



The Head Start Advantage

Success with Dual Language Learners

Key Takeaways

1. Dual language learners (DLLs) in Head Start increased their English proficiency during their enrollment, and the effects of Head Start on receptive vocabulary were larger for DLLs than monolingual-English speakers.
2. Head Start promotes DLL parents' English language ability, their involvement with children's language learning at home, and their partnership with their children's schools.

Measurable Impact

Increased comprehension

Dual language learners increased their standardized vocabulary scores and oral comprehension over their two years in Head Start.

Gains in both languages

Spanish-speaking children in Head Start who did not start learning English until age 3 also made gains in their Spanish proficiency.

Better understanding

Bilingual children in Head Start improved more significantly in terms of receptive vocabulary (words they can understand) than their monolingual peers.



Our mission is to coalesce, inspire, and support the Head Start field as a leader in early childhood development and education.

The Head Start Advantage: Success with Dual Language Learners

Why are dual language learners a focus in Head Start?

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2017), the number of children who speak a language other than English at home has increased from approximately 19.8% in 2007 to approximately 21.3% in 2017.

Among children served by Head Start in the 2017-2018 program year, over 28% are dual language learners (DLLs) who speak a language other than English at home. Nearly 80% of DLL children in Head Start are speaking Spanish at home.

While 92% of the DLL children at Head Start were born in the U.S., parents in these families are mostly immigrants or migrant and seasonal workers, many with limited educational attainment and social capital, which can add additional stress and difficulty in adjusting to the U.S. Moreover, statistics for the 2016-17 program year showed that 61% of the DLL children attending Head Start were at or below the federal poverty threshold, burdening the family with disadvantages inherent in poverty, such as higher risks of experiencing food insecurity and depressive symptoms.

Children's oral language and early literacy development serve as the foundation for later reading abilities and overall academic success. It is well documented that children with low oral language abilities are at risk for poor outcomes as they progress through school. Evidence indicates that participation in high-quality preschools can improve children's social, language, reading, and mathematic skills, as well as reduce the achievement gap for linguistic and/or ethnic minorities, and that Head Start's impacts are larger for DLLs than native English speakers on receptive vocabulary.

What is Head Start?

Head Start (HS) is a comprehensive early education program for children from at-risk backgrounds from birth to age 5. From early math and reading skills to confidence and resilience, Head Start helps children build the abilities they need to be successful in school and life. Head Start recognizes the role of parents as their child's first and lifelong educators and engages parents as equal partners.

What does Head Start do to support dual language learners?

The Office of Head Start (OHS) has offered a set of guidelines to help programs systematically set up their services, procedures, and systems for all programs to meet the needs of the DLL children and their families.

For instance, it is recommended that Head Start classrooms use inclusive curriculum and culturally and linguistically responsive teaching practices. OHS also advises Head Start programs to actively recruit and support bilingual staff who are familiar with the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the DLL children and their families.

During the 2017-18 program year, 29% of Head Start child development staff nationwide were proficient in a language other than English.

Using a multi-generation approach, Head Start works together with DLL families at both the adult and the child level. For adults, programs focus on language and educational support, greater parent involvement, and family-school partnership, such as providing translation services and using DLL families' home languages and cultures in family activities. For children, programs focus on connection to community resources and services, including regular language assessments and ESL training referrals.

Moreover, the services Head Start provides for DLL children and their families aim at promoting children's English acquisition while maintaining their development of their home languages.

Research consistently shows that bilinguals outperform monolinguals in executive control and metacognitive skills. Strengthening the language and metalinguistic skills of DLL children's first language has been shown to enhance English language learning.