



**PROMOTING
LANGUAGE LEARNING
IN THE BIRTH TO FIVE
YEAR OLD**


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Education in Early Childhood

Melbourne
Graduate School
of Education



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Birrarung (Yarra river) on Wurundjeri country

**Acknowledgement of
Country**

We would like to acknowledge peoples of the Kulin nation as the traditional custodians of the water, sky and land on which we are learning and living today.

We pay our respects to Elders, past, present and future and are grateful for their enduring care for beautiful country.



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Why language development matters

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Language development is critical to a child's overall development.

Language acquisition supports a child's ability to communicate, express and understand feelings. It also supports thinking and problem-solving, and developing and maintaining relationships. Learning to understand and use language is a critical building block to literacy, and the basis for learning to read and write.



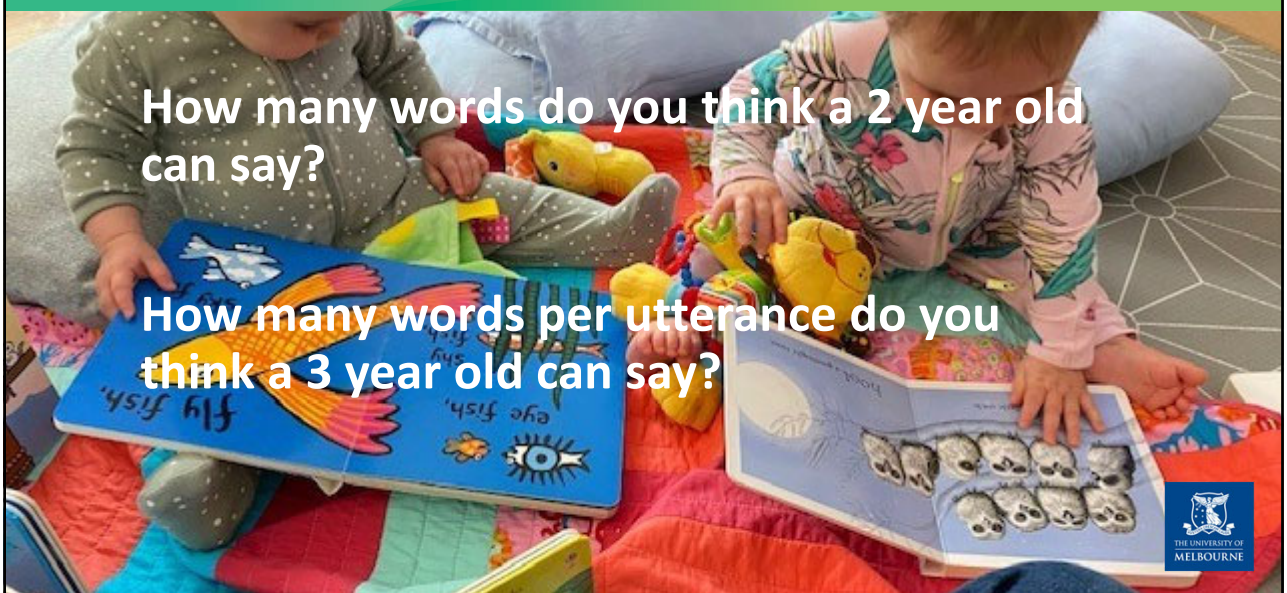
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How many words do you think a 2 year old can say?

How many words per utterance do you think a 3 year old can say?

