



# Bilingual Options

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## **Structuring Playgroup Sessions for Optimal Language Benefit**

Do you find that your playgroup works well for the benefit of your child's language development? Or is it, as in so many playgroups, more a matter of mum's (or dad's) having a cuppa and a chat of their own? Are you lost for ideas of how to structure the playgroup? Here are some ideas which I adapted from the book by Lenore Arnberg some years ago (*Raising Children Bi-lingually: The PreSchool Years*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1987; unfortunately out of print)

- Have a leader responsible for group activities, possibly on a rotational basis.
- Structure the children's time and don't leave them on their own; if pairs of parents take turns to be with the children, the rest can still sip drinks and compare notes.
  - During free play activities, the adults should follow the children's lead and play along. Your presence and use of the community language will remind the children that they should use the LOTE (Language(s) Other Than English). Your language models will make it easier for them to find the right words
  - Anything a child says in English, the adult should trans-late. This provides a model and a reminder for the whole group. It is very likely that the child chose English because s/he could not express it in the community language. Unless the children are given models, they won't learn how to express themselves in the LOTE.
  - Organise other activities tightly around language so that the children HAVE to use the LOTE. For example, during art activities, make them ask for the pencil in a particular colour or the shape to be pasted; sing songs with words left out for them to fill in; design simple role plays where it is clear what each have to say and with a consequence which works as a re-ward.
  - Turn books into role plays. They are a great source of language and play structure which can be creatively changed in repeated play sequences.
  - Repeat, songs and nursery rhymes frequently in order for the children to learn the words.
  - Follow a schedule for each meeting in which songs, themes etc are interchanged. This provides continuity to the program and increases the children's sense of security.
- You may want to try the following sample schedule:
  1. Planned free play (20min), eg. dolls, cars, balls; the adults should talk to the children either one-to-one or in groups.
  2. Active play (20min), eg. singing games, ordinary games, gymnastics, mime and drama.
  3. Talking about a topic with pictures (15min), eg. animals, traffic, farm, holidays.
  4. Eating and drinking (15min), with food and drinks being given on appropriate verbal re-quests. Give models for the children to repeat if needed.
  5. Songs and finger plays (15min).
  6. Art activity, optimally related to the topic in No. 3 (20min), eg. drawing, playdough, etc.
  7. Story (20min), eg. telling a story with flannel board, puppets, or a regular book.
  8. Farewell ritual (5 min), eg. a song or phrase combined with a gesture.

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