

Providing Culturally Responsive and Individualized Infant and Toddler Care

Making Meaning Together Connecting with Dual Language Learners in Infant and Toddler Care

Danny Torres: Hello, everyone. Welcome to the third session of our online conversation series, Providing Culturally Responsive and Individualized Infant and Toddler Care. Today's topic, Making Meaning Together: Connecting with Dual Language Learners in Infant and Toddler Care. Thank you all very much for joining us to speak about this very important topic. My name is Danny Torres. I serve as WestEd Senior Manager of Publications and Dissemination. Now I'd like to introduce Sabrina Laine, Chief Program Officer at WestEd. She'll be introducing the session today. Sabrina, take it away.

Sabrina Laine: Thank you, Danny. And good afternoon, everyone. Welcome, as Danny said, to the third session in our series. My name is Sabrina Laine. I'm the Chief Program Officer at WestEd. For those of you who are new to WestEd or participating in your first online conversation with us, WestEd is a nonpartisan, nonprofit research, development, and services agency. We work throughout the United States and abroad, and our mission is to promote excellence, achieve equity, and improve learning for children, youth, and adults. Today's conversation, as Danny shared, is entitled Making Meaning Together: Connecting with Dual Language Learners in Infant and Toddler Care, a topic that's near and dear to my own heart as a non-native English speaker and dual language learner as a young child.

However, unlike many of the children and families that we serve at WestEd, I had access to all kinds of support, including a mother who was a Montessori school teacher. So, unlike the experience of many young dual language learners, my development, my early development in two languages was celebrated and not discouraged. Okay, enough about me. Let's go on to the experts. That's who you're here to see and listen to and learn from today. And on that note, I'd like to introduce the moderator for today's session, Dr. Peter Mangione, Senior Managing Director and co-founder of WestEd's legacy Program for Infant and Toddler Care and one of the foremost experts in the US and internationally on the many

components necessary for a healthy and nurturing environment for infants and toddlers, and also my friend. Peter, I'm handing it over to you.

Peter Mangione:

Thank you, Sabrina, for that warm and a wonderful introduction. I have the pleasure today to engage in a conversation with two wonderful colleagues, Ann-Marie Wiese, who is a Senior Research Associate at WestEd. She focuses on issues related to enhancing early learning and care for dual language learners. She currently is contributing to California's master plan for early learning and care and the preschool development grant renewal project. Most recently, Ann-Marie directed a family engagement initiative, serving culturally and linguistically diverse preschool families in state preschool programs in California.

She co-directed the project that led to the development of California's best practices for young dual language learners research overview papers, and the California Preschool Program Guidelines as they related to dual language learners. And that came within a series of videos that Ann-Marie directed the development of highlighting program practices and instructional strategies. Ann-Marie led a professional development effort for preschool practitioners with course seminars, onsite coaching and self-assessment, and a self assessment tool of language and literacy practices to support dual language learners.

She's most recently authored chapters in the "Handbook of Research on Early Education of Young Children" and "Advances in Early Education and Care". Welcome Ann-Marie. And we're really looking forward to hearing from you today. And my second colleague is Edilma Serna. She joined WestEd in January 2002, almost 20 years with us, and she is a PITC Regional Coordinator in Los Angeles. Edilma provides PITC bilingual training for center-based and family childcare programs serving children from birth to three years old. She has a lot of practical experience and is really an important resource and coach to people and trainer.

Her past experience includes working in the early childhood field as a teacher and assistant director in her native country of Mexico since 1981. Edilma is currently mentoring PITC bilingual and bicultural trainees and infant toddler specialists in Southern California. Welcome, Edilma. We were looking forward to hearing from you and your experience in the field working in so many different bilingual settings with so many different bilingual providers and children and families. As we thought about this topic, we wanted to really hear from you all and questions that come from the field.

One that often comes up when we're talking about infants and toddlers is, is it the case or do infants and toddlers, especially when we think of that young child first learning language, does that very young child become confused when experiencing a second language in an infant-toddler care setting? Does it in some way delay the child's development, or inhibit the child's development with language if the child is experiencing two languages? Ann-Marie, I know that you have looked at the research really comprehensively and in depth in this area. What does the research tell us about that whole question? Is it confusing?

