

## UNICEF's Latest Global Challenge: A Child Protection System For All

The question wasn't whether a child protection system embraced by each of the nations of the world was needed and would have a humanitarian impact. Many of the more than two dozen UNICEF officials who gathered in Bucharest, Romania in June could recount stories of heartbreak and horror; data suggest some 218 million children are forced into child labor, 1.2 million are trafficked each year, and 143 million are orphans only scratch the surface.

The question was whether designing a child protection system applicable to all nations is possible. And if so, what would it look like?

To University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development (OCD) Co-Directors Christina J. Groark, Ph.D., and Robert B. McCall, Ph.D., the scope and complexity of such a system seemed overwhelming.

"When these people got together, they started talking

about the circumstances, the religious beliefs, and the cultural differences that exist. There were people who had just come back from Myanmar and dealt with that natural disaster [Cyclone Nargis], as well as others who witnessed the man-made disasters – armed conflict, civil wars, genocide – going on. This looked like a totally impossible task," said Dr. McCall.

That task is part of UNICEF's new Child Protection Strategy, which builds on its efforts to create a protective environment for children in nations large and small, developed and emerging. At the

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## Learning Two Languages Early Can Help, Not Harm, Children

For multilingual parents like Jason Perez, the notion that having children learn English and another language during early childhood will overwhelm and confuse them runs counter to their experience.

"I have a daughter who is 8 years old and she speaks Spanish, English, and reads and writes Arabic," said Perez, a prevention specialist at the Homewood-Brushton YMCA. "My other daughter just turned seven. They read an English language book every day and they already have three languages under their belt. English is their first language, but they are capable of using these other languages and it gives

them a broader world view."

Such experiences are supported by a growing body of research that challenges much of the conventional thinking about young English language learners and offers evidence-based insight into how to best educate non-English speaking students so they can achieve full English fluency and academic success.

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Bucharest workshop, UNICEF regional directors from around the world gathered to work on the basics, such as defining a minimum package of services, the capacities and competencies those services would require, how the departments and services need to collaborate with each other, and the outcomes such a global child protection system could be expected to produce.

For Drs. Groark and McCall, child well-being in countries undergoing social transition was not an entirely unfamiliar issue. In 2006, OCD began to investigate the idea of creating an index that could advance the understanding of child welfare and child welfare reform in 21 nations in Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia as part of a USAID-sponsored project.

The OCD co-directors were invited to Bucharest to listen to discussions around child protection issues and to prepare documents on the highlights of the workshop and future work that will be necessary as UNICEF moves forward. “These were very experienced people,” observed Dr. Groark, “each having been a UNICEF director in several countries before being made a regional director. And they were very knowledgeable and clever about how to promote child protection.”

“And they needed to be,” added Dr. McCall. “For the most part, UNICEF is a world advocacy organization—it has no authority or responsibility and little money to influence a country, only the moral persuasiveness of the world community. So they need to advocate for children, who are often highly vulnerable, in a context that may have longstanding opposing historical and cultural practices, limited financial means and governmental effectiveness, and numerous other basic needs higher on the country’s priority list.”

“They were also optimistic and opportunists,” said Dr. Groark. “An emergency, such as a natural disaster, produces large numbers of orphaned and homeless children and public chaos; but the increased international scrutiny, experienced aid agencies, and an influx of money and services represented an opportunity to build a better system for the future.”

So despite their initial doubts, both Drs. Groark and McCall came to believe that a global child protection system, at least in concept, is within reach of UNICEF and the international community. The selling point was the UNICEF regional directors themselves, whose expertise extends from service provision to politics, policy and finance. “Because of their skills and knowledge of their countries, we had confidence they could do this,” said Dr. Groark.

That is not to say it will be either easy or quick. The range of international child protection issues alone is strik-

ing. “Their view of child protection is much broader than our focus here in the United States on child abuse and neglect,” said Dr. Groark.

Brief summaries of the child protection issues UNICEF encounters throughout the world underscore that point.

### Birth Registration

An estimated 51 million births are unregistered every year in developing countries. Most are children born to poor, marginalize, or displaced families in nations where registration systems are dysfunctional or don’t exist at all. In Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, 66 percent of children under the age of 5 are unregistered.

