From birth, many children in the United States are learning two languages at the same time—the language of their family and English. All babies are born with the potential to learn language. Parents may fear that raising a child to learn more than one language might confuse the child. Research, however, has found that being raised bilingual gives children many advantages. Children gain a deeper understanding of two cultures, acquire stronger thinking skills and have a greater general sense of language. Families can help their young children who are dual language learners build the skills they will need to become successful learners and readers once they start school.

First, Let's Talk

Start talking right away! Talk in Spanish. Talk in English. Talk in Somali. Talk in the language that is most comfortable for you. From birth to age three, a child’s brain is growing more quickly than at any other time. Just talking to children during these years is the most important thing parents can do to make the most of the brain-building early years. It doesn't matter what language parents use to talk to their children. Simply by talking and listening to their child, parents make a difference that lasts a lifetime.

Tips for Talking

- **Talk about everyday events.** Talking helps babies and young children connect words to their experiences.
  - When dressing, name and describe everything you are putting on your child—from diaper, jacket, pants, shoes and socks, to colors, buttons and zippers.
  - When riding on the bus, in the car or taking a walk, talk about what you see and feel. Read signs, point out certain numbers, letters or colors.
- **Baby talk is good.** At first, use words and touch to respond to your child's cries. Once your child starts babbling, keep responding with words, gestures, sounds. Children who are responded to gain confidence and delight in language.
- **Talk in real sentences.** Use big words, too, even though you know your child won’t understand them. Use simpler words to help your child understand. Speak slowly, use gestures. Hearing new words helps your child’s vocabulary grow.
- **Tell stories.** Stories introduce words that may not arise in everyday life.
A large study found that, by age three, children whose families frequently talked to them had a vocabulary twice as large as children whose families rarely spoke to them. The more words parents use when speaking to their infant and the more often they talk, the bigger the child's vocabulary will be at age 3. The bigger the child's vocabulary is at age 3, the bigger the vocabulary will be in 5th grade. These differences last through all the child's school years.

Just putting a child in front of a T.V. doesn't do the job. Children need to interact with others about what is happening so they can connect the words they hear to their own experiences. Sensitive interactions with adults do much more to help brains develop than any toy, TV or DVD.

Read to Expand your Child’s World

When you give your children words, you give them the world. One of the best ways to expand a child's vocabulary is through books. Children who are read to from birth, regardless of the language, are more successful at learning to read. Remember, early reading skills that are learned in one language can transfer to another language. The stronger a child's language and reading skills are in his or her home language, the stronger they will be in the second language.

Your child's early years pass quickly, but their impact lasts a lifetime. When you create an everyday environment rich in language through conversations, stories, word games, rhymes, song, and reading, you prepare your children for a future of learning and success. So, go ahead, have fun—talk, read, smile, sing, and play with your children. Talking and reading to and with them is the best preparation you can give children for beginning school ready and eager to learn.

Sources/Resources for Helping Young Children Two Languages:

**Get Ready to Read!** This website aims to help Spanish-speaking parents build their preschool and kindergarten children's early literacy and learning skills. To learn more, visit [http://getreadytoread.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=98&Itemid=107](http://getreadytoread.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=98&Itemid=107)

**¡Colorín Colorado!** This bilingual website provides parents and families with the information they can use to help their children become good readers and successful students. For more, visit [www.colorincolorado.org/families](http://www.colorincolorado.org/families)

Tips for Talking cont’d

- *Ask questions and have conversations.* As your children get older, ask them to tell you a story or to repeat a familiar story. Encourage preschool children to talk with you about their friends, experiences, ideas.
- *Have fun.* Rhyming, tongue twisters and other forms of word play in your home language will help your children learn about sounds.