Supporting Early Language Acquisition

A conceptual framework for improving language education in the early years

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Content

At a Glance

Educational processes in early childhood always occur in concrete, everyday situations. This is also the case for early language learning. Promoting early language acquisition works best when it is incorporated into daily life, when language is not subject matter that has to be taught but a means of communication. Language and literacy are acquired, tried out, and refined in everyday interactions between children and their caregivers in all of their everyday life settings. For children up to the age of 4, language learning that is integrated in everyday life is superior to the teaching and training of language skills. Caregivers support children by providing, identifying, and using opportunities for rich and challenging communication and by interacting with them in a way that supports language acquisition. To do this, caregivers need to have a basic understanding of early language learning, sensitive awareness of the children's interests and activities and of the learning potential in everyday situations, and concepts and principles on which to base their ongoing observation and optimization of their role and actions as educators. *Supporting Early Language Acquisition* provides six guidelines that make this complex task more comprehensible and help to improve early language education in families, daycare centers, playgroups, and daycare families:

1. Identify and utilize everyday opportunities for conversations. Daily life offers abundant opportunities for children and their caregivers to communicate. It is important to seize these opportunities and make use of them together with the children. The focus should be on the children's ideas and interests and on the building of shared understanding, whereby language is only one means of expression among others.

2. Facilitate conversations between children. Children communicate particularly actively and independently when they are together with other children. This supports their language learning very effectively. It is important to bring children together frequently and regularly and to give them space for their shared interests and activities. If needed, adults can gently support conversations between children.

3. Assure the quality of interactions. So that children can express their thoughts and develop their abilities in the exchange with others, communication must be successful. Adults can contribute a lot to high interaction quality. It is important for adults to provide a safe framework for conversations with children, respond attentively to what children say, and enrich conversations with their own input. In addition, adults can expand children's language by offering new language means (e.g., words and grammar).

**4.	Use language in many different ways.** Language makes it possible for children to master ever more challenging communicative and cognitive tasks. These abilities are also crucial for later learning in school. It is important to support and encourage children along this path—from naming the visible environment, to representing one's invisible inner life, to the challenging language tasks of reporting, storytelling, or explaining.

**5.	Provide access to early literacy.** In our information society, children are constantly surrounded by print and media. On their way to using these fascinating tools competently and critically, children need our support. It is important to facilitate their language awareness, respond to their interest in symbols and print, and discover together the world of children's books and media. Adults should also make visible and explain their own uses of print and media to the child.

**6.	Value and support multilingualism.** Young children can easily learn and use several languages. What is important is not so much correct grammar but rather succeeding at engaged and stimulating communication. In first language acquisition, it is important that parents communicate with the child in their strongest language and that the child can clearly distinguish between the various languages. When children learn German as a second language, it is important that adults value the children's first language(s) and support shared understanding also through nonverbal means. In addition, the children need as much exposure as possible to the target language, German.

This understanding of language education ties in with the *Orientierungsrahmen für frühkindliche Bildung, Erziehung und Betreuung in der Schweiz* [Orientation framework for early childhood education and care in Switzerland] (Wustmann Seiler & Simoni, 2016) and with the training and development of early childhood education professionals. It can also be easily integrated into good everyday and educational practices in the family and in daycare institutions (daycare centers, playgroups, and daycare families), as no special materials, activities, or groupings are needed for language promotion. What is essential, however, are two changes in attitude on the part of caregivers and teachers: First, besides paying attention to the child, caregivers and teachers also need to monitor their own actions when communicating with children. Second, it is necessary to see language in the context of successful communication and not reduce it to correctness of words and sentences. The guidelines in *Supporting Early Language Acquisition* are intended to support these attitude changes.

1 Understanding Early Language Education

1.1 Education in the Early Years

The conceptual basis of this framework is the *Orientierungsrahmen für frühkindliche Bildung, Erziehung und Betreuung in der Schweiz* [Orientation framework for early childhood education and care in Switzerland] (Wustmann Seiler & Simoni, 2016). The core message of the *Orientierungsrahmen* is: "Children discover the world—motivated by their curiosity—with our attentive support" (Wustmann Seiler & Simoni, p. 14; unofficially translated here). This emphasizes the central role of the child and the child's interests and activities and at the same time makes it clear that children are dependent on reliable and stimulating exchange with their caregivers. Children's acquisition of knowledge and abilities is an active process of co-construction as they interact with their material and social environment: "Co-construction is the joint shaping of educational processes: answering and exploring questions together, making sense of things and events together, understanding meanings together, learning new things together" (p. 30). This understanding of early childhood education is valid for all children, regardless of their stage of development and their need for support.

This means that educational processes in early childhood start from the experience, interests, and activity of the individual child. The *Orientierungsrahmen* puts it like this: "Educational processes in early childhood are always connected with concrete, everyday situations. They are situated in the child's everyday experience and immediate contexts" (Wustmann Seiler & Simoni, 2016, p. 26). Learning processes in early childhood take place in a two-way exchange between children and their social environment in everyday situations and in play.

Most children do not spend their first years of life exclusively in the family but also in other everyday contexts (daycare centers, playgroups, or daycare families). These contexts together form the child's personal life world and educational world. For this reason, it is important that caregivers in the different contexts are in contact with each other and support the child cooperatively.

1.2 Early Language Education

Supporting Early Language Acquisition builds on this understanding of education. Young children acquire language(s) by interacting with their environment in everyday situations in all of their everyday contexts and communicating with their caregivers and peers. The *Framework* accordingly supports early language acquisition that is integrated in daily life:

In the first years of life, language is not content that must be learned but a means of communication and a way to enter into community and society. Children want to belong and to put forward their needs and interests. To do so, they must communicate with others, which means expressing themselves and understanding others. At first, they do this preverbally via looks, sounds, touches, and body movements. They gradually develop more and more specific means to express themselves, such as nonverbal gestures and facial expressions, paraverbal tone of voice and sounds, and verbal words and sentences. However, the distinction between these modalities is purely analytical: Children want to communicate, and they use all available means to that end. To young children, language is just one instrument in the orchestra of all means of expression (but one that with increasing differentiation becomes more and more important for learning, particularly in school contexts). Language is not an end in itself but instead serves higher-level goals and the mastering of specific communication tasks.

Promotion of early language acquisition is especially effective when it is done by trusted caregivers as an integrated part of everyday life. It is important in the countless situations that arise when together with children to also stimulate language, so as to support children in their linguistic discoveries, paying attention and tuning into the child and the situation. The fundamental task of the caregiver is to be involved in the co-construction

of shared meaning with the child and to support the child in mastering a wide variety of communication tasks. Interesting joint activities offer the child valuable opportunities to discover, use, vary, and refine nonverbal, paraverbal, and verbal means of expression. In this way, children gradually discover and acquire the potentials of language(s) in all facets. When language acquisition is incorporated into everyday life in this way, additional materials or programs for promoting language skills are not necessary.

All children, regardless of developmental status, language biography, and individual and family characteristics, benefit from rich and stimulating everyday communication. Of crucial importance here is high-quality interaction: Caregivers can contribute a lot towards successful co-construction by enabling, maintaining, and protecting conversations, tailoring their actions to the actions of the children, adding enriching inputs, and offering new language to the children.

In addition to exchanges with supportive adults, communication with other children also has great potential for early language acquisition. During joint activity, children of the same age learn to interact with each other, communicate, cooperate, and form and maintain relationships. Younger children use older children as models and acquire new means of expressing themselves when interacting with them. Older children see that younger children are acquiring language and take on challenging and responsible leadership roles.

1.3   Importance of Early Language Education

For the child's educational biography, language acquisition is foundational and has far-reaching consequences: Only if children possess the necessary language abilities early on can they then utilize for their educational processes the largely language-based offerings of school, vocational education, university studies, and professional continuing education. Early language abilities and the quality of early education and care settings have been demonstrated to be associated with school performance in older children and adolescents. Limited language abilities hamper the acquisition of cognitive, emotional, and social abilities; after school entry, the child can hardly catch up, and this has a long-term disadvantageous effect on a person's educational biography. In addition, early language education supports the early integration of children from immigrant families, in that already prior to entering the school system, the children become familiar with learning opportunities in their social environment, the neighborhood, the district, and the community, and in that they have social contact with and play with other children and can acquire the language of their social surroundings in exchanges with caregivers and children.

Early language acquisition can be impeded by young children's individual characteristics (e.g., physiological limitations), conditions in their social environment (e.g. family poverty, overburdened parents, unconsidered media consumption), or a combination of individual and social factors. In any case, it is important to support children's early language acquisition in all of their contexts and to not focus on children's or parents' deficits. The goal must be to strengthen children and parents in their use and further development of their resources. This focus on resources also supports the building of trusting educational partnerships, which have been shown to be very important for children's educational biographies.

