

SUPPORTING HOME LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE

For newcomer adults, learning English is very important. It is their route to resettling, getting jobs and adapting to their new country. However, it is also important to encourage the family to maintain their home language.

Reasons to Maintain Children's Home Language:

- Reduces the stress of settling into the program.
- Helps to foster self-identification and pride.
- Connects children to extended family and their culture.
- When speaking English at home, sometimes errors in speech are passed along.
- All of the brain processing done to learn a home language is useful for learning a new one.
- Speaking more than one language increases a person's ability to learn future languages.
- Literacy in the home language builds literacy in every other language they learn.
- Bilingual children are more likely to have higher academic achievement.

Building a Foundation for Language Learning:

Let parents know how important it is to maintain a child's first language:

- The first language carries all the personal, family and cultural history, including songs and stories.
- It fosters much stronger bonding between parent and child.
- The first language carries more emotional tone and comfort.
- Emotions are more thoroughly and frequently expressed.
- Conversations happen more naturally and frequently.
- First language modeling is critical for second language learning.

Tips for Encouraging Home Language Maintenance:

- Maintain a child's home language through the initial adjustment period as much as possible. Use dual-language books or apply a few key word strips to book pages using the home language.
- Encourage parents to keep speaking their home language with their children.
- Allow and even encourage children to speak to one another in their own language in the program.
- If possible, ask parents for key words in Arabic (or the first language they speak). Write them down as they are pronounced and share them with all staff members who interact with that child.
- Take the time to learn some words in the child's first language to support early communication. Choose words that are important, such as greetings, soothing words, "yes/no" and "bathroom." Words that help children communicate their physical needs are especially valuable in making children feel comfortable and cared for.



Tips for communicating with refugee children when you do not speak the home language:

- Try not to overwhelm a child with too much language, but continue to speak with fewer words and simple language.
- Speak slowly. Pronounce each syllable clearly.
- Use body language. Children may not understand your words in English but may respond to gestures.
- Use single sounds, then words in English. English sounds may be unknown in a child's home language, and a foundation of strong letter-sound awareness will emerge.
- Use short sentences. It is easiest for children to imitate basic, three-to-five-word sentences.
- Make it functional. Use key phrases: "I want..." "Help me..." "Mine."
- Make it concrete. Saying the word 'ball' while holding a ball gives the child more information. Try not to focus on abstract concepts, such as manners.
- Avoid using too many descriptive words. Using only nouns and verbs in your sentences is effective for early learning.
- Use words to describe the child's play (e.g., "You put it in the box.")
- Face the child(ren) when talking. They need to watch how your lips form new words and sounds, along with your facial expressions, just like they did when moving from a babbling stage to words and sentences in their home language.
- Be attentive to children's speech and echo their words to reinforce their learning.
- Language modeling needs to vary according to age, understanding and interest.
- Play sound and word games. Have children listen to a sound recording and provide a choice of pictures they can match with the sounds. Try telling stories with only props and no books, or use books that have no words, but that have colourful pictures or illustrations.
- Use transition songs and other made-up songs to help children retain language.

Encourage Families to Speak their First Language at Home:

- Encourage parents to continue sharing chants, stories, songs and games with their child in their home language.
- Help them find ways to connect with other families who share their language. This will ensure that children hear their home language used at more advanced levels and in natural and meaningful ways.

NOTE: The strategies suggested in this tip sheet are meant to help programs support refugee families in maintaining their home language, but you know your program best. Use only the ideas that work best for the unique challenges and strengths of your program, children and families.