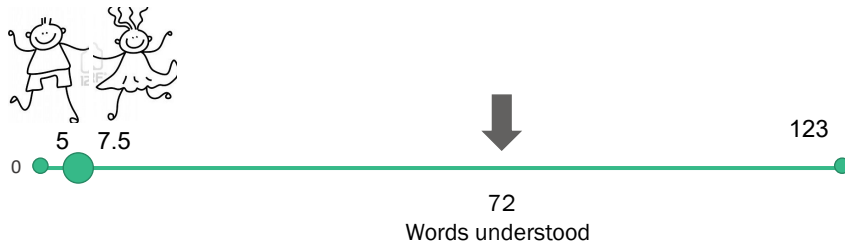


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Expressive Vocabulary at 12 months

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Early Language in Victoria Study (ELVs)

<https://www.mcri.edu.au/research/projects/early-language-victoria-study-elvs>



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Language milestones

Birth to 1 year: cooing, babbling, gestures, first words (words start appearing late in the first year), can understand up to 50 words, joint attention emerges



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Language milestones

Birth to 1 year: cooing, babbling, gestures, first words (words start appearing late in the first year), can understand up to 50 words, joint attention emerges

1 to 2 years: single word → combinations (e.g. 'mummy go'), follow simple commands, use objects in pretend play



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Language milestones

Birth to 1 year: cooing, babbling, gestures, first words (words start appearing late in the first year), can understand up to 50 words, joint attention emerges

1 to 2 years: single word → combinations (e.g. 'mummy go'), follow simple commands

2 to 3 years: 2 to 3 word phrases, understand & use simple questions, ask questions using 'what' or 'where'



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Language milestones

Birth to 1 year: cooing, babbling, gestures, first words (words start appearing late in the first year), can understand up to 50 words, joint attention emerges

1 to 2 years: single word → combinations (e.g. 'mummy go'), follow simple commands

2 to 3 years: 2 to 3 word phrases, understand & use simple questions

3 to 4 years: 4 to 5 word sentences, follow 2 step commands, answer questions about daily tasks, use personal pronouns



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Language milestones



Birth to 1 year: cooing, babbling, gestures, first words (words start appearing late in the first year), can understand up to 50 words, joint attention emerges

1 to 2 years: single word → combinations (e.g. 'mummy go'), follow simple commands

2 to 3 years: 2 to 3 word phrases, understand & use simple questions

3 to 4 years: 5-6 word sentences, follow 2 step commands, talk about activities

By age 5 years: use complex sentences, understands complex questions, use past and future verbs correctly, tell simple, short stories



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Communication milestones 12 months - 5 years



https://www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au/SPAweb/Resources_for_the_Public/Children_Communication_Milestones/SPAweb/Resources_for_the_Public/Communication_Milestones/Communication_Milestones.aspx?hkey=fb6753df-a757-4c4a-8100-aaebdd4451fd

Welcome to the Speech Pathology Australia Communication Milestones Kit

This kit includes a series of A4, downloadable information sheets and an A3 poster that outlines the understanding and speaking milestones for children aged 12 months - 5 years. The information sheets and poster outline how early childhood educators and speech pathologists can work together to ensure that children reach these milestones within the expected timeframes.

It also presents information on the role of speech pathologists and how to find a speech pathologist if you are unsure if a child is having difficulty with their speech, language and communication.

The fact sheets are a useful tool to start a conversation about children who may be having difficulty with their speech, language and communication.



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Phases of development – second language learners (Adapted from Fellowes & Oakley, 2014)

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Phase	Characteristic
Pre-production	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-speaking period also referred to as the 'silent phase' • Limited comprehension • Uses gestures • Sometimes attempts to use home language to interact with English speaking peers and educators
Early Production	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited comprehension • Produces one, two or three word responses • Can participate, uses familiar phrases and words • Uses present tense



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Phases of development – second language learners

(Adapted from Fellowes & Oakley, 2014)

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Phase	Characteristic
Speech Emergence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good comprehension • Construct simple sentences (may be formulaic) • Grammar and pronunciation errors • Understanding of humour in second language still developing
Intermediate fluency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excellent comprehension • Few grammatical errors
Advanced fluency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Near native fluency