2 Research Supporting an Integrated Approach to Language Education in Everyday Communication

2.1 The Relationship Between Language and Education

Language is both a tool of communication and a tool of cognition: Language makes it possible for people to communicate on any topic, and it plays a central role in the organization, processing, and development of experience and knowledge in the brain (Wygotski, 1934/1986; Holland & Cole, 1995). For instance, when a young child sees a dog for the first time and hears the word 'dog,' it can connect diverse impressions and feelings with this linguistic form. A mental 'concept' is formed that the child later—when seeing other dogs and in other conversations—recognizes, tries out, and refines. In this way, children gradually reconstruct in their heads the shared knowledge and linguistic means of expression of the surrounding culture(s). In other words: The linguistic sign supports the organization of personal experience; it makes it possible for the individual to acquire social knowledge and to use individual knowledge for social communication. Language, cognition, emotion, and communication are always interwoven, and language and cognitive abilities develop in close, mutual dependency (Unhjem, Eklund, & Nergård-Nilssen, 2014). The close link between language and other areas of ability is evident, for example, in the development of objective self-recognition (which is manifested in language in use of the personal pronoun 'I'), self-regulation ("executive functions," such as waiting, delaying, planning, and coordinating actions, are conveyed and internalized via language) (Bischof-Köhler, 2011), and different stages of play with others (from parallel play with monologues to cooperative play with dialogues) (Oerter, 2007). In addition to verbal language, other sign systems, such as mathematical sign systems, are educationally relevant. But thanks to its economy and flexibility, verbal language can represent any content, and for this reason it is especially important for educational processes.

Because language is a cultural tool and is acquired in social interaction (Tomasello, 2002), context conditions play an important role in language acquisition: Under what spatial-material conditions do children grow up? What caregivers—parents, siblings, grandparents, and other familiar persons—do they have at hand in their daily lives? What languages are they exposed to? How do people in their surroundings communicate, play, teach, and learn? What media do the children have access to, and how are they used? How does the family spend their everyday time and their leisure time? The economic, social, and cultural capital of families creates very different conditions for language acquisition (Heath, 1983). In concrete individual cases, it is not so much structural factors, such as parents' income or educational attainment, that are important; what is decisive are the concrete language and education practices in daily family life (Heller, 2012). For example, there is a positive association between children's language abilities and the availability of age-appropriate books in the home and the frequency and linguistic complexity of language interactions (Leseman & Van Tuijl, 2006).

2.2 Development of Communication, Language, and Literacy Abilities

Supporting Early Language Acquisition presents only an overview of the development of communication and language abilities. The aim here is not to create the bases for differentiated diagnosis and promotion of individual abilities (detailed descriptions of children's language development can be found in current information sheets (Zollinger, 2015), manuals (Haid & Löffler, 2015; Kannengieser, Kappeler, Aggeler-Lätsch, & Plangger, 2013), and textbooks (Szagun, 2013, Tracy, 2005, Zollinger, 2010). Instead, the goal is to outline, based on selected findings, three main periods of language acquisition, knowledge of which is helpful for incorporating language education into everyday life: preverbal communication, situational use of language, and cross-situational use of language. These roughly outlined periods are taken up again in section 3 below, where opportunities for caregivers to support children are discussed according to children's ages.

The following sections first provide general information on language development and then turn to the development of: (a) preverbal communication abilities, (b) language abilities in a narrower sense, and (c) literacy. The most important findings are then related to the three periods of language acquisition mentioned above.

General Characteristics of Language Development

The building of communication and language abilities is based on certain dispositions (especially the uniquely human ability to understand that others act with intentions) and on stimulating and supportive social exchange (Tomasello, 2002). Communication with and among children thus forms the fundamental prerequisite for language development (Grimm & Weinert, 2002). Generally, communication and language abilities must be acquired receptively first, before they can be used productively: Children first use language(s) when listening, and it takes time before they apply their newly acquired abilities also in speaking (Szagun, 2013).

In addition to these fundamental principles, there are certain regularities in language acquisition in the first two to three years of life that can be described as developmental steps (see the next sections below). However, in older children who have largely acquired the base system of their first language(s), the further differentiation of their language and communication abilities varies greatly, because it is strongly dependent on the specific context conditions (Tracy, 2005).

Development of Preverbal Communication Abilities

Even newborn babies have the capacity to communicate. When babies cry, smile, coo, or babble, these forms of expression fulfill communicative functions (e.g., gaining attention or indicating how they feel). Older children and adults have a special way of talking to babies: Their facial expressions are more exaggerated and showed down, they speak at a slower rate, their pitch is higher, and they frequently use rising intonation (Papousek, 2008). These specific ways of communicating help infants to regulate their attention and their emotions and to process their perceptions. In this way, adults communicate their feelings and actions appropriately for babies, but they also mirror the babies' own feelings and perceptions and thus support them in their early language acquisition.

In the first year after birth, infants acquire important abilities when communicating with their caregivers. These abilities are foundational for later language communication: They learn, by using pointing gestures, to establish shared attention, express shared interest, and indicate shared previous experiences. By the end of the first year of life, young toddlers can understand a number of gestures and can use pointing gestures in several variations (Rowe & Goldin-Meadow, 2009). Another central task in the first year of life is acquisition of the phonemes that are unique to their first language(s). Very young infants are already very sensitive to differences between intonation patterns and are guided by them and show different reactions. In the second half of the first year, infants distinguish the phonemes unique to their first language from other phonemes and recognize individual words both isolated and in continuous speech (Kuhl, 2007). The productive abilities are shown first in the form of gurgling, chirruping, squeaking, humming, and whooping: With these 'vocal exercises,' infants expand their repertory of sounds, recognize their social value, use them appropriately, and gradually adapt to the language of their surroundings. From age 6 to 12 months, infants string syllables together and later double them (Papousek, 2008).

Development of Language Abilities in A Narrower Sense

Language abilities in a narrower sense can be assigned to four linguistic levels: phonology (the system of sounds in particular languages), grammar (word and sentence grammar), vocabulary, and pragmatics (the use of language) (Szagun, 2013). However, this distinction is purely analytical: Young children acquire language abilities holistically through communication, embedded in processes of multimodal co-construction of sense and meaning with competent others. To do so, they use all available means: nonverbal, paraverbal, and verbal (from all of their first languages) (Kress, 2010). Some central findings regarding the four linguistic levels are summarized in the following:

Phonology (system of sounds). Infants and young children acquire the sounds of their first language(s) in a certain order. They can make vowel sounds very early and have been found to then acquire production of consonants in the following order: Single consonants are acquired before consonant clusters and blends, and consonants made in

the front of the mouth and throat are acquired before consonants made further back in the mouth and throat. After age 4, children can produce most of the speech sounds; s-sounds are still difficult, however (Weinrich & Zehner, 2011). When children pronounce the sound sequence of words 'incorrectly,' the problem is usually not with pronunciation but rather with sound recognition. Children 'simplify' words by: (a) leaving off the consonants at the end of words, (b) using easy-to-form consonants (in the front of the mouth), (c) leaving out syllables, (d) approximating one sound to another (regarding where the sound is articulated in mouth and throat), or (e) simplifying consonant clusters or blends. Ways (d) and (e) are observed in children up to age 5 (Haid & Löffler, 2015). From the perspective of the learning child, these are not simplifications but rather full-fledged, functional speech sounds that the child will later further refine.

Vocabulary. The first words that children use refer to their immediate world of experience. Children aged 12 to 24 months use words for certain caregivers, animals, toys, vehicles, for eating and drinking, household objects, or body parts. Besides nouns (e.g., dog), their vocabularies include onomatopoeic words (e.g., meow), function words (there, that), and everyday life-related verbs (action words such as eat or go) (Anglin, 1977). Over time, nouns and verbs increase, whereas the percentage of social words (hello, yes, please) and onomatopoeic words decreases. Between the ages of 2 ½ and 3 years, a differentiation of content words (nouns, verbs, adjectives) occurs. At the same time (in connection with the acquisition of grammar), function words also increase. By the end of the third year of life, children have a passive vocabulary of about 800 to 1,000 words. Their vocabulary shows a balanced distribution of the parts of speech consistent with the target language (everyday speech) (Rothweiler & Kauschke, 2007).

Together with the words (and parts of speech), cognitive concepts develop as well, which are organized by the words (Wygotski, 1934/1986). Compared to adults' concepts, they can be 'overstretched' or 'understretched': A child's concept that is overstretched covers 'too many' objects or features (for example, also motorcycles are called 'cars'), and an understretched concept covers 'too few' (for example, titmice and blackbirds are called 'birds,' but ducks are excluded) (Szagun, 2013). From the perspective of the learning child, these are full-fledged, functional concepts that the child will later further refine. The building of conceptual hierarchies (dog > mammal > animal) is possible only thanks to language, as the ordering of such concepts is abstract and not observable in the world. Children as young as 4 years old use factual knowledge (abstract, not observable, already acquired) to classify objects (for example, they group blackbirds with flamingos and not with bats, which are much more similar looking) (Gelman & Markman, 1987). The knowledge used may correspond more or less to socially assured knowledge.

Grammar (syntax and word forms). The development of grammatical structures begins with the use of two-word phrases/sentences. For the acquisition of sentence patterns in the German language, the following developmental stages can be described: First, the second position of the verb is learned, then the auxiliary verbs in the second position, and finally, compound sentences a with subordinate clause as well as passive constructions. It can be assumed that children use new sentences at first lexically and store and retrieve them as 'chunks' (fixed connection of several words). Only later can they form sentences according to abstract grammatical patterns (Grimm & Weinert, 2002; Haid & Löffler, 2015).

