

## **Children who are learning English as an additional language (EAL): Guidance for early years practitioners**

Children who speak EAL may be at risk of underachievement due to some commonly held assumptions, and mistakes that are frequently made, usually with the best of intentions.

By following the 'Dos' and 'Don'ts' listed in this guidance you will minimise the risk of underachievement for your pupils learning EAL. The first basic principle is to recognise that children learning EAL do have language skills, they just don't happen to be in English, and those skills are transferable to other languages.

There will be some children learning EAL who have a language delay or disorder but this should not be assumed. Where there are difficulties with language these are likely to be aggravated and may have been caused in the first place by advising parents to speak English in a home where it is not the first language of the parents/carers.

Where there is doubt that the first language is developing within the norms for a child's age it is important to carry out an assessment in that language. English language development should not be looked at in isolation from first language.

### **Dos:**

**Do** group children learning EAL with strong peer language role models, they will learn a lot from their peers, especially those with good language.

**Do** ensure children learning EAL are placed in the appropriate age group; they will then be more likely to make appropriate relationships.

**Do** acknowledge and value children's home languages, perhaps you could attempt to learn a few words or phrases - parents would usually be very happy to teach you.

**Do** reassure parents that maintaining and developing the home language will support learning English.

**Do** actively encourage and support peer interaction, children will learn from one another.

**Do** try to understand all the additional things children learning EAL are coping with, not only linguistically but perhaps culturally and socially too.

**Do** accept that children learning EAL may have well developed skills in their home language despite their lack of English, so ensure that tasks and activities are age appropriate.

**Do** accept that children need to copy, it is a way of learning.

**Do** accept and value any attempts to communicate, whatever the language and quietly praise even minimal efforts.

**Do** speak to children learning EAL as they play, commenting on what they are doing and giving them the words they need in context. You will then be teaching them English as they play and allowing them to learn at their own pace.

**Do** expect children learning EAL to switch off frequently, it is VERY tiring listening to a language that you don't understand. Also remember that children have different ways of learning and progress at different rates, be patient.

**Do** recognize that young bilingual learners need time to observe, try out unfamiliar toys, tune into the new language.

**Do** ensure that stories and books have clear illustrations, repeated actions and language patterns; use a variety of visual props.

**Do** emphasize or repeat key words and phrases during practical activities.

**Do** ensure the child is placed third or fourth in turn taking games so s/he can rehearse and hear repeated phrases before responding. Use songs and rhymes with actions and group refrains.

**Do** ensure tasks are cognitively demanding, e.g. do not give basic colour/object matching tasks simply because the English vocabulary needs consolidation; match task learning demands to the child's needs.

**Do** regularly observe/record the child's developing use of English, including non- verbal gestures

### **Don'ts:**

**Don't** withdraw children learning EAL for 1-1 sessions to 'teach them English'. This is inappropriate and almost always counter-productive.

**Don't** be tempted to put children learning EAL who have very little English with younger children, they are less likely to make good relationships and develop appropriate social skills.

**Don't** encourage parents who have limited English skills to teach their children English at home. They will learn English from you at school. Languages are best learned from native speakers.

**Don't** suggest English should replace the home language; children will need to communicate with their extended family.

**Don't** be surprised if children learning EAL find it hard to settle at first.

**Don't** assume that children are being deliberately difficult if they do not always comply with your expectations.

**Don't** assume that children learning EAL understand everything you say and are being 'difficult' when they do not do as they are asked, they may have developed strategies for *appearing* to understand by copying others.

**Don't** discourage imitation/copying, the children are not under test conditions!

**Don't** refer to children's home language as 'jabbering away' in their own language or talking 'gibberish' - this is simply disrespectful.

**Don't** continually ask children questions eg. 'What is this? What colour is that? If the children know the answer, you have taught them nothing and if they don't know they will have failed.

**Don't** be discouraged if the child learning EAL does not want to speak much to you for a while, you are laying the foundations, concentrate on building the relationships, the language will come later.