Ann-Marie Wiese: Thank you, Peter, for that warm introduction. And also, just to say, you know, I think I like to always start when that question comes up is, you know, it seems like a pretty reasonable question to ask, right? Like if you're exposing a child to more than one language, might they get confused? And I think what I like to point people to is what we know about young children when they enter into this world as babies, right? They enter with this amazing potential to learn any language and to learn more than one language.

And we know from the research that while that trajectory for how young children might be learning more than one language might look different than if they were just learning one, you know, if you're learning two or three depending on your family, your community, the culture, cultural context that you're in, and that they hit the same milestones, right? They learn their first words at about the same time as a monolingual child. They start putting those words together, you know, to make meaning in two or three-word combinations to make sentences. And they even reach milestones in terms of numbers of words.

You know, we talk about the word spurt, you know, at that point in the young child's life where all of the sudden they have this acceleration in the number of words that they learn. So exciting as, you know, I think about my own personal experience as a mom, you know, even knowing the research, but that's when your child kind of hits that acceleration in their words, those same things happen with dual language learners. Now they might look different. So, I feel like sometimes, the example would be if you were only looking at one of the children's languages, be it, let's say they're learning English and Chinese and you are maybe only an English speaker, you might only know the words that are the English words, right?

Or the child will only use English with you even in the very early years of their life. So you might not understand the whole totality of their language, right? So, for the young dual language learner, that might lead

you to think, oh, are they confused? Are they behind? Are they delayed? Again, understanding the potential that they have to learn more than one language, understanding that those milestones are similar, but they just maybe look a little different. And so for, the vocabulary is one that we have a lot of research on in terms of thinking about their total vocabulary.

And so then how you learn about what they know, you need to take into consideration all their languages, but no. The confusion, you know, they are born with that ability. And I could talk more about babbling, how they can babble in all languages, but, you know, I'd like to see what you think to that, Peter.

Peter Mangione: So, I agree with you completely. That's my reading of the research, that they are born with this amazing capacity to learn language. And it's in those interactions with us that they learn that language in that early communication with us. And what seems to be key is that they have the opportunity to use language, and their language is supported. I'm wondering, Edilma, as you think about how we support early language development, and as you work with family childcare providers and infant toddler care teachers and caregivers, what are the kinds of things you encourage people to do to support that early language development, because we know that they will learn every language they experience, if we give them the support to do it.

Edlima Serna: Thank you, Peter. Thank you for the warm introduction as well. And I'm glad to be here with everybody. It feels like I am at home. It feels like this topic is very close to my heart as an immigrant and representing the voice of minorities today. So, one of the things that I usually, when I am in the field and working with family childcare providers, center-based teachers, home visitors, or administrators in leadership, they are the ones that really support the dual language learners and have, the responsibility is in our hands. And I always said when it comes to the practicing, I revisit three words, the reciprocal, the respectful, and being enabled to really focus on what it is to be responsive. And if we take a look at the word, the prefix of these three words that I just mentioned, RE means repetition.

So, children, babies especially, because we underestimate that first year and we need to improve that. We need to support that babbling. The research says that it takes 1,000 repetitions of bah bah bah bah wah wah wah wah to get to water. So, us as caregivers on the floor, we need to show children that we are validating, not only with feeling that we come with a deficit if I don't speak the language of the child, any

language. We need to feel that we are strong to read those cues. First of all, when the child is making eye contact, when the child, as Dr. Burn says, is selecting and pointing, it's a behavior, it's an initial behavior of communication.

So, we need to pay attention to these cues that we are talking about it and giving the child a time. When it says reciprocal, I think I want to revisit those, it's giving, but it's felt and pause. Reciprocal means that I have to wait for that communication to return to me. And also, I have to, if the child isn't able to really produce a sound, use self-talk. Self-talk and parallel talk are those amazing tools that you have within yourself. And it's just a gentle reminder that you are going to be able to practice all along. Sometimes we feel that the anticipation or the rushing to do things quickly will get us to that response, because responsiveness means this. Respond quickly.

But we have to do it in a gentle way. I am acknowledging you. And if I've been taking care of a baby on my lap, because that's what I see in the field, and I'm taking care of when providers are supporting mixed ages, and they are supporting three or four children at the same time, there is this eye contact from the distance. There is the language acquisition process that has to be natural. There is no science involved. We are humans, and we are connected because we are social beings. And so, my response to you when it comes, how cultural responsive I can be to that baby and to that child is supporting those first three years, and being there.