The milestones for acquiring word inflection in German are as follows: Children learn the marking of plurals for nouns and the marking of gender for articles, then the marking of case for articles, and finally the marking of person for verbs and past participles. The marking of case for dative and accusative in German (they sound very similar) is children. Also difficult are the plural forms, of which there is a great variety and which cannot be formed in a standard way (Grimm & Weinert, 2002, Szagun, 2011).

Pragmatics (use of language). In the first four years of life, the acquisition of language and communication abilities proceeds as follows: from establishing shared attention (Tomasello, 2002) to differentiation of the basic functions of language (describe the world, develop relationships, express thoughts) (Halliday, 1975) to linguistic representation of decontextualized or abstract objects (Koch & Österreicher, 1994). The following steps in development are ascertainable: 1. Turn-taking, triangulation (shared orientation to a focus of shared attention) and reception and production of pointing gestures. 2. Taking on the listener role (understanding and executing simple instructions) and

expressing demands. 3. Starting conversations, reporting events/experiences, expressing agreement and disagreement. 4. Communication that transcends the situation, i.e., decontextualized communication requiring purely linguistic representation of objects (which are not accessible to the perception of the speakers and listeners), in other words: mastering of cognitively and linguistically challenging communicative tasks such as recounting experience or storytelling (Tracy, 2005). Whereas language directly related to perceivable objects and actions within a shared situation is possible at first, later on also distant contexts, fictive worlds, and purely mental knowledge or opinions can be linguistically represented and thus expressed by a competent speaker and understood by competent listeners (Isler & Ineichen, 2015).

Development of Literacy Abilities

Children typically acquire the specific abilities needed to process print (by reading and writing) in the first year of school (in Switzerland at age 6—7 years) and in the context of systematic instruction. However, some children learn to write much earlier. In addition, children acquire developmental precursors of reading and writing before the age of 5. Two domains that develop relatively independently of one another can be distinguished (Burchinal & Forestieri, 2011): (a) Early print-related abilities make it easier for children to understand and acquire the system of phonetic spelling in Grade 1. These abilities include the ability to identify characteristics of spoken language (such as loudness, emphasis, or syllable structure), to identify individual sounds (consonants and vowels in different positions in a syllable), and to differentiate between letters and other signs (as well as symbols and pictures) (Ehri & Roberts, 2006); (b) Early oral text abilities help children later on with communication in writing—that is, reconstructing complex meaning when reading written texts and expressing complex meaning as structured and comprehensible texts when writing. This includes the abilities of linking individual statements, structuring entire texts, and monitoring and correcting one's own understanding and writing (Schnotz & Dutke, 2004).

Periods of Language Development and their Acquisition Tasks

Based on the findings presented above, three main periods of language development and their specific tasks of acquisition can be distinguished: (1) preverbal communication, (2) contextualized use of language (which accompanies the building of basic language abilities), and (3) decontextualized use of language (which requires and makes possible the increasing differentiation of words and grammar). This rough outlining of developmental periods provides an orientation for language education incorporated into everyday life and at the same time takes into consideration the diversity and uniqueness of the course of language acquisition in individual children. The table below groups the findings mentioned above under the three periods of development and their tasks of acquisition.

Period of development	Acquisition tasks
Preverbal communication	The foundations of language communication are built. Children point out and show nonverbally (with touches, gestures, facial expressions, and sounds). – Establish and maintain shared attention – Recognize and produce phonemes of the first language(s)
Verbal communication: contextualized use of language	What is expressed verbally is present in the situation and directly perceivable. Pointing out and showing continues to be nonverbal but is more and more also verbal (e.g., through use of demonstratives, such as "this" and naming visible objects). – Children begin to build vocabulary and concepts – Building of everyday grammar (sentence structure, word forms) – Dialogue-like interactions (first conversations) with short contributions by the child
Verbal communication: decontextualized use of language	What is expressed verbally can also be not present in the immediate context or abstract (e.g., a past event or a shared abstract feature of different objects, such as color or shape). Pointing out and showing is mainly or exclusively verbal. – Vocabulary and grammar become more differentiated – Longer threads of conversation, longer contributions by the child – Challenging speaking tasks – Early literacy (first print awareness and abilities and oral text abilities)

Table 1
**Developmental periods
for language education**

2.3   Acquisition of Communication, Language, and Literacy Abilities

Everyday Conversations as Contexts for Language Acquisition

Young children do not acquire language abilities in isolation but in social interactions that are guided by interests and convey meaning: In communicating with competent others (children or adults), young children recognize, try out, and differentiate the means of language at all linguistic levels (Halliday, 1975; Quasthoff, 2012). Here, speech is just one instrument in the orchestra of all means of expression—nonverbal, paralinguistic, and verbal—that make shared understanding possible (multimodal co-construction of meaning; Kress, 2010).

Numerous studies have demonstrated that preschool children benefit from language input that is extensive in quantity and rich in quality from their caregivers in the family and in early education and care settings (see, for example, Farran, Aydogan, Kang, & Lipsey, 2006, on language productivity; Vasilyeva & Waterfall, 2011, on syntactic abilities; and Silverman & DiBara Crandell, 2010, on vocabulary). Interactions should be viewed as concrete contexts for language acquisition: They form the immediate medium of language (and generally of social) learning processes and are themselves enabled and framed by personal, situational, and institutional conditions (Heath, 1983; Heller, 2012). For infants and young children, of main importance are interactions with adults and older siblings, where the more language-competent significant persons take a supportive role, so that the child can master the communication task successfully (Bruner 1983/2002; Hausendorf & Quasthoff, 1996). But also important are interactions with peers, whose language promotion potential is based on similar interests and abilities, the pleasure of playing together, and the ongoing negotiating and swapping of roles. Under these conditions, children are often highly motivated, engaged, and able to communicate with persistence and at a challenging level (Stude, 2013).

Interactive Support of Language Acquisition

Adults—private caregivers or education professionals—have a variety of opportunities to support children up to the age of 4 in acquiring communication and language abilities. Qualitative and also some quantitative studies have found the following forms of support to be important for young children's language learning:

Interactions with peers and child participation. When children on their own initiative and with self-chosen partners talk about their own interests and on the basis of their own expertise, their language productions are especially extensive and differentiated (Isler, 2014a; Stude, 2013).

Framing of interactions. By framing activities, adults or older children help infants to sustain their (at first) shifting attention as shared attention through increasingly more turn-taking in vocalizing (Jaffe, Beebe, Feldstein, Crown, & Jasnow, 2001). In group conversations with older children, the marking, steering, and protecting of longer conversations bolsters the success of collective interactions (Isler, 2014b).

High-quality interaction. The adult caregivers interact with the children attentively, respectfully, and in an empowering way. They tailor their actions to the children's actions (e.g., in that they take up their initiatives), challenge the children by their contributions, assure understanding through clarifying and expanding on children's words, and in this way contribute towards successful co-construction of meaning (Bruner, 1983/2002; Kannengieser, 2015; Perren, Frei, & Hermann, 2016; Vogt et al., 2015).

Language input. To acquire new words and grammar, children must come into contact with increasingly elaborated language. For them to recognize and work out new phonemes, words, grammatical forms, and patterns in the communication flow, the patterns must appear with a certain frequency. For this reason, children need language input of a sufficient quantity and of challenging quality, and they need caregivers that pay attention to new words and grammar and support children in acquiring them when needed (Farran et al., 2006; Vogt et al., 2015).

Shaping conversations as supportive opportunities for language acquisition. Adult caregivers have many opportunities to shape conversations to support children's language acquisition: (1) They encourage children to take active roles in conversations and reinforce and affirm them in these roles, (2) They signal their interest in exact understanding, clarify difficulties in understanding carefully, and make their comprehension processes clear, (3) They offer sample wordings to the children or, acting as a model, intermittently take the active speaker role (and then hand that role back to the children), and (4) They encourage children's elaborations by asking questions or changing the frame of reference, (Heller & Morek, 2015; Kannengieser, 2015; Quasthoff et al., 2011; Vogt et al., 2015).

Engaging in sustained conversations. In addition to short exchanges (e.g., for regulating behavior, naming objects, answering closed-ended questions), care is taken in daily life to engage children in sustained shared thinking, jointly spinning the thread of the conversation turn by turn through exchanging, expanding, and scaffolding (König, 2006; Hopf, 2012; Vogt et al., 2015).

Challenging language tasks. Children at the age of 3 and 4 are able to represent decontextualized and abstract worlds through language. Challenging language tasks such as recounting experiences, telling stories, explaining the world, or expressing opinions are taken up, supported, and modeled by adults. This encourages children to engage in these complex tasks in increasingly challenging roles: from listening, to supported and independent speaking, to guiding other children (Kannengieser, 2015; Morek, 2012; Isler & Ineichen, 2015).

Metalinguistic activities. Separating language out of the communication flow and objectivizing it in play and experiment are possible as early as in the first year of life (for example, by modifying familiar fingerplays, singing verses of song with only one vowel, or inventing imaginary rhyming words). At age 4 or 5, children themselves play with and explore language very creatively. These situational and playful changes at the metalevel of language objectivization promote recognition and acquisition of linguistic features and patterns (Andresen & Funke, 2003; Stude, 2013; Isler, 2014a).