Without registration, no legal acknowledgment of these children exists, and that can mean no access to health care, immunizations, foster care or adoption, and schools. Because registration has a birthdate, it helps to prevent child labor, underage military conscription, and child trafficking. It can also help reunite displaced children with their families and protect against minimizing official populations of minorities within countries.

### Child Labor

Of the estimated 218 million children aged 5-17 who are forced into child labor throughout the world, some 126 million are believed to be doing hazardous work, such as working in mines and with chemicals, pesticides, and dangerous machinery. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the child labor force stands at an estimated 69 million – about one in three children in that region. In South Asia, the child labor force is estimated to be about 44 million children.

These children largely come from poor households and rural areas. Domestic servants are overwhelmingly girls, who are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

### Child Marriage

Child marriage can have serious consequences for children. Abuse is common in child marriages, girls tend not to go to school once they are married, and child marriage increases the risk of premature pregnancies that result in higher rates of maternal and infant mortality. And teenage girls are more vulnerable to sexually-transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS.

UNICEF estimates that more than 60 million women in developing countries were married or in a union before the age of 18. In some developing nations, more than 60 percent of women are married before they reach their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday.

### Child Trafficking

Child trafficking is a lucrative black market business and the

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demand for children as cheap labor or for sexual exploitation is high. UNICEF estimates that as many as 1.2 million children are trafficked every year and face disease, violence, sexual abuse, and other dangers.

Some children who are trafficked are forced into the sex trade. In the Mekong sub-region of Southeast Asia, surveys suggest that 30 to 35 percent of all sex workers are 12 to 17 years old. Mexico reports more than 16,000 children engaged in prostitution, with the highest numbers found in tourist destinations. In Lithuania, 20 to 50 percent of prostitutes are minors.

### Children In Conflicts

Armed conflicts often exact a heavy toll on the most vulnerable, including children. Children represent about half of civilian casualties, more than 2 million children are estimated to have died as a direct result of armed conflicts since 1990, and more than 1 million have been left orphaned or separated from families.

An estimated 20 million children have been forced to flee their homes because of conflict and human rights violations and are living as refugees in neighboring countries or are displaced within their own countries' borders. And UNICEF estimates that at any given time some 300,000 child soldiers – some as young as 8 years old – are exploited in armed conflicts around the world.

### Children and Justice

More than 1 million children worldwide are detained by law enforcement officials. In many cases, extrajudicial proceedings by police or military systems that offer no civil protections result in children being arbitrarily or even illegally arrested, detained, and sentenced. Some are below the age of criminal responsibility. Most are not serious offenders and are in jail awaiting trial.

The holding conditions of these children can be deplorable and inhumane. Many are jailed with adult prisoners. The risks of sexual abuse is high, and physical abuse is common.

### Discrimination

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that all children are entitled to the same rights, regardless of their race; gender; language; religion; national, ethnic, or social origin; property; disability; or birth or other status.

In reality, millions of children are subject to discrimination of many kinds.

Gender-based infanticide, abortion, malnutrition, and neglect, for example, are believed to be the reason an estimated 100 million women are “missing” from the world’s population. UNICEF estimates that only 2 percent of the world’s 150 million children with disabilities attend school. And some 250 million people suffer discrimination for being born into a marginalized social class.

### Children Without Parental Care

Children without parents or guardians are at greater risk of becoming victims of violence, exploitation, trafficking, discrimination, and other abuses. They face higher risk of developmental delays. During armed conflict, they may be separated from family and community, sometimes across national borders, and exposed to dangers, including death, malnutrition, and illness.

UNICEF estimates that 143 million children in the world are orphaned by one or both parents. They are left parentless for many reasons. Armed conflict has left more than 1 million orphans since 1990, orphans account for 2-5 percent of the world’s refugee population, and the number of children orphaned by HIV/AIDS is expected to increase to more than 25 million.

### Female Genital Mutilation

An estimated 70 million women and girls alive today have been subjected to some form of genital mutilation/cutting. There are several reasons for this practice. It is sometimes done as a way to control or reduce sexuality, for example, or as a practice for initiating girls into womanhood. In some cultures, it is seen as enhancing fertility and child survival; in others, it is—often mistakenly—assumed to be a religious requirement.

