curriculum includes several lessons for parents that specifically encourage bilingualism and biliteracy at home. These lessons contain references to the research on the lifelong benefits of being bilingual from an early age.

Third, the therapists' advice is not supported by the research evidence on dual language learning, compiled over decades and reviewed and summarized by the National Academies of Sciences. Their 2017 report emphasized two key points: first, young children have the capacity to learn two languages; second, children should not give up their first (home) language to learn English.¹

Regrettably, parents of children with disabilities who speak languages other than English:

“...are often advised by speech and language specialists and educators to use only one language in the home or to send their child to monolingual, rather than bilingual, schools on the assumption that this will result in improved language outcomes.”²

However, in contrast to the advice provided to parents in the focus groups, there is extensive evidence that children with developmental disorders, including developmental language disability, can become bilingual within limits set by their disability.

According to Dr. Fred Genesee, an international authority on dual language development and a member of the National Academies of Sciences committee that developed the 2017 report: there is no evidence that restricting children with developmental disorders to only one language improves their developmental outcomes.³

There is also the important caution that:



“Suppressing a child’s minority language...is not necessary for a child to learn a majority language and culture and could have negative effects on a child’s social emotional wellbeing.”⁴

Since a child’s home language is foundational to the development of their identity,⁵ advising parents to reduce or eliminate their use of the home language with their child could have severe negative consequences, both short- and long-term. Genesee and colleagues advise speech/language therapists to:

- Encourage parents of young DLLs to use their L1 [home language] in the home, especially in ways that support literacy-related skills⁶
- Assess dual language learners in both their languages
- Recognize children’s L1 as a personal, social, economic, and educational asset to be “promoted and nurtured as much as possible.”⁷

Bilingualism: Parents’ Beliefs

Perhaps most importantly, the therapists’ advice—that parents/family members minimize or eliminate their use of Spanish with their child—undermines the very foundation of parent-child interactions and communication. The advice, however well-intentioned, impedes the right of families to maintain their culture and authentic identities and to pass their heritage on to their children. This can also hinder the developing child’s identity formation, as it cuts off the child from prior and familiar language, ideas, and communication. Finally, the advice separates the child from their prior learning.

Children’s daily interactions with parents and family members, occurring in their home language, drives children’s learning and development. Therefore, in our view, advising families to stop using their home language with their children is a civil rights and public health issue. This practice compromises the well-being and optimal development of Latino infants/toddlers as well as children from other language-minority communities.

Early Intervention Services for Young Dual Language Children: What Can Programs Do?

Based on the information obtained from the AVANCE focus groups, the Latino Infant Initiative recommends that programs serving Latino infants and toddlers apply the following practices:

- Check in regularly with parents receiving ECI services, such as speech therapy, to discuss service delivery and gather information, monitor children's progress, and hear from families about their interactions with service providers/therapists.
- Utilize parents' information such as that described above as an opportunity to strengthen parent engagement content and refine collaborations with other agencies and partners.

Essentially, this is an opportunity to share the extensive research evidence in support of bilingualism and biliteracy and to promote positive attitudes, understandings, and practices for young dual language learners.

Programs can pro-actively prepare Latino parents, much like AVANCE does, to understand that their home language is a resource and an asset; to learn about key research evidence that supports this outlook; and to be prepared to respond to instances in which they are asked to reduce or eliminate their use of Spanish with their children/or their children's use of Spanish with others.

- Develop collaborative working relationships with therapists, to explicitly include:
 1. Honoring and valuing the home language(s), cultures, goals, and funds of knowledge of parents and family members
 2. Integrating key research evidence into written and verbal communications between program administrators, teachers, and service providers, to specifically support family goals of bilingualism, recognize the advantages of dual language development, and develop effective communications between program personnel, early intervention providers, and parents and family members.
- Write MOUs to reflect the research evidence on dual language development. Specifically, to provide early intervention services that encourage continued development of a child's home language while facilitating the child's acquisition of English, even while children receive speech/language or other services.

Key Conversations: Discussing Early Dual Language Development with Speech/Language Therapists

Based on the information obtained from the parent focus groups, the Latino Infant Initiative recommends that programs serving Latino infants/toddlers and children from other language-minority backgrounds work with early intervention providers to understand that recommending that families stop speaking their home language to their children can:

- Jeopardize children's identity formation and wellbeing
- Distance and separate children from their parents, grandparents, and other family members, from their cultural heritage, and the larger community
- Interrupt cognitive development, as children are cut off from familiar ideas and information
- Lead children and families to feel disconnected from the very early educational programs and services that aim to promote their learning and development.

Programs serving Latino infants/toddlers and children from other language-minority backgrounds can collaborate with early intervention providers to:

- Re-visit the program's mission, goals, and objectives so that active support for children's bilingual development is recognized, respected, and prioritized
- Ensure that parents' goals and beliefs regarding their child's bilingual development are explored, elaborated, and incorporated into service plans and strategies for their children
- Incorporate research on dual language learners into onboarding and professional development training to ensure all ECE teachers and interventionists are well-versed in the data and are implementing best practices
- Revise MOUs to include information on children's capacity for dual language development, as contained in publications by the National Academies of Sciences and other sources.



Concluding Remarks

It is our hope that the day comes when no children or families in the U.S. are asked to set aside their home language in favor of English.

Instead, UnidosUS advocates for a future in which diverse

languages and multi-lingual development are regarded as beneficial and desirable. We advocate for a future in which children of all ages and families from all backgrounds are actively welcomed into high-quality, culturally, and linguistically responsive early education programs, which promote the continued development of families' home languages while facilitating English language development.