Become familiar with literacy. Children experience reading and writing before starting school as functional practices that aid their communication, if they can participate in them in interactions with adults. For this reason, access to print media of all kinds and participation in reading and writing activities are centrally important for the acquisition of literacy abilities. Through playing and experimenting with spoken or sung language (e.g., through rhymes, rhythms, or vocal techniques), through communicative use of signs (e.g., signals, logos, or characteristic lettering), through looking at picture books and drawing pictures, and in challenging conversations (reporting experiences, telling stories, explaining things, or negotiating their points of view), caregivers can support young children in acquiring literacy abilities (Heath, 1983; Gregory & Williams, 2000; Isler, 2014).

For language learning that is incorporated into everyday life, it is necessary that new linguistic means can connect with abilities that children have already acquired: Their acquisition should be challenging but not overtaxing and should be in the "zone of proximal development" (Wygotski, 1934/1986). This zone is not the next developmental stage, however, assessed in advance and aimed for by education staff in a targeted manner in conversations. Instead, zone of proximal development means what the child can already do with help in the social world and later will increasingly master autonomously in his or her mental world (such as describe a perception or invent a story; Wygotski, 1934/1986). Accordingly, what stands in the foreground here are situational and dynamic observation of the course of the conversation and appropriate and stimulating support of the child.

Effectiveness of Interactive Language Education in Everyday Conversations
Recent quantitative studies have found that optimization of acquisition support in everyday conversations has a positive effect on children's language acquisition: For socially disadvantaged children especially, attending good-quality preschool education settings can have a sustained positive effect on their language performance later in school and on their educational career (Barnett & Frede, 2011; Bos et al., 2003; Dickinson & Porche, 2011; Grob, Keller, & Trösch, 2014; Sammons et al., 2008; Seyda 2009). The type of educational interactions (process quality) plays a central role (Kuger & Kluczniok, 2008): Improving preschool teachers' interactive support facilitates children's language productivity and language performance at diverse linguistic levels (Girolametto, Weitzmann, & Greenberg, 2003; Dickinson & Porche, 2011; Piasta et al., 2012; Jungmann, Koch, & Etzien, al. 2013; Simon & Sachse, 2013). However, staff and teachers in early childhood education and care settings still do not sufficiently utilize everyday conversations for supporting children's acquisition of language and cognitive abilities (Kannengieser & Tovote, 2015; König, 2006; Sammons et al. 2008; Suchodoletz, Fäsche, Gunzenhauser, & Hamre, 2014). Promotion of children's language acquisition by education staff and teachers can be improved effectively through professional development measures (Girolametto et al., 2003; Kupietz, 2013, Hamre et al., 2012; Piasta et al., 2012; Cabell, Justice, McGinty, DeCoster, & Forston, 2015; Vogt et al., 2015).

Effectiveness of Integrated Approaches to Early Language Education
International research has demonstrated the effectiveness of integrating language education in everyday life for several English-speaking countries (for an overview, see Whorrall & Cabell, 2015). For German-speaking countries, there are still too few reliable studies available for a conclusive assessment of the approach (Schneider et al., 2013; Stamm, 2014). However, the findings available indicate that incorporating language education into everyday life is clearly superior to more isolated and training-oriented approaches: Hofmann, Polotzek, Ross, and Schöler (2008) compared different language education programs for 4- to 5-year-old children and concluded that "targeted early fostering of language development following certain programs and concepts [...] does not lead to better language abilities than unspecific promotion in the context of the everyday kindergarten environment" (p. 297; unofficially translated here). Gasteiger-Klicpera, Knapp, and Kucharz (2010) also found that in the same age group, special measures to promote language development had no effects. In a sample of 2- to 3-year-old Turkish-German and Russian-German children, Posse, Golcher, Topaj, Düsterhöft, and Gagarina (2014) found positive effects of language promotion groups led by speech therapists but also positive effects of promotion of language development by daycare staff that was integrated in the everyday setting. These findings indicate that language promotion by caregivers and teachers in everyday settings is more expedient than curricular promotion programs and/or promotion programs that separate out certain groups of children. Since playgroups and daycare centers are not yet implementing everyday language promotion in a targeted manner today (König, 2006; Kannengieser, 2015; Vogt et al., 2015), there is promising optimization potential here.

2.4   Multilingualism

Many children do not grow up with one language but with several. From a theory perspective, the findings mentioned above, with a few exceptions (e.g., regarding acquisition of plural forms in German), apply for all languages and for first language learning as well as for learning further languages. Still, for children growing up with several languages, there are some special features that will be explained in the following section and for which research results will be cited, where available. After clarifying some important concepts, we will turn to the special features of acquisition of multiple languages and to supporting multilingual children in language acquisition.

Clarification of Concepts

The first language is the language that the child uses to communicate with his or her primary caregivers from birth. In multilingual families, children acquire several first languages, or more precisely: They acquire a personal first language that contains elements from different language systems (e.g., Turkish and English). Second, third, or even fourth languages are additional languages in which the child later communicates regularly in daily life. These languages are frequently acquired when the child enters an education and care setting where a language that is new for the child (e.g., German) is used for everyday communication. In contrast, foreign languages are explicitly taught as subjects at school and are not acquired through immersion as are common languages in everyday communication. Therefore, they are not relevant for children up to the age of 4 (Günther & Günther, 2007).

With multilingual children, a distinction is made between simultaneous acquisition of several first languages and sequential acquisition of a first language and further second, third, and fourth languages. The child's language abilities in the first language (or first languages) and in further languages can be differently developed, so that strong and weak languages can be distinguished (whereby through the course of life, individual languages can change from strong to weak and vice versa). First, second, third, and fourth languages that are acquired through everyday use in communication (i.e., through immersion) are usually stronger than foreign languages learned in school (Günther & Günther, 2007).

In addition to individual languages, there are also varieties within a language (e.g., German in its variations as many local dialects and as official and standardized forms), and there are institution-specific and group-specific registers (e.g., teenage slang, business language) (Hoffmann, 2007). Mastery of certain individual languages, varieties, or registers can, as language barriers, grant or deny social belonging and educational success (Kaesler, 2005). In addition, individual languages have different social values (Brizic, 2006). Typically, the official common languages of a country (Switzerland: German, French, Italian, and Romansh) and the international lingua franca (English and increasingly also Chinese) are ascribed a higher value than languages of origin of immigrants from economically weaker countries (e.g., Albanian, Turkish, or Arabic; Gogolin, 2013).

The concepts presented above are based on a traditional perspective that views the language acquisition of children growing up multilingually from the adult perspective as the learning of separate individual languages. Today, multilingualism is understood more and more as "independent, primary language competency" (Auer, 2009): Children use language to co-construct meaning and build common understanding with their caregivers in their everyday contexts. Practicing "translanguaging" (Seele, 2015), they utilize all of their acquired and situationally available resources for their communication, regardless of their belonging to different individual language systems.

When education professionals are guided in their actions by language teaching norms (such as consistent use of the majority language) that are based on a traditional understanding of multilingualism, this can foster mechanisms that maintains inclusion and exclusion and reproduces social inequality (Gogolin, 2013).

Acquisition of Several Languages

The language acquisition of multilingual children can show several special phenomena: (a) In code mixing, children combine individual elements (e.g., single words, phrases, or sentences) from several languages, (b) In code switching, children speak several languages without mixing them, but when speaking, they switch back and forth between

languages depending on the demands of the communication situation (e.g., when speaking with their German-speaking father and their Russian-speaking mother), (c) The features of one language can be transferred to another language, as a kind of interference (e.g., adding the English plural 's' to German nouns), and (d) Abilities acquired in one language (e.g., the ability to negotiate something a child wants) can be transferred to another language (Anstatt & Dieser, 2007; De Houwer, 2009).

Phenomena (a) and (c) above can lead to "incorrect' forms in the target language that from the child's perspective, however, are rule-based and logical. In phenomena (b) and (d) special resources of multilingualism are evident. To these belong also the early and strong metalinguistic abilities of multilingual children (who are often more experienced in talking about different languages or experimenting with them). Also, contact with the different writing systems fosters understanding and acquisition of print as a graphic and symbolic form of language (Kenner & Gregory, 2013).

Supporting Language Acquisition in Multilingual Children

There is little research available on language acquisition in multilingual children (Reich, 2009). From a theoretical perspective, the same principles hold for supporting language acquisition in multilingual children as for in monolingual children (see section 2.3 above). Adult caregivers can additionally support language acquisition in multilingual children in the following ways:

Valuing both/all languages. Children are very sensitive to whether their home languages are valued or devalued and can sometimes respond to disparagement by refusing to speak. For this reason, it is very important that all of children's caregivers have positive attitudes towards all of their languages. Education and care staff should express their appreciation of the children's languages in everyday contacts with the children and also in their co-operation with the children's parents. In addition, children should be allowed to determine when they use what languages (Tracy, 2007; De Houwer, 2009).

Using languages clearly. Young children do not yet have concepts of individual languages. They communicate with different persons and in different situations and acquire the means of language that work. It is therefore important that the languages are used by the caregivers in a stable manner and are thus expectable for the child (e.g., in that a person always speaks the same language or that in a certain situation the same language is always spoken). Clear use of languages creates the preconditions for natural communication and regular input in all languages. This holds also for early education and care settings: The use of different first languages of the children is not a problem, if it is clear when the common language, German, will be spoken (Jampert, 2002; Sayilir, 2007).

