



Supporting Your Child as a Dual Language Learner

A Guide for Families of Young Children

April 2026



**CALIFORNIANS
TOGETHER**

Written by
Dr. Elizabeth Alvarado

Introduction: A Message for Families

Raising a young child who is learning more than one language is a powerful and special journey. It can also come with questions and even worries. The good news is you are already doing something incredible by simply valuing and using your home language.

As your child enters an early learning program or school, you may hear terms like *Dual Language Learner* or *English Learner*. You may also be asked questions about your child's language when you enroll. This guide is designed to help you understand what those terms mean and why programs ask for this information.

Inside this guide, you'll learn:

- Why your home language and culture matter
- How language terms and support change as children grow
- How programs learn about your child's language
- What your child's language journey looks like over time
- How to choose an early learning program
- How to understand your options in elementary school
- How early language development connects to future opportunities, including the State Seal of Biliteracy

Every child's language journey is unique. There is no single "right" path—but there are many ways to support your child so they can grow, learn, and thrive in more than one language.

By staying informed and engaged, you are giving your child a lifelong gift: the ability to communicate, connect, and succeed across languages and cultures.

Why Your Home Language and Culture Matter

Your home language is a key part of how your child learns, thinks, and connects with others. In the early years, children learn best when they feel safe, understood, and connected. Using your home language helps create that foundation.

Research shows that children who continue to develop their home language build strong language and thinking skills.¹ These skills support learning in English. Over time, many bilingual students meet or exceed grade-level expectations.²

Using your home language does not delay English language development. It supports learning in both languages. When schools learn about your child's language and culture, they can better support your child's learning and create a welcoming environment.

Benefit	At Home	At School
Connection	Speaking your home language helps your child stay connected to family and culture.	Educators use what they learn about your child's language to build stronger relationships and connect learning to your child's background.
Confidence	Sharing stories, songs, and traditions builds vocabulary and confidence.	Classrooms that reflect your culture and language in books, songs, and daily routines help your child feel valued and ready to learn.
Belonging	Using your home language helps your child feel safe, secure, and have a sense of belonging.	When educators understand and honor each child's identity and experiences, children feel a deeper sense of belonging.

¹ Thomas, W. P., & Collier, V. P. (2002). A National Study of School Effectiveness for Language Minority Students' Long-Term Academic Achievement. Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence (CREDE).

² Rolstad, K., Mahoney, K., & Glass, G. V. (2005). The Big Picture: A Meta-Analysis of Program Effectiveness Research on English Language Learners. *Educational Policy*, 19(4), 572-594.

How Language Terms and Support Change as Children Grow

In conversations with other parents, teachers, or programs, you may hear different words used to describe children who are learning more than one language. These terms, and the support children receive, can change as your child grows.

In California, early learning programs, such as preschool or Transitional Kindergarten (TK), young children are most often called **Dual Language Learners (DLLs)**. This term is typically used for children birth through age five who have a home language other than English, and are learning two or more languages. During this stage, support for DLLs is often informal and relationship-based. Teachers and caregivers focus on helping children feel safe, understood, and ready to learn, while supporting both English and the child's home language through play, conversation, and daily routines.

As your child enters elementary school, starting in kindergarten and continuing through middle and high school, you may hear the term **English learner**. This term is used for students who are still developing English and may receive more structured support. Schools must provide **English language development (ELD)** instruction, along with support during regular classroom learning, to help students build both language and academic skills.

Over time, as students build their English skills, they may be reclassified as fluent in English, becoming **reclassified fluent English proficient (RFEP)** students. This means they are able to participate fully in classroom learning without additional language support. Many students continue to develop both English and their home language beyond this point.

Learning a new language takes time. Many students develop basic communication skills in English within a few years, but it often takes five to seven years to develop the academic language needed for school.³ This timeline can vary depending on the child and the support they receive.

The terminology and supports may change as your child grows, but the goal stays the same: to support your child's learning while continuing to value and build on their language assets.