Whatever the reasons for the practice, it is a fundamental violation of the rights of girls, it is discriminatory, and it can lead to death, irreparable harm, pain, and trauma.

### Violence Against Children

UNICEF ranks violence against children as one of the most serious problems facing children today. Violence pervades societies and can find children in schools, orphanages, on the streets, in the workplace, in prisons, and at home. The World

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Health Organization estimates that 40 million children under the age of 15 suffer abuse and neglect and require health and social care.

Violence against children can lead to injury and death, affect their ability to learn, destroy their self-confidence, and undermine their ability to become capable, nurturing parents. Victims of violence also face a higher risk of depression and suicide later in life.

### United States Not Immune

Although the scope of international child protection issues identified by UNICEF is far broader than problems common in the United States, a universal system to address them does have implications for America.

First, the United States is not immune to some of these issues. A 1995 survey, for example, found that 5 percent of U.S. parents admitted to disciplining their children by violent means, including hitting with an object, kicking, beating, and threatening with a knife or gun. And no nation in the world sentences more children convicted of major felonies to life in prison without the chance of parole than the United States. Although sentencing a juvenile to life without parole violates the 1990 Convention on the Rights of the Child, at least 2,380 U.S. inmates received such sentences as juveniles; Israel is a very distant second with 7.

Finally, it is possible that with the arrival of immigrants from diverse nations, the United States will encounter some of the international child protection issues that today rarely, if ever, occur within its borders, particularly those that stem from religious beliefs and cultural practices.

### Designing A System

In addition to the wide range of child protection issues, an effective international system must consider a complex set of factors that includes differences among nations, govern-

ments, laws, cultures, and resources available to implement and monitor standards and services.

In Bucharest this summer, UNICEF officials took some important early steps toward shaping a global child protection system. For example, they reached consensus on a list of benchmark child protection interventions that governments, non-government organizations, and other groups (i.e., formal and informal tribal/community groups) should attempt to achieve in all nations.

They also identified the basic components of a global system, such as services and interventions; legal frameworks; institutional structures; processes, such as monitoring, information, and referral systems; and the institutional, human, and financial resources available to support child protection. And they recognized that the success of a child protection system depends on being able to identify, strengthen, and link its component elements with each other into an integrated "system," which does not currently exist in most countries.

"They saw that you have to cut across all of the kinds of agencies and departments to get to child protection, but you couldn't ignore the infrastructures of the budget and the capacities of the country," said Dr. Groark.

Work is expected to continue on several fronts, including producing a diagram of a global child protection system; organizing a campaign to raise awareness of child protection issues; and creating ways to improve child outcomes among agencies, nations, their governments and citizens. Once a workable international child protection system is designed, UNICEF officials can look forward to the equally arduous, if not more difficult, job of working with a diverse set of nations, governments, and cultures to implement it. "Implementation will be a set of sequential steps," said Dr. McCall. "Different countries will begin at different points along this sequence. It won't happen all at once." ■

John -- Put a fall (seasonal) picture in this space.

# Early Childhood Mathematics Education: What It Is, Children's Abilities, And Teacher Readiness

American school children fare poorly in mathematics when ranked against their peers in other countries, consistently placing in the bottom third of international comparative studies. The implications of such rankings are troubling. Recent studies suggest that children's math concepts at the time they enter school are the strongest predictors of their achievement in later years – even more than their literacy skills.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, those at greatest risk are socially and economically disadvantaged children – a group that counts a disproportionate number of African American and Latino children – whose average levels of academic achievement are lower than those of children from more advantaged families.<sup>2</sup>

These issues are raising concern among policy makers, educators and parents in the United States and drawing attention to ways to improve mathematical performance, including early childhood mathematics education. Head Start, for example, is strengthening its mathematics curriculum and states such as Texas and New Jersey have initiated new early childhood math programs.

The good news is that a growing body of research shows that effective mathematics education for children 5-years-old and younger holds great promise for improving their math performance later in school, particularly among disadvantaged children. Experience suggests, however, that implementing early childhood math education on a broad scale is difficult.