There is so much misconceptions, myths in the field, the negative connotation about children will get confused as Ann-Marie says, and we know that the research says it doesn't. Children need to be exposed to the language, and children need to be validated by their home language. We need to make the U-turn and create mirrors where children are respected by the cultural background that they bring into the program. That the families have respected by the culture in their experiences that they bring with us when they come to the program. We all have different learning styles of communication. And that is something that we have been studying for a long time.

In any arena, the way that we communicate, it's an open book for all of us. And this is one of the things that I would like to invite everybody. When you meet the first time that family, go and embrace it as a new person, as a new entity, as a new community, and learn about from them because they are the ones who are gonna give you the hints how to support those stages, especially in the first three years. Thank you, Peter.

Peter Mangione: Thank you, Edilma. I heard so many different ideas from you. First of all, the culture. You're not only supporting the child's language development, but you also are supporting the child's cultural development. And the two work hand in hand. So, we really don't think about them separately, but if we're supporting a child, we have to think about culture and language, that family experience, the experiences, the assets, what that child's bringing to us, all of the learning that child is already bringing to us. And if we can get to know the family and culture, then we can build on that learning. We'll talk about that some more a little bit, but there are some other things you said that I would like to get to.

And one is this idea of reading the child's cues. And you spoke about how it's really about communication when we're talking about language learning. That's true of an infant who's a monolingual learner, and that's true of an infant who is a bilingual or a dual language learner. That those infants, especially when they're very young, are going to be giving us cues. And it's our responsiveness with language that's gonna be so important for that in reading those cues. We know from the research that 70% of the communication from an infant, a young infant, is going to be non-verbal. So, it's really establishing that communication.

And another thing you said, which I think is so powerful to think about, is that communication is a back and forth, and it's reciprocal, as you said. And that's what the child is learning. How to receive information, receive messages through our communication, through our language, and how to give messages both verbally and non-verbally. And it'll be really non-verbal at the beginning. And that non-verbal basis of communication is culturally based. And that's one of the reasons we have to get to know the culture well to support children. Ann-Marie, when I think about language development, and I think about this question of confusion, sometimes what comes up is that children seem to be mixing up the two languages. And I know that experts have said that that's part of their learning process. I wonder if you could elaborate on that, explain that some.

Ann-Marie Wiese: Yeah, you know, it's interesting. That's definitely another one of the areas, right? So, that, where the bilingual child in their language development, again, it looks different than a monolingual. They have two languages, maybe three languages depending on their family context, again, depending on their cultural context that they're in, but those are all linguistic resources that they bring to the table, right? So, in infants, like you said, most of the communication is non-verbal, but once they're using language, oftentimes they will use words or phrases and combine them together from the different languages that they have at their

disposal. And the term that we see in the literature is code switching or code mixing more broadly, and it's been studied from young children all the way up into adulthood.

It's used for, most of us that are bilingual often code switch in our communications with others. And I will say that more recently in the research and kind of academic discussions around this and looking at children's development and how adults use more than one language as well, there has been, I think, a kind of an emergence in using a different term, which is called translanguaging. So, really putting the emphasis on how the bilingual individual, be it a child, that they are tapping their linguistic resources and using them to communicate. Again, so coming back to that, you know, we are all social beings. We learn a language within the context of our relationships, and we also use language to communicate with others. It really, I just saw something recently I think in a resource that, you know, maybe we can provide later that actually ZERO TO THREE has on their website that talks about bilingualism.

And one of the things that they said in that that really resonated with me is that, you know, there really this communication is what feels connection. So it's this, we're talking about reciprocal communication but at this broader level, communicating with others also helps build that relationship, right? It's both. It happens in the context of the relationship, but it contributes to the relationship. And they talked about it as being at the heart of the relationship. So, going back to your initial question though, I would say, you know, what you see with young, like toddlers, even when they're using two, three word phrases, is that the child is actually being very intentional about how they use which words from which language.