Assuring quality of communication practice. Children use language functionally, to pursue their action goals (e.g., to share an interesting experience or to express feelings). Children should be addressed at the highest level of their social and cognitive abilities and should be taken seriously as conversation partners, even if they still lack words and grammar in a second or third language. The everyday communication environment should be rich and differentiated. That means also that children utilize their languages to represent cross-context contents and can acquire the different writing systems of their languages. Differentiated language practices on the part of caregivers have a beneficial effect on children's language acquisition (Albers, 2009; Thiersch, 2007).

Assuring quantity of communication practice. For acquisition of language abilities, the intensity of language contact is very important as well. The longer a child hears and uses a language, the better the chances are for its successful acquisition. This pertains to both length of contact in the longitudinal course of life (number of years) and cross-sectionally in everyday life (number of hours per day or week). If there is not enough contact with a language, that language can be lost (e.g., the father's language, if the father is seldom present in everyday family life). The language of the surroundings is conveyed largely by older siblings or other children. That is why it is learned more easily by younger siblings than by the older siblings but possibly at the cost of the first language. Especially children from socially disadvantaged families can benefit a lot from intensive contact (longitudinally and cross-sectionally) with the language of the surroundings (Reich, 2009; Keller, Troesch, Loher, & Grob, 2015).

Using phrases in the target language consistently and repeatedly. When young children learn a second language, it is helpful if words and phrases for everyday communication (e.g., the names of rooms and activities at daycare or phrases to express difficulties in understanding or feelings) are used frequently and consistently. The same holds for more complex texts: Multilingual children (like children in general) benefit greatly by looking at picture books (storybooks or books on nonfiction topics) and by listening to texts over and over again. In this way, they gradually deepen their understanding of the content and expand their vocabulary and the ways that words are put together in phrases and sentences (syntax) (Nodari & De Rosa, 2006).

Dealing constructively with mistakes. Incorrect language forms (more precisely: language forms that do not yet conform to the official norm) are normal for learners of their first and second language. Mixing languages by multilingual children is also not a reason for concern. What is important is that caregivers and teachers treat children's talk with respect and focus on successful communication. Corrective feedback (taking up and restating children's unconventional formulations using correct language in their response) provides children with the opportunity to notice deviations and to further develop their vocabulary and syntactical knowledge (Nodari & De Rosa, 2006; Tracy 2007).

3 Guidelines for Early Language Education

The guidelines in this conceptual framework deal with the process quality of early language education—that is, the communication of caregivers and teachers in their interactions with children. The first two guidelines describe two basic settings in early language learning: everyday conversations with adults and conversations between children. The third and fourth guidelines relate to concrete enactment of early language education at the microlevel of interactions: the quality of interactions and the use of language in many different ways. The last two guidelines outline the breadth of early language education: It includes also early literacy and multilingualism. The table below shows the structuring of the guidelines:

Guidelines for early language education	Main perspectives
1 **Identify and utilize everyday opportunities for conversations**	**Settings of early language education** When, where, with whom does early language acquisition take place?
2 **Facilitate conversations between children**	
3 **Assure the quality of interactions**	**Performance of early language education** What do we do exactly to support the children, and how do we do it together?
4 **Use language in many different ways**	
5 **Provide access to early literacy**	**Scope of early language education** What also belongs to early language education?
6 **Value and support multilingualism**	

Table 2
Early language education: guidelines and main perspectives

In the following, each guideline is presented in the form of a key message, and the importance of the guideline for the child is outlined. In the main section, possible ways for adults (and other language models) to support children in their language acquisition are then explained.

When supporting children's early language acquisition, the goal is basically to be a lively and attentive conversation partner. The six guidelines map out central concerns in support of children's language acquisition. They can be used as guidance in planning and reflecting upon practices of early language education, but they are not at all to be understood as rules of conduct that caregivers and teachers must train in and implement systematically. Communication with children is not an end in itself but joint, meaningful interaction.

1 Identify and utilize everyday opportunities for conversations

Daily life offers abundant opportunities for children and their caregivers to communicate. It is important to seize these opportunities and make use of them together with the children. The focus should be on the children's ideas and interests and on the building of a shared understanding, whereby language is only one means of expression among others.

Importance for the Child

As partners of the child, adult caregivers (possibly also older siblings with care responsibilities) play a central role in the child's acquisition of communication and language abilities: First, they have intensive temporal, physical, and emotional contact with the child; second, they are competent speakers of the target language; third, they support—in their educational role—children's language acquisition. In conversations, adults provide children with appropriate new words and sentence patterns as well as finely tuned feedback to children's verbal expressions.

How Adults Provide Support

What can adults do to help children use conversations in everyday situations also as opportunities for language education? Some ways to support children's language acquisition are the following:

Using everyday situations as opportunities to engage children in conversations. During diapering, when taking a walk, at the kitchen table, in the supermarket, at the playground, on the train, when getting ready for bed, when visiting relatives—children seek to interact with their caregivers everywhere. These situations are always opportunities for language education, e.g., naming objects and activities, asking children questions, expanding on children's words, explaining things, or relating things to past experience. For this to happen, however, adults need to be tuned in to children's signals (and not be too preoccupied with exchanges with other adults or with using their mobile communication devices).

Establishing and maintaining shared attention. The prerequisite for a common understanding is the establishment of shared attention. This is done at first by looks, objects, gestures, and sound of the voice (intonation, singing) and later increasingly also by verbal cues. The special potential of language comes into play more when the subject matter is not at all perceivable in the here and now (e.g., feelings and ideas, past experiences, or abstract characteristics such as colors or amounts). Maintaining shared attention requires successive and coordinated cooperation of the parties involved, with turn-taking. For young children, that is still very challenging: Their attention often strays, and they need rest periods. Adults can support the duration of children's attention span by keeping dialogue short at first, giving children a clear framework through touches, gestures, and facial expressions, and linking several short dialogues to a more extended chain. Gradually, children are ready for longer dialogues and will take a leading role.

Giving children space to express themselves. In conversations, children want to try out their verbal means of expression and experience themselves as active and competent conversation partners. In the first months of life, infants seek the attention of their caregivers, signal their intentions, and do their part in keeping up the exchange. Adults cannot respond to these initiatives all of the time. But it is important for children to experience here and again that their initiatives are recognized, taken up, and valued. Older children want to contribute something of their own when communicating. They speak more and use more sophisticated language when the conversation turns to their own experiences and interests and when their conversation partners show sincere interest in them. For this reason, it is important that adults give children space to express themselves by responding to their conversation initiatives, taking up their topics, inviting them to share their perspectives (e.g., experiences and wishes), and giving them enough time to respond. Adults should contribute their content knowledge and language abilities but should not exploit their advantage or dominate the conversation. It is more interesting for both parties when adults interact with children on an equal footing and allow them to participate in shaping the conversation or to even lead the conversation.

Focusing on understanding and supporting it with all means. Children use language to communicate with others. With their verbal utterances they are pursuing needs and

interests that are important to them. This motivated use of language must be the focal point in the communication. In the exchange, adults should not be focused on correct and complex use of language but on understanding the child's thoughts and on further expanding the shared line of thought. They should signal clearly to the child that they are interested in what he or she is saying and whether they have understood so far (e.g., by maintaining eye contact, through facial expressions indicating that they do not yet understand, or through making sure by summarizing). Children use language as a means of expression in interaction with many other persons. For children, language is integrated in social action that is holistic and gives meaning and purpose. Because communication works nonverbally at first and verbal means of expression are acquired and refined over time, understanding at first depends on physical signals, facial expressions and gestures, and voice signals. But these nonverbal forms of expression are indispensable for successful communication also after language acquisition begins. It is important that adults communicate from the start using all available means, including language, and that they continue to bolster the understanding of talk using nonverbal means also with older children.

Jointly spinning sustained conversational threads. The ability of conversation partners to cooperate interactively over the course of several turns (e.g. questions, responses, extensions) can be acquired and further developed already at the nonverbal level (e.g., by taking turns when holding or manipulating objects or by playing with sounds). Here it is important to keep at something—that is, to stay with an activity or a topic and develop it further, working together. Later, children learn to keep also 'inner' thoughts in focus, such as an experience or an explanation, to express them in a comprehensible way, and to expand on them further in a joint effort. For this reason, adults should take up and encourage longer threads of conversation of this kind and support, maintain, and protect them.

Marking conversations between adults clearly and engaging in them sparingly. In families, in public meeting places (e.g., at the playground), and in early education and care settings (daycare centers and playgroups), adults often talk together 'over the heads of the children' to pursue their own communication goals. This practice has probably increased with the presence of smartphones and other digital communication devices in the daily life of the family. What is difficult for children is that conversations by telephone or text messaging can be heard and seen only in part or not at all. Conversations between adults are not a problem for children, as long as they do not compete with paying attention to children, remain the exception (at least among educational professionals), and are clearly marked by the adults to be special communications not addressed to the children (e.g., signaled through looks or bodily gestures or through a change in speaking voice). It is also important that children can regain the adults' attention immediately if urgently needed (e.g., if disputes arise or accidents happen).

2 Facilitate conversations between children
Children communicate particularly actively and independently when they are together with other children. This supports their language learning very effectively. It is important to bring children together frequently and regularly and to give them space for their shared interests and activities. If needed, adults can gently support conversations between children.