³ Kenji Hakuta, Yuko Goto Butler, and Daria Witt, How Long Does It Take English Learners to Attain Proficiency? (Santa Barbara: University of California Linguistic Minority Research Institute, 2000), 12-14.

Your Child's Language Journey

As your child grows, their language development continues across different stages of schooling. The words schools use, and the support your child receives, may change over time, but their bilingual or multilingual journey continues.

Stage	What This Means for Your Child
Early Years (Birth–Age 5)	Your child is building a strong foundation in their home language while beginning to learn English. They may be identified as a Dual Language Learner. Continued use of your home language in daily life helps support early learning and development.
Elementary School	Your child continues learning English and academic content. Some students may be identified as English learners and receive additional support for English language development. Bilingual or dual language programs may support continued growth in both English and your child's home language.
Middle & High School	Many students become fluent in English and may be reclassified as fluent English proficient. Students can continue developing their home language through classes, programs, and real-world use. Strong skills in both languages can lead to earning the <u>State Seal of Biliteracy</u> upon high school graduation.

Strong development in your child's home language over time supports success in both languages and opens future opportunities.



How Programs Learn About Your Child's Language Use

When you enroll your child in an early learning program, you may be asked about your child's language. This typically includes a short survey and, sometimes, a conversation with staff.

You may be asked:

- What language your child learned first
- What language is spoken most at home
- What language your child uses most
- Who speaks each language with your child

These questions are not a test. They help programs understand your child's language background and identify whether your child is a **Dual Language Learner**. This information helps teachers get to know your child and plan how to support their learning and communication.

When your child enters kindergarten, the school will use the Home Language Survey to decide if your child should take an English language assessment called the **English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC)**.

The ELPAC measures how well a student understands, speaks, reads, and writes in English. It is used to determine whether a student qualifies for **English learner** support and to ensure progress toward English proficiency over time.

It is important to understand that programs can ask about language, not immigration status. They are not allowed to ask about citizenship or legal status. You have the right to ask questions, request translation or interpretation, and understand forms before participating.

Choosing an Early Learning Program

Choosing an early learning program is an important decision. Families have options, and you can choose a setting that supports your child's language, culture, and learning.

In California, early learning includes early learning centers, TK, Family Child Care (FCC) homes, and Friends, Family, and Neighbors (FFNs). Each setting is different, but all can offer strong experiences when they are responsive to children and families.

If you have questions, you can reach out to your local Resource and Referral agency, school district, county office of education, or connect with First 5 or other families to learn about options in your area.

As you explore your options, it helps to know what strong programs have in common. In the early years, the focus is on helping children feel safe, connected, and ready to learn.

A high-quality setting includes:

- Warm, responsive relationships
- Opportunities for play, conversation, and language development
- Embracing and celebrating each child's linguistic and cultural diversity as an asset
- Support for your child's language alongside English

Here are a few questions you can ask to learn more about a program:

- How do you support children who are learning more than one language?
- How are children's languages and cultures included in daily routines?
- How do you communicate with families?

Strong programs welcome these conversations. If a program does not feel like the right fit, it is okay to keep looking. Finding a setting where your child feels understood and supported can make a meaningful difference.

Elementary School: Understanding Your Options

As your child enters elementary school, the system may feel different from early learning. Families often have fewer choices about where their child attends, but there are still important decisions about how your child is supported. Schools use different approaches to language development. Some classrooms are taught mostly in English, while others support learning in two languages over time.

You may hear terms like:

- **Developmental Bilingual** programs, where English learners receive instruction in English and another language with the goal of becoming strong in both over time
- **Transitional Bilingual** programs, where English learners use their home language for instruction at first, while gradually increasing English
- **Dual Language Immersion (DLI)** or **Two-Way Immersion** programs, where English learner and native English speaking students learn together in two languages, often starting with more instruction in one language and adding balance over time.