So, they might, you know, for example, like the child might use a particular word for let's say milk, right? So, they might use the Spanish word leche, and they might say, I want leche, right? So, but they still are using the grammatical construction that you would use in English, and they're inserting the word from the other language. So, they are still using rules that they've constructed for themselves about how you use language appropriately that they've learned in the context that they're in. And as they get a little within that range but also a little bit later, they tend to use the languages that they have and match them to the speaker that they're using them with.

So, they start to notice, oh, this person speaks Spanish and English, so I can use Spanish and English together with that person. This person or this other adult only speaks English with me. So, you know, again, it's that

potential. It's that, as Edilma said really, it's sort of, I think, I don't know if it was your, Peter, that said, you know, it's this potential, this asset like kind of shifting how we're really looking at that. The potential that they have to learn language, but also what are those assets that they are bringing, and how they are, they have this extra resource, they have more than one language, and they're using that. They're bringing all of that to bear in their interactions with those around them.

Peter Mangione: When you were describing that learning crosses, it made me think of the monolingual infant learning language, or toddler, let's say, older infant. At first they might, what in the literature gets called, over generalized. So, every four-legged creature they see is a dog, and eventually they start sorting it out. There are dogs and cats, and then there are dogs, cats, and cows, and they continue to do that. And the way you described the learning process of the dual language learner with the two languages, it's sorting out too, that the child is working with both languages, playing, seeing what applies, what doesn't, and then sorting it out.

And that's a natural part of the learning process. I think that's really a nice way to think about it. You said another word that was so important within the context of the program for infant-toddler care and that's relationship, that children are learning language, they're having that kind of experience in a relationship, and it's through communication in a relationship that caring adults deepen their connections with the children they're caring for. Edilma, I'm thinking about, this is another one of those RE words, isn't it? Relationship.

Edilma Serna: Yes.

Peter Mangione: Thinking about, you know, your work and how you work with people around...you're forming a relationship with the child as the child is learning, learning language and learning everything else, but language is a powerful tool for learning. How do you think about that? How do you work with people around helping them see the relationship part of the work they're doing and how that's supporting learning?

Edilma Serna: It's such a good question, Peter. Thank you. I think the first thing that I do, we need to become aware, nos caprenden dos linguas. So what is the process? The person that learns two languages, when that person as a baby is being exposed, the hearing is so important in maintaining those emotional and physical environments where children may be having this experience of feelings of distress, insecure, under the stress. And also being able to support that in voicing, especially that we are working in my state, in my community, in my country, I see that we all have this

exposure to bilingualism, or trilingualism, or bicultural, being biliterate in just reading billboards, Why? It's an exposure of a different language.

But our dispositions and how we support that process is very important. Children, babies, I help the field, and I help teachers and family childcare providers to pay attention to the non-verbal cues. I think that's the key. It's very important that we acknowledge that period, that receptive language that is going on before the child starts getting into selecting and discriminating the consonants and the vowel sounds, and then is forming a syllable, which is happen by the 15, 18 months. We are listening to this beautiful first attempt to come from the teller. Communication is dialogue of the young infant. And helping them that their second language, their home language is a valuable tool. Don't undermine that. Don't underestimate what is going on in that process.

We also need to pay attention at this theory of the home language. The home language is the main language of the communication of the family. So, we need to validate that, and that foundation is going to create for those questions that I get in the field, well, my child is gonna get confused when he gets to kindergarten, and they are asking for just numbers of vocabulary that he needs to build. So we need to help parents. We need to help teachers that English will be there, because if the child has a strong foundation in their home language, English can be introduced gradually. So, zero to five are crucial for the development of language.

There is also confusion in the field about, well, my program claims to be bilingual, but when I get there, I hear more 80, 90% Chinese, or 80, 90% Spanish in my neighborhood and the programs that I have supported. And I said, I think you have this approach of having a dual language approach, which is 50% of the communication in one language and 50% in another language. So, this dual language approach, I help providers to feel okay with it and defend what they are doing with action, and also help them to advance in what they believe because they are forming, not only the language skills that are gonna support these children in the future generations because globalization is here and it's not gonna go away, and being able to support that identity and feel good about who they are, but also in thinking and speaking and communicating with others.

So, I think it's important that we clarify that children and babies will learn English, but also, they need to validate who they are, and just paying attention to those cues are crucial.

Peter Mangione: And that paying attention to the cues and connecting with their child allows for the development of the relationship, which is that warm relationship, that responsive relationship is the foundation for everything else.