Young children's ability to learn mathematics, the content of early mathematics education, and the readiness of teachers and child care staff to teach math to young children are among the issues important to understanding and improving early mathematics education. This report, based on a review of the early childhood mathematics education research published by the Society for Research in Child Development, examines those issues.

## Early Mathematics Ability

Overwhelming evidence arising from more than two decades of research shows that children from birth to age 5 years learn real mathematical skills and ideas without adult instruction.

Studies suggest they begin to develop everyday mathematics from as early as birth.<sup>3,4</sup> Everyday mathematics develops in the ordinary environment and includes informal ideas of what is more and what is less, taking away, shape, size, location, and pattern.

Infants show some core mathematical abilities, such as being able to discriminate between two collections of objects that vary in number.<sup>5</sup> They also develop basic systems for locating objects in space.

## Interest In Math Ideas

Studies suggest children have a spontaneous interest in mathematical ideas. Young children have been found to spontaneously count, even up to relatively large numbers. They sometimes want to know what the "largest number" is. This interest is usually not generated by adults, who often are unaware of it.

Mathematical ideas are also seen in children's play. When playing with blocks, for example, young children may spend time determining which tower is higher than another.<sup>6</sup> Also, they often create patterns of blocks, extend the patterns, explore shapes, and create symmetries.<sup>7</sup>

## Strengths And Weaknesses

Young children show both mathematical competence and areas of incompetence. Among their competencies is being able to understand the basics of addition and subtraction at an early age.<sup>8</sup> They also spontaneously develop methods of calculating, such as counting on from the larger number. For example, given the numbers 9 and 2, a child may count

out “nine, ten, eleven.”<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, young children often have difficulty understanding that the number of objects remains the same when the objects are simply shifted around. They may also fail to realize that an elongated or other odd-looking triangle is still a triangle with three sides to it.

A young child’s thinking is both concrete and abstract. Examples of concrete thinking include their ability to see that one group of objects is more than another, and their ability to add three toys to four toys and arrive at the sum. One way children demonstrate abstract thinking is by knowing that adding always makes more and subtracting makes less.

### Math Language And Literacy

Language and literacy are deeply embedded in mathematics education and children begin to grasp this at an early age. From the age of 2 years, for example, they learn the language and grammar of counting, memorize the first 10 or more counting words, then the rules that make the higher numbers.

They learn other kinds of mathematical language, such as “square” and other names of shapes, and words that define quantity, such as “bigger” and “less.” Some of these words, such as “more,” are among their first words spoken.<sup>10</sup> In fact, some mathematical words are so pervasive that they are considered aspects of general cognitive development or intelligence and are not often thought of as belonging to mathematics.

Language is necessary to express mathematical thinking and with development children become more aware of their own thinking and begin to express it in words.<sup>11</sup> These skills start to develop in children as young as 4 and 5 years and are essential to not only mathematics, but other topics as well. Most young children, however, find it difficult to learn the special written symbolism of mathematics, such as the + sign for adding and the – sign for subtracting.

### Social And Income Status

Socially and economically disadvantaged children generally perform more poorly in mathematics than their more advantaged peers. However, the pattern of differences are complex.

While the performance of lower SES children on informal addition and subtraction problems is often worse than

that of middle SES children, both groups use similar strategies to solve problems, such as counting on from the larger number.<sup>12</sup>

Disadvantaged children tend to have a more difficult time with verbal addition and subtraction, but they perform as well as their more advantaged peers on nonverbal problems, suggesting they do not lack the basic skills or concepts of addition and subtraction. They also show few differences in everyday mathematics they use in free play.

However, disadvantaged students are more likely to be enrolled in low-quality schools and other learning environments that fail to provide effective mathematics education.<sup>13</sup>

**Research clearly suggests that evidence-based early childhood mathematics education is needed to help raise the sagging mathematics performance of American students.**

### Concepts And Elements Of Early Math Education

Today, the means for teaching early mathematics are available, including research-based curricula. Research also provides policy makers and educators with insight into how programs can be implemented to promote the learning of mathematics subject matter and ways of

thinking.