The principle is simple: all ECE settings and services must be culturally and linguistically responsive and developmentally appropriate for all children. The purpose is to fully support all children's learning and development in ways that affirm, not deny, family culture and language(s). Cultural and linguistic responsiveness is an essential element of what makes ECE programs "high quality." The pandemic only made pre-existing inequities in education all the more glaring. There is an urgency for policymakers to develop and fund initiatives and policies that make culturally and linguistically appropriate practices and services a characteristic of all programs and services for young children and their families.

The size and continuing growth of the Latino and other language-minority communities in the U.S. makes it essential that all early childhood educators and early intervention personnel are grounded in the data on dual language development. For decades, research has demonstrated that children's home language is a resource: children benefit from dual language settings and daily interactions that support both of their languages. Yet, Latino parents continue to experience a lack of understanding within the ECE system, with their children bearing the brunt of continuing misinformation.

Photograph courtesy of UnidosUS Affiliate, AVANCE.

When parents are told to stop speaking their home language to their child, the message communicates to children, parents, and family members that their identity, heritage, communication, and cultural values are not valuable.

All levels of the education system have a role to play in optimizing opportunities for dual language development. Early childhood educators and early intervention personnel need to lean into the home language, culture, and goals of the families they serve and let parent/guardian priorities lead decisions around instruction and language use. Early intervention agencies can proactively review the available research evidence on children's dual language development and explicitly recognize a family's home language as a personal, social, cultural, and educational resource that should be strongly supported while the acquisition of English is also promoted.

K-12 administrators can provide the available research evidence on children's dual language development to families so that they can make informed decisions about programs that strongly support bilingualism and cultural literacy. K-12 systems can work to ensure that early intervention services are informed by research evidence.

At an institutional level, university programs and curricula for child development/early childhood education courses and Speech/Language therapy should be reviewed and revised, if necessary, to reflect the research evidence on dual language development.

Parents who wish to raise their children to be bilingual, including parents/guardians of children with disabilities, should receive nothing less than full support from programs and systems they are enrolled in. Specifically, children, parents, and family members should not be told to minimize or eliminate their home language while receiving speech/language services. Parents should not be bystanders to their child's development but should be recognized and respected as valued partners.

The issue is about more than language. It's about identity, families, culture, and learning. It's about children and families feeling (or missing) a sense of belonging.



Policy Recommendations for Young Dual Language Children with Disabilities

The parents' experiences in our focus groups point to the need to disseminate research on infant/toddler dual language development more widely at a systems level – not only among parents of young children but all stakeholders in the child's development. In particular, the continuing demographic trends of the U.S. demonstrate an urgent need for stronger connections between educational services for linguistically diverse young children and the application of extensive research evidence on children's capacity for dual language development. UnidosUS offers the following policy recommendations to advance dual language learning and child development:

- First, federal, state, and local policies must recognize that a child's home language is their personal, social, and educational resource. Policies for ECE programs, early intervention providers, and K-12 school systems should be informed by scientific evidence.
- Second, UnidosUS seeks a reauthorized Higher Education Act to ensure that the scientific evidence on dual language development is adequately incorporated into teacher preparation and special education/speech therapy programs.
- Third, investments in federal funding are needed to increase and strengthen the pipeline of culturally and linguistically competent early intervention personnel, including speech therapists who are fluent in Spanish and other languages as well as English.
- Fourth, UnidosUS calls for stronger agency capacity for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Education to disseminate research findings to language minority communities—putting the scientific evidence into the hands of parents and family members.
- Fifth, UnidosUS calls upon federal and state policymakers to fund research into promising program practices for dual language and culturally diverse learners.

Resources

Further discussion of the research evidence is presented in the following:

Latino Infants: A Continuing Imperative

English [unidosus_latinoinfants2022_42522.pdf](#)

Spanish [unidosus_2022bebeslatinos_81122.pdf](#)

What Are ‘Linguistically Responsive Practices’ and Why Are They an Essential Ingredient of “High-Quality” Early Childhood Education?

[LinguisticallyResponsivePractices_IssueBrief_50420_sp.pdf \(unidosus.org\)](#)

[Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures |The National Academies Press](#)

Bilingual Language Development in Infancy: What Can We Do to Support Bilingual Families?

<https://osf.io/jerty/>

Paradis, J., Genesee, F., & Crago, M. B. (2021). *Dual language development and disorders: A handbook on bilingualism and second language learning*. (3rd edition). Baltimore, MD: Paul Brookes.

Endnotes

- 1 National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2017). *Promoting the educational success of children and youth learning English: Promising futures*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.
- 2 Paradis, J., Genesee, F., & Crago, M. B. (2021). *Dual language development and disorders: A handbook on bilingualism and second language learning*. (3rd edition). Baltimore, MD: Paul Brookes. Page 58.
- 3 Fred Genesee, personal communication (October 11, 2022).
- 4 Paradis, et. al, p. 44
- 5 Bialystok, E. (2001). *Bilingualism in Development: Language, literacy, and cognition*. Cambridge University Press.
- 6 Paradis, et. al, p. 287
- 7 Paradis, et. al, p. 288



UnidosUS, previously known as NCLR (National Council of La Raza), is the nation's largest Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization. Through its unique combination of expert research, advocacy, programs, and an [Affiliate Network](#) of nearly 300 community-based organizations across the United States and Puerto Rico, UnidosUS simultaneously challenges the social, economic, and political barriers that affect Latinos at the national and local levels.

For more than 50 years, UnidosUS has united communities and different groups seeking common ground through collaboration, and that share a desire to make our country stronger.

For more information on UnidosUS, visit www.unidosus.org or follow us on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [Twitter](#).

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