Importance for the Child
From the start, not only adults but also other children play a central role in children's acquisition of communication and language abilities. When children are together, there are many different opportunities for them to independently use, try out, and optimize their language abilities for personal and social purposes. Children interacting with one another can use communication and language to establish contact (e.g., show their interests, invite others to take part), share (e.g., feelings, opinions, experiences, or plans), or coordinate joint activity (e.g., offer, take, let go, and give back an object, or negotiate roles, the course of play, ideas, or plans). Playing together plays a key role: When negotiating, maintaining, and further developing joint play activities, children use especially rich language to express their ideas and negotiate their interests.

How Adults Provide Support

Conversations between children should not be steered by adults: Independent interactions between children form the basis for engaged communication. Children want to stake out their scopes, try out different roles, and negotiate with each other about their different ideas, topics, and opinions. Under these conditions—and so long as the group of children has sufficient expertise in the target language—peer conversations are a particularly effective context for language learning. It is therefore important that adults keep a low profile, create space for children's joint activities and conversations among themselves, and leave these up to the children. What can adults do to make possible and protect conversations between children? Supporting children's language acquisition can be done as follows:

Ensuring regular contact with other children. Children who grow up with siblings or attend daycare have daily contact with other children automatically. In other cases, social contact has to be actively organized (e.g., joint activities with other families, regular trips to certain playgrounds, attending parent-child events and programs, or attending a playgroup). Regular contact with other children, which also allows children to build trusting relationships with one another, can contribute a great deal to language acquisition.

Making possible, protecting, and acknowledging conversations between children. Children need a suitable framework to be active together and to engage one another in conversation. This includes organizational conditions, such as safe spaces, stimulating materials, and free time not planned for other purposes. It is also important that each child feels comfortable and has his or her basic needs met. Then the child can be active, observe, and participate. Here, group size and composition also play a role: In small groups with familiar children, conversations are easier than in larger groups with unfamiliar children. In addition, children as young as age 1 have personal preferences for other children. By considering these aspects, adults can create favorable framework conditions for conversations between children. They should also protect peer conversations that are going well from being interrupted or broken off prematurely (e.g., by looking after intervening children or adjusting their own program flexibly). Lastly, adults can acknowledge successful peer conversations by showing their appreciation, pointing them out to other children, and developing together with the children suggestions for further joint play projects.

Supporting individual children in conversations with other children. Children have to know of one another and develop interest in one another before they come together for joint play. Adults can create recurring opportunities for children to meet and help newcomers to find a place in an existing group. In addition, they can demonstrate possibilities of how children can also participate in group activities nonverbally (e.g., when children are not yet familiar with the language spoken by the other children).

Temporarily supporting and encouraging conversations between children if needed. Finally, it can make sense for adults to participate in children's conversations for a limited amount of time. In phases where there is a high need for information or negotiation (e.g., when children wish to play a game that they are not yet familiar with, when roles have to be assigned, or in stubborn conflict situations), it can be helpful if adults moderate the children's conversations. Adults can also participate at times in the children's group play and introduce new behavior patterns that the children can try out by themselves later on (e.g., certain moves in a board game or talking about the figures' feelings in pretend play). These forms of support should be used sparingly, however. The aim is for children to deal with and steer their joint play on their own as far as possible. That self-determination is precisely where peer conversations have their greatest educational (and language building) potential.

3

Assure the quality of interactions

So that children can express their thoughts and develop their abilities in the exchange with others, communication must be successful. Adults can contribute a lot to high interaction quality. It is important for adults to provide a safe framework for conversations with children, respond attentively to what children say, and enrich conversations with their own input. In addition, adults can expand children's language by offering new linguistic means (e.g., words and grammar).

Importance for the Child

Successful exchanges with their caregivers are vital for children: Only under conditions of social inclusion, respect, and positive emotional attention can children further develop their abilities, experience the effects of their own actions, and develop a sense of their own identity. For this reason, children show initiative and engagement when communicating with familiar persons—adults, older siblings, or other children. They want to belong to the community, participate, be understood by others, and develop their communication and language abilities.

How Adults Provide Support

Successful communication is always dependent on the contributions and cooperation of all persons involved. By assuring high quality conversational interactions and through reflection upon their own actions, adults can contribute a great deal to successful communication. The following elements support the success of interactions:

Framing and steering interactions. There are several things that adults can do so that children feel a sense of belonging and participate: They invite children to converse, welcome them, and make sure that they have their own, safe place (e.g., on the diapering table or in the circle in a children's group). They listen carefully to what the children say and encourage and support them through their nonverbal or verbal responses. They take care to maintain dialogues and conclude them in an appreciative way—a framework like this helps children to orient themselves in conversations, follow conversations, and participate in them successfully. Adults moderate conversations between children with restraint and show confidence in the children's own ability. In group situations, adults steer conversations by inviting individual children to speak, including other children in the conversation, and when needed explaining and upholding rules. Finally, it can be important for adults to protect conversations from interruptions by outside parties, other children participating in the conversation, or noise. In moments like these, adults do not allow themselves to be quickly distracted; they continue to pay attention to the child who is speaking and respond to the interruption, if needed, using other means (e.g., by a touch, facial expression, or gesture).

Adapting interactions to individual children. Adults can adapt conversations to the child and the situation on several levels: First, on the level of interaction, they adapt their own actions to the actions of the child; give the child enough time to respond, without anticipating; tune in and listen; and take turns talking. Second, on the level of content, they take up and expand the child's topics. And third, on the level of language, they tailor their voice and their choice of words and sentences to the child's abilities and contributions and take up, differentiate, or implicitly correct the child's expressions. Moreover, for successful conversations, it is crucial that adults ensure a common understanding. There are a number of different ways to do this: Adults can signal their own understanding or incomprehension (e.g., express astonishment, doubt, or agreement by means of facial expressions or verbally, or repeating what the child says) and make sure of their understanding of what the child has said (e.g., by asking the child questions).

Providing stimulating input in conversational interactions. Adult caregivers foster children's language acquisition by providing stimulating input. This is possible already with infants, when adults take up the sounds babies make and vary them (e.g., string them together). In conversations with older children, there are various other possibilities: First, topics can be extended to include more experiences or examples by asking children further questions. Second, a topic can be spoken of in greater depth by mentioning new aspects or adding one's own perspectives. And third, adults can vary topics by switching to other language tasks (e.g., making a connection to an experience of one's own or drawing a comparison to a well-known story). But input can also encourage children to take on more active and more challenging roles in play or in conversations (e.g., inventing the next step in a game or recounting an experience). Stimulating questions

such as "What happened to you yesterday?" or "What do you think about that?" or "Why is that so?" invite children to progress in their oral language acquisition.

Offering new words and grammar and clarifying them. For one, adults can make sure to underpin their verbal comments with gestures, facial expressions, and voice. In addition, they can use increasingly sophisticated vocabulary, new word forms, and more complex phrases. For another, they can offer children new language in other ways: They can accompany their actions with verbal commentary, name objects and activities pointed out by themselves or by the child, and explain words and comments that the child does not understand (by nonverbal visualizations or verbal explanations). In addition, they can offer specific vocabulary, answer options, or model phrases and restate children's language. But the focus should always be on shared understanding. Correcting children's statements is only appropriate if it serves a communicative purpose (e.g., so that other children can more easily understand what the child is saying).

4 Use language in many different ways

Language makes it possible for children to master ever more challenging communicative and cognitive tasks. These abilities are also crucial later on for learning in school. It is important to continuously support and encourage children along this path—from naming the visible environment, to depicting one's invisible inner life, to the challenging language tasks of reporting experience, storytelling, or explaining.

Importance for the Child

Children want to experience and discover the material and social world around them with all of their senses. Here language plays a central role: Language makes it possible to build, try out, and refine new concepts and in this way opens up new entirely new dimensions of cognitive and emotional progress. Children need language to become familiar with and name their everyday worlds. But they also need language to express their needs and regulate their emotions. And finally, children need language in order to transcend the here and now and talk about things that are not perceivable in the situation (e.g., their past experiences, their plans, invented stories, or their knowledge of the world). For this, they need to master, at first with support from adults, a variety of challenging language tasks.

How Adults Provide Support

Children need a lot of opportunities to build and expand their language repertory. Adult caregivers can create and take up such opportunities, and as language role models they can also give children rich language input. They following elements contribute to a rich variety of language use:

Naming objects, activities, and characteristics. Adults support children's language acquisition when they comment on their ongoing actions in everyday situations (e.g., when diapering or bathing the child, shopping, dressing, cooking, shaking a rattle, or looking at a picture book with the child) and name things, activities, and characteristics (e.g., colors, shapes or frequencies). They can also talk about the interests that the child is signaling or comment on the child's actions. When objects are named in words, it is important that this does not happen in isolation but rather that the words are embedded in a context (e.g., "This is a cat. It meows and purrs and has soft, black fur"). Exposure to words in context helps children to expand and connect their vocabulary and concepts. It is also supportive if children can have as many physical experiences that stimulate as many senses as possible to accompany the adults' verbal statements (if they can not only see the cat but also touch it, hear it, or smell it).