The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics and other leading professional organizations argue that young children should be taught the “big ideas” of mathematics, such as number, shape and space, measurement and pattern. For example, understanding number goes beyond saying a few counting words and involves reasoning about number, making inferences, and developing a mental number line. Understanding shape involves more than learning the names of common shapes and includes analyzing and constructing shapes and recognizing their defining features. Children also need to be aware of mathematics strategies and be able to verbalize them. Studies suggest young children are capable of learning such material.

In preschool, however, teachers typically use a narrow range of mathematical content. For example, their focus is often limited to the names of common shapes and small counting numbers, they are doing little to encourage processes such as estimation and they infrequently use proper math terminology.<sup>14</sup>

### Key Components

Effective early childhood mathematics education is made up of several key components. They include:

- **Environment.** The preschool classroom or child care setting can set the stage for mathematics learning. To do so, these environments should contain a rich variety of materials, such as blocks, a dress up area, and puzzles. More important, teachers need to support activities in these settings to aid the development of math skills.

- **Play.** Play provides opportunities to explore and take part in fairly sophisticated mathematical activities, especially block play. However, play is not enough. It does not, for example, help children interpret their play experiences in mathematical form.

- **Teachable moment.** This involves the teacher observing children's play and other activities to identify a situation they can exploit to promote mathematical learning. This is only effective if time is spent carefully observing children in play, which, studies suggest, preschool teachers generally do little of.<sup>15</sup>

- **Projects.** These include teacher-guided explorations of complex topics, such as working with children to create a map. Such projects involve mathematical ideas, including space, measurement and perspective, and help children learn that making sense of real-life problems can be enjoyable.

- **Curriculum.** Organized curriculum is essential to early childhood mathematics education. An effective curriculum offers planned activities for teaching math and assumes that math is interesting and exciting on its own and does not need to be sugar coated or integrated with other activities to appeal to young children. Curricula found to be effective, particularly with disadvantaged children, include *Building Blocks*,<sup>16</sup> *Number Worlds*,<sup>17</sup> the *Pre-K Mathematics Curriculum*<sup>18</sup> and the *High/Scope* curriculum.<sup>19</sup>

- **Teaching.** Leading professional organizations recommend that in high-quality math education for children 3 to 6 years old, preschool teachers need to practice deliberate and planned instruction to introduce mathematical concepts, methods, and language.

### Teacher Readiness And Mathematics Education

The number of children enrolled in some type of early education program – preschool, child care centers, Head Start, and kindergarten – has markedly increased in the United States. From 1970 to 2005, enrollment among children ages 3 and 4 years rose from 20 percent to 54 percent. With so many children enrolled who are capable of learning mathematics, the question of whether their teachers are ready to teach them math becomes important.

Unfortunately, studies suggest the overall quality of math instruction is lacking in early childhood education settings across the country.

### Teacher Qualifications

The consensus among policy makers and professional leaders is that a four-year undergraduate degree with specialization in early childhood education is the minimum standard for early childhood teachers. As recently as the 2005-2006 school year, however, only 18 of 38 states that fund preschool required that lead teachers in every classroom have a four-year degree.

More important is whether a degree provides teachers with the knowledge and skills to effectively teach mathematics to young children. Studies suggest that an undergraduate degree – even one in early childhood education – is not a good predictor of the quality of instruction children find in the classroom or of their academic outcomes.<sup>20</sup>

And a common shortcoming found among postgraduate programs is their inability to adequately prepare early childhood education majors to teach domain-specific knowledge to young children, particularly mathematics.<sup>21</sup>

### Teachers' Beliefs

Preschool teachers, in general, have been found to give the social, emotional and physical domains of their classroom higher priority than intellectual and academic activities. In general, they tend to believe young children need to be healthy and socially and emotionally competent and that acquiring basic literacy and mathematical knowledge and skills is less important.<sup>22</sup>

One study noted, for example, that over the course of eight focus group meetings, none of the participating preschool teachers, professional development providers, and administrators discussed mathematics at all.<sup>23</sup> Also, when asked to compare the value of different academic topics, early childhood teachers tend to rate mathematics as significantly less important than literacy.<sup>24</sup>

However, studies suggest that the greater the school's poverty level, the more likely teachers are to identify academic skills as a major problem they need to address.