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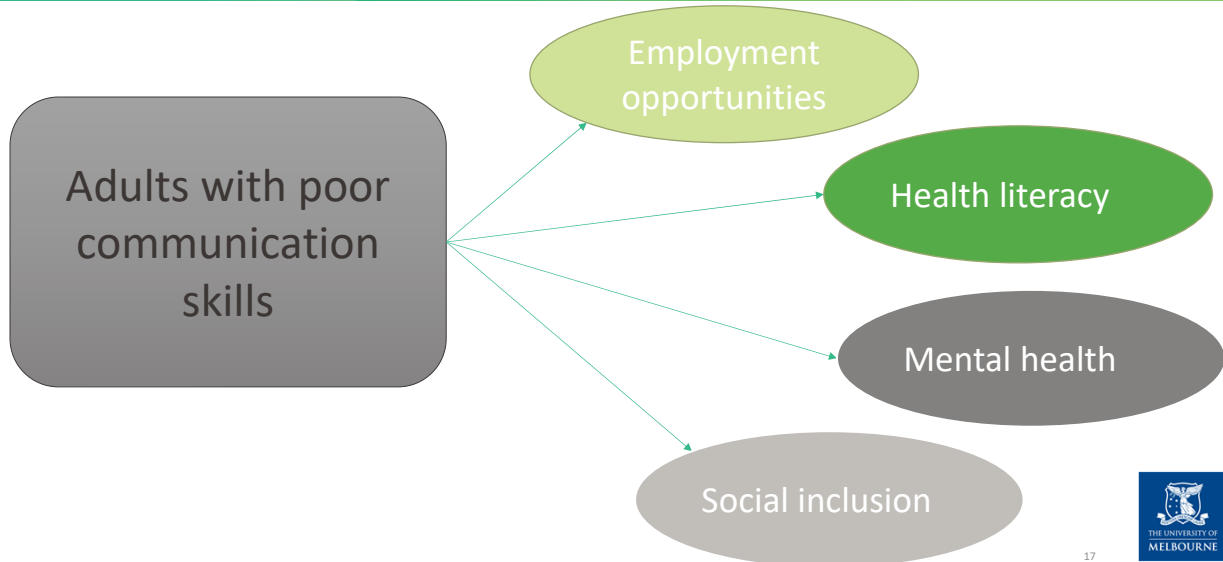
“While the majority of young children acquire language effortlessly, a significant minority do not.” (Law et al, pg. 5)

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- A child’s early oral language development (how they use language and what they understand), can predict their long term health and well being
- Children who develop strong language skills in the early years are more likely to arrive at school ready to learn

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How is Language Learned?



Noam Chomsky

“Nobody is taught language.... In fact you can’t prevent the child from learning it.”

Language is uniquely human and is an innate component of the mind



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Lev Vygotsky

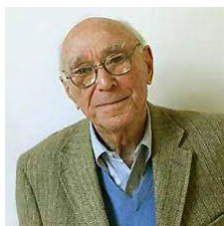
“a child’s greatest achievements are possible in play”

“what a child can do today with assistance, she will be able to do by herself tomorrow”

- Development occurs within a social context
- Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)



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Jerome Bruner

“Learners are encouraged to discover facts and relationships for themselves”

“....as children we acquire language to tell the stories that we have inside us”

Learning is accomplished by doing



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- Language is a social phenomenon
- Children want to communicate with others
- Interaction between people of varying levels of expertise provide social scaffolding (zone of proximal development)
- Children's social-cognitive abilities mediate language acquisition

Focus: Responsive and Reciprocal Interactions



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- One key factor associated with the “word gap” is types of adult-child interactions children are exposed to in the home
- **Enhancing parent-child interactions** in the early years is one way to try and **improve language outcomes**



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Adult responsiveness

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- Genetic predisposition + social environment
- A form of caregiver-child interaction found to play an important role in early language development is adult **responsiveness**
- Adult behaviours that are *contingent, developmentally appropriate* and *prompt in response to a child's initiations* (Bornstein & Tamis-LeMonda, 1989)