Edlima Serna: Exactly.

Peter Mangione: And we want to make sure that every baby in care, whether the child's a dual language learner or monolingual learner, that that child is having that relationship experience and forming that secure attachment, and then the learning can happen, and then the communication can happen. Ann-Marie, as I'm thinking about this whole area and what Edilma was saying and thinking about how important the early years are as an opportunity to learn, I'm also wondering if there are advantages for children who are learning two languages and what we need to do to make sure we're taking full advantage of those advantages.

Ann-Marie Wiese: You said that very eloquently, Peter, 'cause what I was thinking, you know, Edilma, you were talking about some of the misconceptions, and we talked about confusion and code switch are these things that we're starting to, I think, you know, we have it in the research, and I think people are trying to understand that this potential that children have to be bilingual. But I think, you know, shifting from the notion of... We really used to think that bilingualism, okay, could maybe come at a cost to the child long-term. We really know now that there are also long-term benefits, right?

So, there's the how bilinguals look different than a monolingual early in life. And then we think about what happens long-term for them. If, and the big if, which I think is really important to consider, is that these benefits, before I state some of them, that they're really not automatic, they don't just happen magically, and that they're really, you know, like just a little bit of bilingualism doesn't yield you these benefits long-term. So, how do we really think about nurturing and supporting and developing both languages? The home language and English is the scenario that we're talking about most of the time. But the one that I think is really relevant to our conversation around relationships and one that is in my view really the most important is this ability to continue that connection to your family, to your culture, to your community long-term.

And we are a nation that when children come in speaking a language other than English, often within a generation or two, that language is lost. And thinking about what that means to the individual child in terms of their own identity, their self-esteem, their connection of how they, to

their, maybe not immediately to their parents, you know, but maybe there's another generation that doesn't speak English fluently. The benefit of having the bilingualism means you get to maintain and sustain those relationships in deep and meaningful ways. And to your identity, you know, language is so intricately tied to culture.

And then there are also academic benefits long-term, right? So, we know that there's research on kind of the cognitive flexibility and working memory advantages for bilinguals. We also know that long-term, you know, they can demonstrate higher levels of academic achievement if they sustain and maintain the bilingual fluency. And also, Edilma alluded to this with, you know, we're in a globalized society, right? Being bilingual and biliterate or multi-lingual, and, you know, literate in more than two languages is often an advantage. But again, in the context of our topic today, really that connection to your family, culture, and community.

So, how you do that is really gonna depend on, you know, I think about all the different contexts we've talked about. Edilma said, you know, maybe you have one age group, two languages, you're direct, you know, maybe you're in a center-based setting, you're in a family childcare setting, how you achieve that balanced bilingualism and creating those opportunities for children is gonna look different. But the intentionality around thinking, you know, I am maybe a monolingual speaker that doesn't speak the same language as the home language of the child. How am I intentionally partnering with the family? You know?

How am I making sure to share with them and lift up their voice and their role in the child's long-term development? Because we have them in our care, maybe if you're an infant toddler caregiver one to three years, maybe if you're in a family childcare center longer, but they're gonna be with those parents for life. So how do you help equip them? You know, I'm trying to use that language instead of empower because they have the power. They speak the language, they have the culture, they have those deep, meaningful lives, and they have the best interest of that child at heart. So, how do you help equip them with the tools to have them know that they have that strength and that they just need to trust and continue that that is their role to give their child that gift and to be that partner on the journey with you as a caregiver or teacher?

So, again, it looks different, but that intentionality around how do you create those opportunities in both languages together with family, with community. And, you know, there was a really concrete example that came to me as I was just reflecting right before we started today for my own children, because I myself grew up bilingually as well, in Spanish

English. But when my children went into a center-based care setting, which was a Title V setting here in the state of California, that program that this amazing partnership with, and I don't know how it came to be, I was a parent in the setting and just benefited from it, but they had partnered with a day center for seniors in the community. And those seniors were invited to come in and volunteer four to six hours a week, and just sit with babies and talk with them and sing with them in the languages of the home of the children that were in the setting.

And it was this amazing gift where they had brought in these elders really of the community who knew some of those families and had that opportunity again to partner in really kind of creative ways. But it, you know, so it speaks to everything you were saying, Edilma.