### Teaching Practice

Evidence suggests that the low priority preschool teachers give to teaching mathematics manifests itself in their classroom practices. Their classrooms typically are found to be socially positive, but instructionally passive. They also spend much less time teaching math than teaching literacy,<sup>25</sup> with one study finding that only 15 percent of class time is typically devoted to mathematics. Similar practices have also been found in kindergarten classrooms.

The quality of mathematics instruction has also been found to be troubling. One study, for example, found that in two preschool programs with a reputation for high quality,

mathematics was not a prominent topic of discussion and, when discussed, the conversation lasted less than one minute and usually focused on very basic concepts, such as age, number recognition, and the names of shapes.<sup>26</sup> Mathematics even tends to be overlooked in the classrooms of teachers who identify it as an important subject to be taught.

### Policy Implications

Research clearly suggests that evidence-based early childhood mathematics education is needed to help raise the sagging mathematics performance of American students. Although early math education is complex and difficult to implement, a growing body of research offers an understanding of key issues, points out shortcomings in teacher preparation and practices and identifies several effective curricula available today.

Studies suggest that improving teacher training and support is the most urgent need. Other areas of improvement that have been identified include the need for federal, state, and local education authorities to promote early childhood mathematics curricula, including efforts to develop new, evidence-based curricula. Greater support is needed for research in areas such as how to enrich teacher knowledge of early mathematics education and effective teaching practices. There is also a need to support the development of new assessment methods.

Work in such areas is essential if child care, preschool, and kindergarten programs are to exploit the consensus findings of researchers that children, from an early age, have the potential and desire to learn mathematics.

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*This Special Report is based on the publication cited above. It is not intended to be an original work but a summary for the convenience of our readers. References noted in the text follow:*

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(Languages continued from Page 1)

Addressing the education of young English language learners is emerging as an urgent national issue as school districts experience a dramatic increase in the number of these students. Some Southern states have seen 300-400 percent increases in the number of children from non-English speaking homes. Recent studies report that in some parts of the country, these children make up more than half of the preschool population.

For the better part of the past two decades, immigration patterns and populations seen across the nation largely bypassed western Pennsylvania. When more than 13 million immigrants streamed into the U.S. during the 1990s, fewer than 25,000 found their way to region, according to a 2002 Duquesne University workforce study. Today, however, there are signs more non-English speaking families with young children are calling the region home.

Several family support centers in Allegheny County are seeing more families with young English language learners enter their programs, particularly the Prospect Park center, where children representing more than 20 nationalities are among those enrolled, said Sheila Beasley, University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development family support outreach director. "First and foremost, the parents want their children to master the English language. And what usually happens very quickly is that as the children master the language, they help teach the language to their parents."

The good news is that new insights into early language development that can be useful in creating more effective policies and practices are available through advances in neuroscience, research on dual language development, early childhood program evaluations, and international studies on multilingual development.

### Family Differences Matter

Ages three to eight are critical years for children's learning of sound, structure and functions of language. It is during this period that language development can be significantly influenced by home, family and other circumstances.

Significant differences are seen among early English language learners in regard to the kinds of circumstances

that influence language development. Key factors include the language spoken at home, fluency of the home language, the extent of their exposure to English, their family values and customs, and their age and family socioeconomic status.

These differences suggest that a single program model isn't able to address such diverse populations and circumstances, and that the effectiveness of an intervention may hinge on the ability to adapt to the specific needs of the children it is intended to serve.

Despite differences in children's circumstances, research strongly suggests that as a group young English language learners are very capable of learning subject matter in two languages and may experience cognitive gains by being exposed to more than one language early in life.

### Knocking Down Myths

One of the most common beliefs is that learning two language as a young child will lead to confusion and may slow progress toward becoming fluent in English. Studies suggest, however, that the opposite is actually true.

Most researchers agree that bilingual infants develop two separate but connected linguistic systems during the first year of life. And recent research suggests that learning two languages early in childhood results in the development of greater brain tissue density in areas important to language, memory, and attention. This increased brain activity and neural density may have a long-term, positive impact on certain cognitive abilities, such as focusing on details of a task and understanding how language is structured and used.