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Social Interactionist Approach

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- Social interactionist perspective (Bruner, 1983), children acquire language within a social environment
- Being responsive encourages a reciprocal relationship and increases the ability to build a conversation between caregiver and child
- The child is able to initiate the topic of interaction and the caregiver then responds in a way that is meaningful to the child



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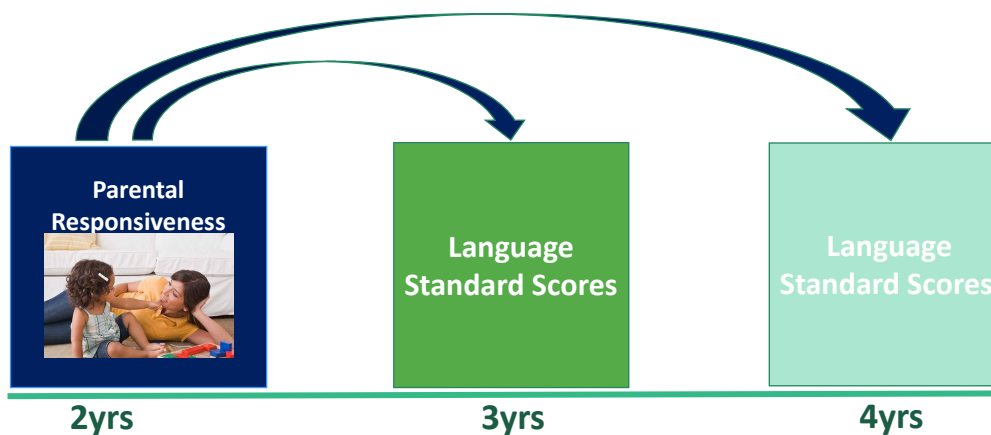
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- Adult behaviours that occur immediately after a child's behaviour and are related to the child's focus of attention. *E.g., child is pretending to cook on a toy stove, the adult asks, 'what are you cooking?'*
- Joint attention/following child's lead



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Levickis et al, 2014; Conway et al, 2018



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Strategies to promote language development

Babies have conversations too!

- *Take turns to talk, allowing children time to 'reply'.* Use natural pauses as babies will eventually fill these pauses and it teaches them to give and take in a conversation.
- *Describe objects, activities or events.* Talk to babies about what they are seeing and doing.
- *Follow baby's lead.* Wait until they let you know they are ready for something new, e.g., they may drop the toy, or look or move away from the object.



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- *Follow children's lead.* Observe and respond to a child's interest; join in with children and let them decide what to do next; attend to and respond to children when they use gestures, vocalisations and words
- Why:
 - A child's attention is greater to objects or activities of the child's choosing than of the adult's choosing
 - More opportunities to interact with adults following their lead results in more opportunities for learning and engaging in communication



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- Observe/listen what the child is doing, playing with, looking at, or talking about
- Use what the child's interest as a starting point for communication, e.g., child is playing with a toy stove, adult asks "What are you cooking?"
- Let the child direct the play. You can ask the child about what they are doing or about how you should play. E.g., when drawing, ask "what should I draw?"
- When a child is not engaged in an activity, you can offer a couple of choices based on activities in which the child has shown interest in the past



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Wait. To encourage children to initiate and engage in conversational interactions.

Why:

- By waiting for their answer in conversations you can encourage children to actively participate in the conversation and learn to take turns speaking
- Waiting increases children's initiation, communication and independence
- Wait and give the child enough time to understand that you expect them to send you a message, whether that message is with sounds, words or gestures



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- *Use descriptions.* Describe what's happening or what the child is doing; Use words to label familiar and unfamiliar objects, situations or feelings
- Why:

Describing and labelling gives children opportunities to hear how we talk or gesture about our surroundings and our actions, and you teach the correct labels for the actions and objects a child sees or plays with
- Example: Talk about what you are doing or what children are doing during daily routines, such meals or clean-up



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Use imitations. Repeat a child's gesture, vocalisations, or words back to the child.