Peter Mangione:

I'm thinking right now of that infant, that young child, and I'm thinking of the research which talks about that bilingual advantage that you spoke to Ann-Marie, where children, by the time they're four or five, who are truly bilingual, who've had that balanced experience that you described where they're getting rich experience in a relationship in each language, that those children with executive functioning, that ability to inhibit a response and shift your attention, that cognitive flexibility so you can focus on one thing and then shift back to the other, which is so important for learning in all areas, whether we're talking about math, learning about math or learning about advanced literacy concepts or whatever learning we're talking about, that we know is an important ability that children are developing, and it seems like children who are truly bilingual are developing that earlier.

And I can imagine that baby first encountering a second language, having to learn how to attend to one language or the other with this person, oh, we communicate in Chinese, we communicate in Spanish, we communicate in Russian. There are these non-verbal cues, which are part of the culture that you communicate that way. And then with this other person, I'm communicating with someone who speaks English and has these other kinds of non-verbal cues and messages that I have to attend to. And that early brain development, the brain is sorting it out. And we can see that it benefits as the child develops. So, it's so important to have this balanced experience.

And Edilma, I'm thinking about those children who come into a program where the provider speaks English and maybe the children have a different language. There may even be some children who don't even have the same home language. There are several home languages in your program, and families with different home languages. How do you work

with providers, caregivers, teachers, around supporting families to keep using their home language so the child keeps having that balanced experience and both languages keep developing?

Edlima Serna:

Thank you, Peter. It's such a good question. And I think that's what we need to work in our interpersonal, intrapersonal skills, feel good about themselves and making them feel welcome. And sometimes learning a few words in another language or feeling good about your home language, it creates a foundation. Just the greeting is a foundational connection for saying you are welcome in this environment, but also at the same time, how parents can come and bring, well, I just happened to have this experience in the supermarket with one of my former participants in PITC. She says, "I want my child to be able to feel proud of his language, but also I want him to be exposed." And the school the child is attending, it's a four-year-old who used to be a baby in a family childcare program, and he switched to this program that is offering different languages.

And so, the child is in an immersed program where he's learning 25% English, 25% is Spanish, and 25% Chinese because she feels that the child needs to have this identity in being able to connect with the surroundings and where the child lives. So, I think making that connection and helping providers and teachers to let them know what is the importance of having this bicultural, bilingualism, biliterate foundation, and also thinking about your philosophy. What are you offering to the parents? Go back and revisit those values. What are your values when you are looking at this language?

Sometimes we project that we add, like I mentioned earlier, and Ann-Marie just mentioned, about the importance of creating those partnerships, but these are the great moments, the philosophy of the program and the values that we portrayed and we said, it has to be aligned. And it has to go hand-in-hand when I say that. Remember Darwin used to say in his studies in the origin of word, and I don't know if, I came across to this book that it was in my shelf, and it have to recommend it because he will talk about that language is half art and half instinct because we bring, it's in us.

And so, by supporting that provider and by supporting that family that is coming with this a lot of information and bringing just sometimes as simple song, a rhyme, a story, that is now parents that are coming where the dominant language is Spanish. It's not only English, but also Spanish, and they are indigenous, indigenous talking a dialect. And how can we support that that this parent feels welcome? And this is the dilemma

when the family childcare provider of the center-based teacher asked me, "I'm serving the communities from Oaxaca and they're speaking a dialogue." And I said that's the language, even the earth, they are part of our community.

You have to welcome them. Don't separate that, and because of feeling of apprehension, now I have to work on that situation and embrace that. But I go back and revisit, look at you who you are, and how proud you feel when you speak Spanish and you're welcome to, you are willing to combine and say all these different sentences. But if you learn one word and mistake Zapateco for another indigenous dialogue, that parent is gonna feel welcome. And that's the connection. Use the whispering. Modulate your voice when you're talking to them, so they don't feel afraid. It's important that we are making them feel good. So, that's...

Peter Mangione: What I'm hearing is that this message of value in their language and culture and letting them know how important it is, and the way you were talking, it reminded me of the way we started this conversation. Babies have this amazing capacity to learn any language, but it doesn't start happening until they're in a culture, in a language, in a relationship in which that communication is happening. And then it'll all start happening. And what we can do to support the process is to be intentional in our relationships, in our communication, in our support and expressing our values about to dual language learning and our belief that through our relationships, both with the family and with the children, if we're open and are learners and find ways to communicate, we will support those children to achieve their maximum potential.