Lucas Musewe has experienced first-hand how mastering multiple languages sharpens the understanding of structure and usage. Musewe, management information systems director for Partnerships in Family Support, grew up in Kenya, where children learned three languages during childhood: the mother tongue; the national language, which is Swahili; and English. "When I read English I am able to interpret it into my own language. I don't need a third party to interpret it for me."

In fact, most children in the world learn more than one language in their early years. "It's not detrimental to the child,"

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said Musewe. “It’s a skill and people have to realize that it is a skill.”

Another common belief holds that the best way for these children to learn English is to immerse them in English from their preschool years through third grade. Again, the research raises serious doubts about that approach.

Recent evidence shows that supporting the home language during children’s preschool years will help, not hinder, their progress toward becoming fluent in English. On the other hand, research suggests that completely shifting children to English while they are still learning and have not yet mastered their first language may slow their learning of English and depress their academic achievement.

Gloria Rodriguez-Ransom’s young children learned both English and Spanish and both languages are spoken at home. After spending 2004 in Puerto Rico, the family returned to Pittsburgh and Rodriguez-Ransom, a parent leader/advocate at the Wilkinsburg Family Support Center, saw how easily her children were able to make the transition from one language to another. “When we came back, they didn’t struggle at all. It didn’t take them long at all to adjust, learn that everyone speaks English here and pick up where they left off.”

The notion that native English language speaking children will experience academic and language setbacks if enrolled in dual language programs is also refuted by the research. Recent studies suggest, for example, that a dual language approach benefits both English language learners and their English-speaking peers by exposing all children to two languages and by promoting bilingualism and an understanding of other cultures.

Studies also suggest that, while it may be challenging, programs can adopt effective strategies that support the language spoken in the child’s home even when teachers and staff don’t speak the child’s home language. “So much of the responsibility is with the parents but our society also has a responsibility to be adaptable, respectful, and accommodating of other languages,” Beasley said.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION**, see the following publication: *Espinosa, L.M. (2008). Challenging common myths about young English language learners.* Foundation for Child Development Policy Brief 8. [www.fcd-us.org/usr\\_doc/MythsOfTeachingELLsEspinosa.pdf](http://www.fcd-us.org/usr_doc/MythsOfTeachingELLsEspinosa.pdf).

## Announcements . . .

### Free Background Reports Cover Children’s Issues

The University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development offers a recently-updated series of free background reports providing concise overviews of current topics important to children and families.

New topics in the series, *Children, Youth & Family Background*, include childhood obesity, foster care, early literacy, parent-teen relationships, and the trend among non-profit agencies to help support their missions by starting money-generating social enterprises.

The reports, originally produced to keep journalists and policy makers up to date on children’s issues, are available free of charge to anyone interested in learning about the latest developments in areas ranging from education and child development to child welfare and juvenile crime. These re-

ports are written, edited, and reviewed by the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development.

All *Children, Youth & Family Background* reports are posted on the OCD website as portable document files (.pdf) for viewing and downloading at the following address: <http://www.education.pitt.edu/oed/family/backgrounders.asp>.

## Announcements . . .

### **Parenting Guide Series Available From OCD**

The University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development is offering a series of easy-to-use parenting guides offering information and advice on 50 parenting topics. These guides are available free of charge to parents and organizations, agencies, and professionals who work with children and families.

The You & Your Child parenting guide series, written and edited by the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development, covers topics ranging from how to deal with children's fears, finicky eating habits, and aggressive behavior to getting a child ready to read, setting rules, and coping with grief.

Each guide is based on current parenting literature and has been reviewed by a panel of child development experts and practitioners. The series is made possible by the Frank

and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.

To receive a printed set of all 50 guides by mail, send a request along with your name, organization, mailing address and telephone number to:

Parenting Guides  
University of Pittsburgh  
Office of Child Development  
400 North Lexington Avenue  
Pittsburgh, PA 15208.

The You & Your Child parenting guides are also available on the OCD website as portable document files at: [www.education.pitt.edu/ocd/family/parentingguides.asp](http://www.education.pitt.edu/ocd/family/parentingguides.asp). ■

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