- Why:

This shows the child that they are heard and understood, encouraging them to communicate more

The child can also hear the correct form of words when you repeat their vocalization or verbalisation back to them if their words are unclear

Example: Child says 'bobble' while reaching for a bottle. Repeat back to the child 'bottle', using the correct form of the word.



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Use open questions. Observe what the child is focused on and ask open-ended questions like "What...?", "Why...?" and "How...?". Pause for a response.

- Why:

Asking questions that require more than a yes/no answer allows children to respond both verbally and non-verbally, encouraging communication

Example: Ask questions that are related to the child's play (e.g., "What are you painting?")



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Feedback loops

Do not stop at one question... Engage in a series of back-and-forth exchanges with children

Why:

Asking follow up questions helps children reach a deeper level of understanding.

It also enables adults to assess children's comprehension, provide clarifications, extensions, etc.

Having to articulate their thoughts provides opportunities for children to practice their language skills in a one-on-one interactions where both adult and child are deeply engaged in sharing meaning.



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Use expansions. Repeating what a child has said and adding new or different grammar (syntactic) or word meaning (semantic) information.

- Why:

Expanding on what a child says can be an effective way to teach new information while providing more opportunities to hear language

By expanding on children's language, adults are being responsive to children's communication and encouraging further communication



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Extend the topic by modelling decontextualized language. Decontextualized language is language removed from the here-and-now. It is used to talk about the past or future and to share information about abstract objects and events

- Why?

When children engage in extended conversation within which adults expose them to decontextualized language, this encourages children to use language in more complex and abstract ways, and in contexts removed from the here-and-now

For example, constructing narratives about past or future events (e.g., “We went to the zoo”), provide explanations (e.g., “I got my jacket because I’m cold”) or engage in pretend play (e.g., “My teddy is thirsty”)



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Language modelling



Use language to comment on activities you and the child are doing

Use labelling that is contextual

Use repetition

Use a variety of language stimulation strategies

Model rather than correct children's language mistakes



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Educators can positively influence children's language development

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- Early childhood education and care settings provide an important space for promoting child language development
- Evidence demonstrates high-quality early childhood education programs can result in long term benefits (Hamre, 2014)
- Promoting high-quality adult-child interactions provides children with the types of experiences that can promote growth in their language skills (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2000; Ulferts et al., 2019)

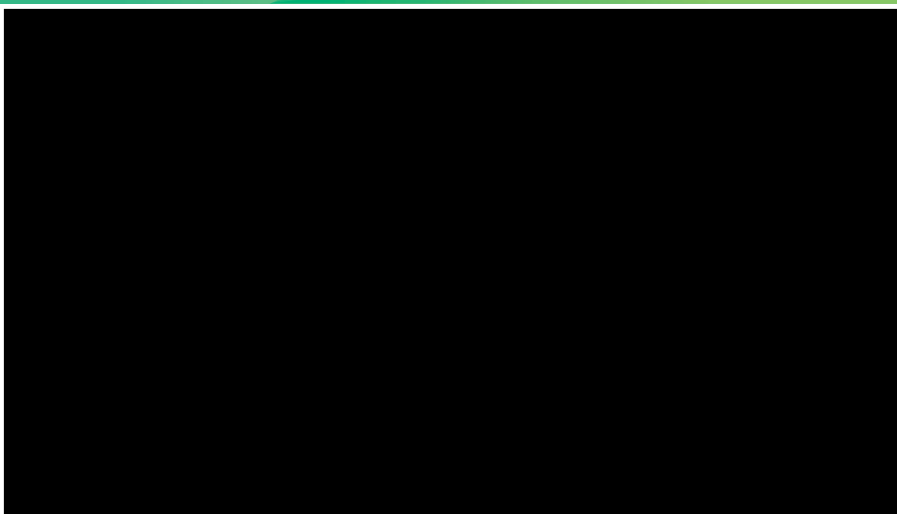


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Shared story book reading – an ideal context for exposing children to decontextualized language

