



# Young Multilingual Children in Maryland

Exploring Parent Perceptions of Children's Language  
Development, Family Engagement Practices, and  
Decision-Making about Early Care and Education

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Purpose

This study explores the perceptions, experiences, and decision-making of parents of young multilingual children, ages birth to five years, with regard to children’s language learning and development, family engagement practices, and children’s participation in early care and education (ECE) programs.

The term **multilingual children** is used to refer to culturally and linguistically diverse children, ages birth to five years, who are learning two or more languages. Multilingual children are exposed to multiple languages in their homes, communities, and/or early care and education settings, and they develop and use language in dynamic ways. In the field, these children are commonly referred to as dual language learners, or DLLs.

## Research Questions

Three questions guided this study:

1. What goals, aspirations, fears, and concerns do parents have for their children’s language learning and development?
2. What are parents’ perceptions about family engagement practices used in early care and education programs and the extent to which these support children’s language learning and development?
3. What roles, if any, do their goals, aspirations, fears, and concerns about children’s language learning and development play in their decision-making about early care and education?

## Methodology

Data were collected in July and August 2019 from 27 mothers across three ECE sites serving children and families from Montgomery County and Prince George’s County. The primary methods for data collection consisted of individual interviews (INT) or focus groups (FG). Table 1 presents an overview of data collection methods along with some demographic information of the participants.

**Table 1: Summary of Data Collection**

Site Number	INT or FG	Language Used	Number of participants	Countries of Origin Represented	Native and Home Languages Represented
1	INT	English	1	Senegal	Wolof, French, Creole, Susu
2	FG (2)	English/ Spanish	9	El Salvador, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Puerto Rico	Amharic, Spanish, Twi
3	FG (2)	English/ Spanish	17	Afghanistan, Algeria, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Myanmar, Peru, Venezuela	Berber, Burmese, Dari, Pashto, Portuguese, Spanish

The first phase of data analysis occurred soon after each interview or focus group and resulted in initial concepts and themes tied to individual sessions (e.g., interview or focus group). The second phase of analysis consisted of re-examining the initial concepts and themes and coding all of the data. This resulted in a list of major themes and patterns that make up the study findings.

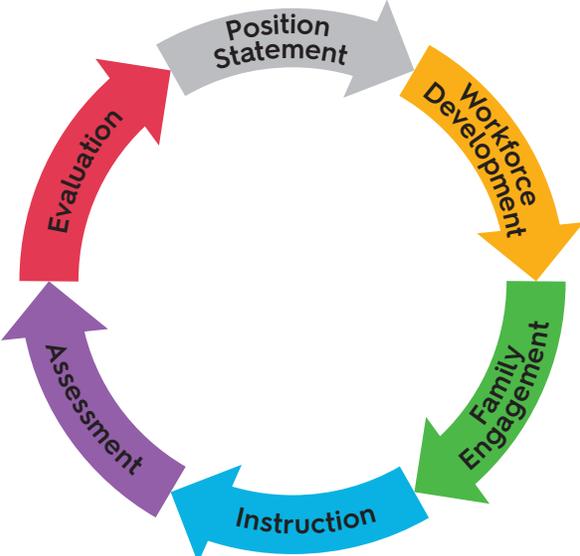
# Findings

The parents in this study hold strong beliefs and values about language. More specifically, they believe *families’ native language(s) enhance communication and connection with others and that being bilingual/multilingual presents opportunities and benefits*. Driven by these beliefs and values, findings show that all parents aspire for their children to be bilingual or multilingual. Common fears and concerns around children’s language include native language loss, experiencing difficulties understanding others, and the use of evaluation tools and methods that are not linguistically responsive to children. With regard to family engagement, findings indicate that access to ECE staff who speak families’ native language(s) greatly enhances family engagement and communication between parents and staff. Lastly, we found that language plays a role in decision-making around ECE options. In particular, data show that parents seek language learning opportunities and child socialization opportunities that promote and support language development.

# Recommendations

This report highlights the critical need for *language-focused family engagement* (Cuéllar, Blair & Mancilla, 2018) and systemic approaches to enhancing family engagement. We invite state leaders to explore ways to offer statewide support for language-focused family engagement across the six key areas depicted in this graphic. In addition, we offer recommendations which are informed by the findings of this study and take into consideration projects and initiatives that the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) accomplished, and has underway, in partnership with WIDA Early Years. The recommendations discussed in this report include

- Expanding program options that support young children’s bilingualism/multilingualism
- Investing in professional learning around issues of equity related to language
- Implementing asset-based two-generation programs that are culturally and linguistically responsive
- Creating a communication campaign about ECE program options that taps into the power of word-of-mouth
- Using linguistically responsive assessment and evaluation methods and data interpretation processes



**Figure 1: Six Key Areas for Statewide Support for Multilingual Children and Families**



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