All English learners, including those enrolled in the programs listed above, are required to receive **ELD**, during which teachers intentionally use research-based strategies to support and advance their English language proficiency.

Each approach is different, but all are meant to support language learning. What matters most is how your child is supported over time—both in learning English and continuing to develop their home language. It can help to understand how your child’s school approaches language and what supports are in place.

In California, families have the right to request a bilingual program. If 20 students at one school, or 30 students in a district, share the same language, families can submit a formal request. Starting early, ideally before kindergarten, gives schools time to plan. Families often work together by connecting with one another, submitting a written request, and participating in school or district meetings. Schools must respond to and consider these requests, though programs may take time to develop. Even when options are limited, asking questions and sharing your interest can help shape future opportunities for your child and others.

Future Opportunities: The State Seal of Biliteracy

As your child continues through school, they can keep building skills in both English and their home language. In California, students who develop strong skills in two languages can earn the **State Seal of Biliteracy** when they graduate from high school. This recognition demonstrates that a student can read, write, and speak in English and an additional language.

The State Seal of Biliteracy:

- Appears on a student's diploma
- Is recognized by colleges and employers
- Honors bilingual skills as an asset

Students can begin building toward this goal from an early age. In California, some schools and programs offer **Biliteracy Pathway Recognitions** in preschool, elementary, and middle school to recognize progress over time. It is important to know that students *do not need to be in a bilingual program to become bilingual or earn the State Seal of Biliteracy*. Many students develop strong skills in more than one language through their families, communities, and everyday experiences. The language your child uses and develops now lays the foundation for future opportunities.

Conclusion

In this guide, you have seen how your child's language is recognized, how support may look in different settings, and what choices families can make along the way. Across early learning and school, programs, terms, and options may change. What does not change is that your child's language, culture, and identity are central to how they learn. Families are part of that process every day. The language you use, the questions you ask, and the decisions you make all shape your child's experience over time.

There may not be a simple path, but there are many ways forward. Building on your child's language supports their learning now and helps prepare them for what comes next.

Planning Guide

✓ **Choosing an Early Learning Program**

Look for a program where:

- Your child's language and culture are embraced and celebrated as assets
- Teachers build on your child's existing language skills
- Your child feels safe, understood, and comfortable
- Communication with families is clear and respectful
- Language is part of daily routines, play, and learning

✓ **Exploring Elementary School Options**

As you learn about schools, it may help to:

- Ask what language programs are offered
- Understand how English is taught and supported
- Ask how your child's language will continue to develop
- Learn what happens as students move to higher grades
- Connect with other families about their experiences

✓ **Advocating for Bilingual Programs**

If you are interested in bilingual programs:

- Start early (before or during kindergarten enrollment)
- Talk with other families who share your language
- Ask your school or district about program options
- Submit a request if enough families are interested
- Stay involved and follow up

✓ **What Families Can Do Now**

- Continue using your home language in daily life
- Encourage your child to speak, listen, and share ideas in both languages
- Ask schools how they support long-term language development
- Learn about language programs as your child moves through school

Resources



[Keeping Your Home Language \(available in 16 languages\)](#): This resource highlights the advantages of supporting the home language and provides families with recommendations for helping their children preserve their home language.



[The California Department of Education's Dual Language Learner resource page](#) provides guidance, tools, research, and family and educator supports to help identify and effectively support multilingual children in preschool programs.

Benefits of Multilingualism: This resource highlights the numerous advantages of being multilingual, including cognitive benefits, academic advantages such as earning college credits, and improved job opportunities.



[English](#)



[Spanish](#)

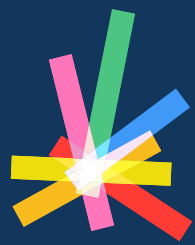


[Chinese](#)



[Arabic](#)





**CALIFORNIANS
TOGETHER**

CHAMPIONING THE SUCCESS
OF ENGLISH LEARNERS

caltog.org