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General points regarding language promotion

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- *Sharing picture books.* Point and label objects or actions, re-read the same book. Children learn more new words if a story is read to them multiple times
- *Use language that is slightly above the child's current level:* E.g., with a 3-year-old you might use three- to four- word sentences and simple vocabulary to ensure children understand and participate in conversation
- *Model rather than correct children's language mistakes:* E.g., if Julia says, "My grandma gave me a book," you could simply respond, "It's so nice your grandma gave you a book. What's it about?"



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English language learners and responsiveness

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- Creating a welcoming environment for children and families from all cultures and who speak different languages
- The strategies that support language learning for first language learners also benefit children from a variety of language and cultural backgrounds
- E.g., following the child's lead, allowing the child to choose activities that match both their interests and language abilities
- Using gesture and visual materials can assist children's understanding of language and their acquisition of words
- Non-language activities (e.g., picture matching) and activities that stimulate a range of senses (e.g., water play), allow children to demonstrate their competencies and participate without language



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- Responsive strategies are useful for helping multilingual children feel more socially connected and may assist their communication
- Encourage parents to talk and read to their children in their home language, as a way of strengthening children's home language skills
- Incorporate children's home language into the environment where possible



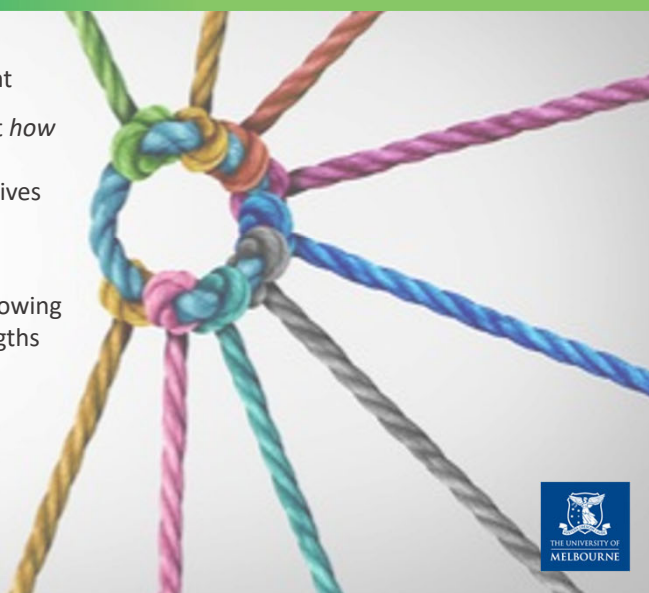
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Learn about the family background, cultural needs and other factors that may influence the home environment

Learning about families can help educators think about *how* they can best engage with that family, it provides an opportunity to find out about different family perspectives and expectations, as well as an opportunity to develop shared goals for children's learning

It is important to be inclusive by learning about and showing respect for the background, cultural identity and strengths of each family to inform educator practices



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Family-centred practice to promote continuity of learning (Cohrssen et al., 2011)

- understanding and respecting family relationships and routines
- valuing the strengths of the child and their family
- respect families' choices and decision making
- work collaboratively with families, recognising them as equal partners in supporting children's learning and development



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“While the features of [adults]’ communication need to change as children’s developmental abilities increase, essential components of *shared attention* and *back-and-forth verbal or nonverbal exchanges* remain. Further, embedding these exchanges in a loving and supportive environment helps children build interest and attentional capacity for conversations and books and sets a strong foundation for learning and social-emotional growth.”

(Rowe & Zuckerman, 2016, pg. 826)



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THANK YOU

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- A big thank you to the adults and children who took part in the example video clips included in this presentation

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