Expressing inner processes verbally. For children to be able to express their own inner processes but also to be able to understand others' emotions and intentions, language is indispensable. Opportunities to speak about feelings, states, or plans of action are abundant in daily life (e.g., when children experience or observe joy or pain, or when choosing and planning an activity). Characters and happenings in picture books also provide a good opportunity for practicing putting inner processes into words. Depending on the contexts and children's abilities, adults can vary their support, in that they either

put things into words for the child (e.g., "The man in the book is sad because his ice cream fell on the ground and now he can't eat it") or facilitate the child's own language by asking questions, providing answer options, or expanding on their words (e.g., "How do you think the man feels? Is he sad? Angry? Happy? What do you think he will do next?"). Depending on the situation, adults can ask different types of questions (i.e., questions requiring children to give closed or open answers or to make decisions).

Encouraging challenging language tasks. When talking about things outside the immediate space of perception (e.g., things experienced in the past, fantasy, or imagined things) or about knowledge and opinions that are also not visible, a common understanding relies strongly on language. For such challenging language tasks, elaborated language means are needed (e.g., subjunctive forms in make-believe play or if/then in argumentation). In later learning in school, subject matter is often decontextualized (not present in the situation, such as 'birds' in environmental instruction) or abstract (e.g., mathematical operations). For this reason, these complex language abilities play a central role in school success.

Experience shows that children provide many opportunities for challenging conversations. Adults can take up these initiatives and support children in extending their language and in using decontextualized language more and more on their own. Use of questions such as "What happened to you?" or "What would you like to do after snack time?" invite children to report past events or forge future plans. Questions such "How does that work?" or "Why are you laughing?" call for explanations. Questions such as "What do you think about that?" and "Do you think so, too?" invite children to provide argumentation. The main challenge for adults is to support children appropriately and in a way that elicits language (e.g., asking suitable questions, providing help with complex wording or answer options). The following four challenging language tasks play an increasingly important role in children's everyday life starting at around age 2 ½:
– Recounting real-world experience: Using decontextualized talk to describe real experience (e.g., recounting past, future, and possible events; reporting inner thoughts and feelings; deducing world knowledge from media and recording one's own knowledge through media).
– Telling stories (fictional): Talking about fictional worlds (e.g., listening to storytelling, telling stories, producing a fictional world, talking about stories, deducing stories from media and recording one's own stories through media).
– Explaining things: Conveying knowledge (e.g., understanding and giving instructions, commenting on a matter, giving reasons for a matter or way of proceeding, formulating questions and stating assumptions pertaining to a matter).
– Taking positions: Expressing and negotiating personal points of view (e.g., explaining and defending positions; taking up and assessing others' explanations).

5 Provide access to early literacy

In our information society, children are constantly surrounded by print and media. On their way to using these fascinating tools competently and critically, children need our support. It is important to facilitate their language awareness, respond to their interest in symbols and print, and discover together the world of children's books and media. Adults should also make visible and explain their own print and media practices to the child.

Importance for the Child

In the daily life of many children, language is not only a means of oral communication; it is also present in literary forms (in rhymes, songs, and stories), as print, and in various media. Children experience how older children and adults use these tools and want to participate in such activities themselves. In singing and storytelling, language is embedded in inspiring and enriching communal experience. The rhythms, melodies, and repetition in verses, fingerplays, and songs make it possible for very young children to participate actively by moving, making sounds, and humming. Becoming familiar with symbols and letters of the alphabet opens up access to many interesting areas of life (e.g., shopping, taking a train, or office work). In picture books, television shows, or on

the Internet children encounter knowledge about near and distant worlds and stories that challenge and strengthen them. Children want to discover, try out, and enjoy these activities. They pick out whatever is interesting and accessible to them and include it in their own activities—as means of communication, in their independent way and regardless of correct forms or official rules.

How Adults Provide Support

Adults can trust that also these learning processes take place at children's initiative, following a logic of their own. However, children do need exposure to objects and activities that encourage the acquisition of early literacy as well as communication partners for their examinations of print and media. The following activities promote children's acquisition of early literacy:

Reciting rhymes and verses and singing songs. Poetic forms of language like rhymes, verses, and songs are characterized by specific patterns: They have a rhythmic structure and remain unchanged (e.g., lullabies and fingerplays), or they are varied in a predictable way (e.g., in songs with small changes from verse to verse). When children hear them many times, they can soon participate actively (from making individual body movements, to speaking or singing along, to reciting or singing independently, to creating variations). Rhymes, verses, and songs should therefore be repeated often, with adults more and more handing over the leading role to the children (in the context of rituals in families, daycare centers, and playgroups, this is very feasible). Even infants can take the initiative and express their preferences here.

Playing with and exploring language. Language is not only a means of communication; it can also itself become the object of play and conversation. This holds even for very young children and pertains to language phenomena at all linguistic levels: Infants squeak with pleasure at preverbal play with sounds. They love repetitions and surprises and soon begin to initiate them themselves. Older children discover the sound characteristics of language (e.g., when building and breaking down words sound by sound) or word meanings (e.g., words with multiple meanings, or when comparing a word in different languages) but also communication phenomena (e.g., funny misunderstandings). Conscious use of language games like this can enrich the time shared with children. But it is more important to utilize spontaneously arising opportunities for brief perspective changes at this meta-linguistic level (e.g., if a word is misunderstood, look for other words that sound similar or that have similar meanings, or discover together what led to the misunderstanding).

Discovering symbols and the alphabetic print system. In print, language becomes visible and lasting. But meaning can be made visible and preserved not only through language but also in the form of pictures. For this reason, 'reading' and drawing pictures and symbols are important foundations for written language. There are abundant opportunities in daily life for 'reading' (e.g., when looking at a picture book or 'reading' traffic signs) and 'writing' (e.g., when drawing a shopping list or a personal experience) such symbols. To understand how alphabetic writing works, children have to be able to identify units of oral language (phonological awareness), isolate individual phonemes in spoken words (phonemic awareness), discriminate individual letter forms (graphemic awareness), and assign sounds to letters (letter-sound knowledge). Only on this basis can children read and understand unfamiliar words or put down their own thoughts as written words. However, previous to that, many children recognize frequent or characteristic words as holistic word shapes (e.g., the family name written on a plate next to the doorbell or the brand logos of attractive products on supermarket shelves). Adults should also give children opportunities to observe their own uses of print. They can also motivate children to use pictures, symbols, and print by 'reading' and 'writing.' If children are interested, their attention might be directed to units and characteristics of language, print, sounds, and letters.

Using and enjoying picture books and other children's media. Picture books (and associated games), audio books, or video films enable children to follow their interests and discover innumerable worlds that transcend the here and now of the actual situation. Adults can ensure that children have access to a variety of age-appropriate children's media. The materials should include real-world nonfiction texts (e.g., about everyday family life, animals, or construction machinery) as well as fictional stories (e.g., about children's experiences or fantasy characters).

But in addition to choosing their own topics and picture books, children should also be allowed to explore their interests using other media. It is appropriate to offer them suitable audio media (e.g., stories on digital sound recordings) and films (e.g., children's programs on television or animated films as digital videos). The following recommendations can be made regarding use of these media:

– Children should be introduced to new content and media in the company of trusted caregivers. It is important that they are supported in their understanding, can share their impressions and thoughts with others, and can relate the content to their own experiences.

– Children love to look at interesting books, listen to interesting audio books, and watch interesting films over and over again. In doing so, they discover more and more details and eventually gain a wider and deeper understanding of the presented subject matter or story. After having been exposed to a book, play, or film for the first time in the company of a caregiver, children benefit a lot from repetition—both on their own or together with other children.

– In addition to conversations about media content (see the first point above) and repeated use of media (see the second point just above), further processing through creative reproduction is also very important (e.g., reenacting stories using toy figures or inventing new experiences for a story character).

There is no question today that reading to children and conversations about picture books are extremely valuable and effective opportunities for language and literacy acquisition. Among other things, they facilitate positive shared experiences, growing familiarity with diverse uses of picture books, engaging with interesting topics, sustained shared thinking, and growing familiarity with complex textual language units. Also, even young children can use familiar picture books by themselves.

These benefits apply also for suitable audio books and films—as long as adults accompany children's use carefully according to the principles outlined above. Children's books and other children's media are readily available at public libraries, and libraries frequently offer attractive reading encouragement programs for children and their parents. In a number of cities in Switzerland there are now also intercultural libraries with children's books and media in many languages (for an overview, see www.interbiblio.ch); they provide diverse offerings for families that do not speak German at home.

6 Value and support multilingualism

Young children can easily learn and use several languages. What is important is not so much correct grammar but rather succeeding at engaged and stimulating communication. In first language acquisition, it is important that parents communicate with the child in their strongest language and that the child can clearly distinguish between the various languages. When children learn German as a second language, it is important that adults value the children's first language(s) and support shared understanding also through nonverbal means. In addition, the children need as much exposure as possible to the target language, German.

Importance for the Child

The first language(s) that children acquire in interaction with their closest caregivers is (are) of central importance for their building of identity. Children want to communicate with the people close to them, participate as a part of their community, and in this way gradually experience and discover themselves. For this they increasingly need —besides touches, eye contact, facial expression, and gestures—also means of language. It is at first completely irrelevant what language system the words and structures come from (e.g., German or Albanian): Children learn through communication to recognize and use the sounds, words, and sentence structures that they encounter. From the perspective of the child, families with two or three languages are not a problem; for them, all of the languages are simply part of their very personal first language, which they will later on and gradually differentiate into different language systems with their specific words and structures.