It's very exciting to think about. This conversation could go on, I think. But we have actually ran out of time, which is it's gone very quickly. I would like to invite Arlene Paxton to join us. Arlene is the Director of the PITC Regional Support Network, and also the content area team director for the infant-toddler content area at WestEd. Arlene, welcome. I think you are watching our questions and have been trying to put that together for us, and you want to hear, convey to us what the audience is interested in.

Arlene Paxton: Right, so thank you, Peter, for the introduction, and thank you all for the conversation today. So, a few of the questions that you've touched on, but I thought maybe we could expand a little bit around... So, there's a question around sign language with babies and toddlers. And obviously that is a language, right? We have families and children who are hard of hearing and use sign language, but it's all... So, I was wondering if any, well, Ann-Marie, I might start with you. I'll direct this to you. Any

additions you'd want to make to sign language to use with young infants and toddlers?

Ann-Marie Wiese: So, I'll say it's interesting that you raised that. Some of the initial research on cross linguistic language development, so not looking at the bilingual child, but looking at do you speak English and what is the development of that language look like? And how does it look different based on your culture, right? You know, to raise... There's the language itself, the features of the language, but also the context that you're in culturally. Some of the early seminal research was on what we think of as traditional spoken languages. But there actually is a huge body of research on ASL as a language, right? And in and of itself, how those patterns for dual language development if you are a monolingual child versus a dual language child or bilingual child also translate to when you look if you're say spoken language and learning ASL as one of your first languages as a bilingual child.

I don't know if the question was specifically more around the use of, like, we know that it's come out of, you know, the work that I'm familiar with this from UC Davis around the use of sign, a simplified version. Some of it is like ASL, but it's more simplified use of signs for baby sign language almost to communicate with young children and infants before they necessarily have the verbal production abilities to use language productively. I would say what's amazing about that is since it's not tied to a specific spoken language and is non-verbal, you know, speaking to what Peter and Edilma were saying about non-verbal language for infants, the communication, it could play a real role where again, that sign then could be a connector, right? For this is how you say it with sign, this is how you say it with English, Spanish. It could be a really valuable tool in your toolkit, right? With young infants.

Peter Mangione: And those babies' signs, the research shows, help infants, those new learners of language who are communicating, it helps them communicate. And what the research shows is those children become less frustrated, that they have a non-verbal means to communicate as well as a verbal means. And then they can start learning the words that go with the signs. And there are these three kinds of, as you alluded to, Ann-Marie, three kinds of signs. One are these gestures from the child themselves, and you use those gestures as signs. Another is to take signs from one of the formal languages like American Sign Language, or ASL, and use those signs to communicate with the child.

There's some research on that. And then this third point where American Sign Language, or any sign language based on a language or founded in a

culture is going to have all the features of a spoken language. It's going to have a grammar, it can represent everything we can represent in spoken language, and there are wonderful case studies of children whose parents only use sign language because they are deaf or hard of hearing, and the child actually has oral language capacity. And so, that child becomes a dual language learner when the child enters into a setting where there is a language spoken. And so, that same kind of process we talked about where children were learning two oral languages also would happen between a sign language and a spoken language.

Edlima Serna: May I add something, Peter, to that conversation? It's so interesting because last week I had the opportunity to talk to a family childcare provider that she just received a Russian family. And she was looking ways of how to communicate. She doesn't have a translator. The parent just is new completely to the culture, and I just suggested what about just learning a few signs to support those major transitions, routines, routines are so important because the parent was, she can say that she was worry about her child not eating. And so I said, well, let's do more, and I exposed her to different sign language so that she can utilize and communicate with the parent. And it was like in the middle of the night on Sunday that she texts me and she says, it work.

Peter Mangione: That's great.

Edlima Serna: Reduce the stress, the worry of the parent, and now they are communicating in this sign language. And so, I think when you want to help, it doesn't matter what you have to do. But if you think about the situation, that is the gift. This provider was thinking, how can I help this family that newly arrived, and I need to support this baby? And she's worried about the feeding, and is worried about the diaper change, and is worried about all these routines. So, to me it's bringing it home, bringing in what we do, and use the universal language, your body, your face conveys. The non-verbal communication is so important because it sometimes conveys more than what we do in long sentences.