When children have to find their bearings anew in an environment where a foreign language is spoken (e.g., when entering daycare or playgroup), it can be very unsettling at first: for one, because the children's verbal means of communication apparently no longer work, and for another, because the children experience a central part of their identity as different, foreign, not belonging. In this situation they need caregivers who communicate reliably also using nonverbal means, make it possible for the children to engage in nonverbal forms of participation, and recognize and value their first languages. Under these conditions it is easily possible for the children to acquire another language as a second language rapidly. This process is accelerated enormously through shared activities with other children who already speak the new target language (usually German). If there are no such children to play with, however, more opportunities to converse with adults and more language input from adult caregivers (and possibly suitable German-language media) are necessary.

How Adults Provide Support

Adults can support language acquisition in dual or multi-language learners through their own use of language and through thoughtful interactions with children who are learning German (or another language) as a second language. The following possibilities stand in the foreground:

Using your own strongest language. Children need caregivers who communicate with them with cognitive and emotional engagement, with rich language, and in a supportive way. Those are demanding requirements that cannot be met in an unfamiliar language. For this reason, it is important for parents to speak their strongest languages with their children at home. It is unfavorable for language learning and a threat for identity building if they—with the best of educational intentions—withhold from their children their own forms of expressing feelings and thoughts, their own songs and verses, or their own stories, picture books, and texts. Many public libraries offer children's media also in immigrants' languages. The intercultural libraries (for an overview, see www.interbiblio. ch) offer large selections of media in different languages.

This guideline applies also for caregivers in early education and care settings. However, in this professional context, the everyday language used in the setting—usually German, but in dual language settings German and English, for example—takes center stage. The important thing is to communicate in the everyday language(s) in a facilitating and encouraging way. Staff that cannot yet speak without difficulty in German (and in the second everyday language in dual language settings) should receive support in further developing their language abilities. But following the principle of communication-oriented language education, there is nothing that speaks against staff speaking with children in their shared first language if needed.

There is no general answer to the question as to whether an early education and care setting should use Swiss German or High German as the everyday language. The decision should be made taking the language constellation of the group into consideration. If many children are learning German as a second language and there are few German-speaking children in the group to model the language, High German should be chosen, because it: (a) is used more uniformly by the caregivers/teachers and is thus easier to learn, (b) prepares children for the language in written texts, and (c) represents an additional educational opportunity for children who speak Swiss German at home. If the majority of the children in the group speak German, both varieties are possible as the everyday language. Swiss German and High German have a lot more similarities than differences, and the children will learn the other variety with ease when they are school-age: standard German in classroom instruction (and in the media) and German dialect in social interaction with peers in leisure time.

Using different languages in a clearly evident way. The fear that children's contact with several languages can impair their language acquisition is unfounded: Young children want to communicate, and they use the words and structures that work in their surroundings, no matter what language system they come from. But because language acquisition essentially consists in recognizing and trying out the means of language (sounds, words, and sentence structures), and these forms can only be learned with their repeated and stable occurrence in the environment, children are dependent on the use of different languages being recognizable and expectable. In multilingual families, the simplest solution is for each caregiver to consistently speak their strongest language with the child ("one person, one language"). That makes it clear for the child

what language repertory he or she should use in that communication. But it is also possible to manage language use not via persons but via situations. For example, parents with different first languages can decide on a common everyday language that is always used in situations where children communicate with both parents at the same time. Also, when visitors come or spending time with relatives are situations where frequently a language other than the everyday language is used. The main thing is that use of the different languages is stable (connected to persons or situations) and thus clearly understandably for the child.

Appreciating the children's languages. Children's first languages—due to their importance in interactions with the children's closest caregivers—are strongly linked with the building of identity. Children therefore react sensitively to others' perception and appreciation of their languages (and to disregard and disdain): Where their languages are welcome and visible, they feel that they are being taken seriously personally and that they belong. Adults can show appreciation of the special language resources of multilingual children in conversations with them (by asking about certain words and expressions in the children's first language (or in the family languages) or show interest when children use their first language). Adults can also make the multilingualism of individual children or the common multilingualism in the children's group visible or 'public,' acknowledge, and foster it (e.g., with greeting rituals and songs in different first languages, through picture books and children's media in the children's first language, or by inviting parents to tell stories in their native languages). If they also show their own multilingualism, they can break down further barriers for children and parents and build additional trust.

Ensuring participation and communication also nonverbally. When learning their first language, very young children communicate nonverbally at first (by touches, objects, eye contact, sounds, facial expressions, and gestures) and then learn step-by-step to recognize and use the additional potential of verbal means of expression. In the orchestra of communication tools, language gradually becomes stronger and more prominent, and with the aid of language, children can develop increasingly challenging communication tasks (e.g., describe their feelings or recount an experience).

This is different when learning a second language sequentially—that is, when learning a second everyday language after learning a first language: In their first language, these older children have already learned to communicate complex content through words and grammar. If they cannot use their first language due to the situation (e.g., because not Portuguese but German is spoken at daycare), they are at first very limited in their possibilities for expression and understanding. They have complex (e.g., emotional or cognitive) communication needs but do not have at their disposal the language that works in this situation. Under these conditions, nonverbal forms of expression take on a different role than during the acquisition of a first language: They function as compensatory support systems for the as yet lacking verbal means of expression (the orchestra must step in for the indisposed solo instrument and do a lot more than merely accompany the solo, so to speak). Adults can support children in this situation by: (a) deliberately and richly accompanying what they are saying by nonverbal means (with touches, objects, eye contact, sounds, facial expressions, gestures, and pictures), (b) paying close attention to children's nonverbal language, and (c) clearly signaling their own process of understanding (by showing that they do not yet understand or that they understand through gestures and body language or through signal words). In addition, they should make sure during group activities, such as singing songs or talking about picture books, to offer the children also nonverbal means of participating (e.g., dancing or humming along without singing the lyrics of a song or turning the pages of the picture book or showing the book around), so that all children can participate in the group in a way that is accessible to them.

Providing lots of opportunities for contact with the target language. Language does not develop automatically and 'from within'; it must be acquired 'from the outside' in social exchange with competent members of the language community. For this, children need a lot of contact with the target language. Important is language input, which should be sufficiently intensive and increasingly rich and differentiated. But just as important is language output—that is, chances for children to try out the acquired words and grammar themselves, to observe what effects they have, and in this process to continuously develop them. It should be remembered that understanding words and grammar comes before producing them. Children can only use language tools that they have

been exposed to and that they recognize as language forms—phonemes, words, word forms, sentence structures, or complex communication tasks such as recounting an experience or providing argumentation. What is more, many children need security in their understanding before they start to produce language themselves and for this reason do not speak for a long time and then suddenly express themselves astonishingly competently in the target language.

The most effective route to good contact with the target language German is to give children regular and extended access to German-speaking children. If this is not possible (e.g., because few children in the playgroup speak German), other means should be used to ensure that the children have sufficient contact with the target language. Some ways to do this, among others, are the following:

– Caregivers in early childhood institutions organize the day such that they have (under the given conditions) as many chances as possible for conversations with individual children and with small groups.

– Additional caregivers are recruited (e.g., a playgroup assistant) to optimize the staff-to-child ratio.

– For children learning German as a second language, private visits to German-speaking children are initiated and kept up.

– Somewhat older children are given the opportunity to listen to already familiar stories (ideally, supported by illustrations through conventional or digital picture books) over and over again through sound recordings and to depict and expand on them through drawing and play acting.

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Guidelines at a Glance

1 **Identify and utilize everyday opportunities for conversations**
Using everyday situations to engage children in conversations
Establishing and maintaining shared attention
Giving children space to express themselves
Focusing on understanding and supporting understanding with all means
Jointly spinning sustained conversational threads
Making conversations between adults clear and engaging in them sparingly

2 **Facilitate conversations between children**
Ensuring regular contact with other children
Making possible, protecting, and acknowledging conversations
between children
Supporting individual children in conversations with other children
Temporarily supporting and encouraging conversations between children
if needed

3 **Assure the quality of interactions**
Framing and steering conversations with children
Adapting interactions to individual children
Providing stimulating input in conversational interactions
Offering new words and grammar and clarifying them

4 **Use language in many different ways**
Naming objects, activities, and characteristics
Expressing inner processes verbally
Encouraging challenging language tasks

5 **Provide access to early literacy**
Reciting rhymes and verses and singing songs
Playing with and exploring language
Discovering symbols and the alphabetic print system
Using and enjoying picture books and other children's media

6 **Value and support multilingualism**
Using your own strongest language
Using different languages in a clearly evident way
Appreciating children's languages
Ensuring participation and communication also through nonverbal means
Providing lots of opportunities for contact with the target language

Impressum— Legal Disclosures

How to cite this publication:

Isler, D., Kirchhofer, K., Hefti, C., Simoni, H., & Frei, D. (2017). *Supporting early language acquisition: A conceptual framework for improving language education in the early years*. Zurich, Switzerland: Department of Education of the Canton of Zurich.