Ann-Marie Wiese: And Edilma, you know, I think what's beautiful about that story for me too, it's about the stance you're bringing into that relationship. And I also think that that family childcare provider acknowledged that, I don't know, but I can, right? Because I think, I also, you know, just because she didn't speak Russian, she found a way to tap into the resources she did have because she had that commitment to supporting that child's learning and development and connecting with that family and welcoming them. So she said, okay, who can I reach out to to help me figure this out? Because I know I can. Like, I can with support, you know, just like the children and

families need support, our providers and our teachers need support. And they also need, we need to, you know, having an assets-based approach in how we view what they are possible, right? That possibility of what they can offer and what they can accomplish.

Edlima Serna: And that's a wonderful example of supporting diversity, because diversity means that we need to respect and be sensitive to cultural differences and actively work toward equality. We talk about equality. This is a good way and good opportunity for us to bring that into our conversations. This provider that I just recently spoke about, she not only included the sign language, but she went and get a dictionary with pictures in Russian and tried to facilitate and communicate and pointing, instilled the value of wanting to do something good for the other person. And understanding that empathetic behavior, I think, is what we need to encourage as we support language development and language acquisition in another language. Thank you.

Arlene Paxton: So much good conversation. Many questions. About three minutes left. But I hope you all understand, three to four, that we unfortunately will not be able to get to all of the questions today. But I'm gonna ask this question, Peter, to you, and I think it's something that's weighing heavily on people's minds in the time of the pandemic and masks. And, you know, this is a topic we've talked a little bit about before in some other PITC webinars, but I think important and very relevant. So, with masks and PPE it's difficult for infants to see our faces. Will this affect their language and learning?

Peter Mangione: It's not ideal. I mean, obviously, the infant is looking through for every channel of communication possible to learn, to communicate, and learn. Will the child learn to communicate? Yes, and the thing about development which I think all of us can keep in mind is that there's a self-writing tendency in development. And if during a period, you don't get what's ideal and you do get the communication later, it can make up for it. I know that there were a lot of efforts as the pandemic continued to find ways to communicate. One thing is that relationship with the families became even more important.

And to communicate with the families, you know, you don't have to have masks when you're with your baby, with your young child. Take full advantage of that communication because that's where the child is going to have that experience. Here we have to use masks. I know programs experimented with transparent masks, and some used face shield so that there could be more contact. We know a lot of communication for infants comes from other non-verbal channels, the eyes, and you're also still

using language. And that's one of the things that we really emphasized as we worked with programs and teachers and providers that you still need to use language even if the child can't see your mouth and can't see you making the sounds that way.

So, there are still a lot of ways that we're supporting that communication. We're working with families, help supporting them to really use that communication and use the full communication they're able to make available and believe and hold true in our hearts that if we develop that relationship with the child and provide that support and as the opportunity arises to be fully ourselves without a mask, the child will learn from us when we have to use a mask, and then that learning will flourish when the masks go away.

Edlima Serna: May I add the importance of books in this case? I think children, when they get exposed to faces in books that can support, that if you feel that you need to have tools, this is another way. I look at the books as a tool to communicate feelings, because it might be that it will be blocking some parts of our face, our mouth, or the way we move our lips, or the way babies need to exercise a lot with their tongue. So, using books, I think, is another tool that can bring that support to the child's development, communication, and language. But I also feel that books are very powerful when it supports diversity.

Once children see themselves represented in books, that existence is validated, and they feel that they are a part of the world. And this is a quote that I feel that it will support what is this huge process of acquiring language development by Eric Velasquez. Thank you.

Arlene Paxton: Well, thank you, panel. Peter, I think that's all the time we have for questions at this point.

Peter Mangione: It is. We have used up our whole hour here. We have a couple of minutes left. Danny is going to rejoin us and give some information about what comes next. This'll be available to people, this conversation, and we'll be sharing additional information as we continue with this series. Ann-Marie, and Edilma, and Arlene, thank you so much. It's been really rich. I've really enjoyed it and learned a lot from you. Thank you.

Ann-Marie Wiese: Thank you.

Edlima Serna: Thank you, Peter. Thank you everybody.