



**UNIDOS** US

Nurturing Your Preschool-Age  
Multilingual Child Amid COVID-19:

## **THE IMPORTANT ROLE OF LANGUAGES**

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*Robert Stechuk, Ph.D., Director, Early Childhood Education Programs*

**ESPERANZA**  
HOPE FOR ALL

# UNIDOSUS

UnidosUS, previously known as National Council of La Raza (NCLR), is the nation's largest Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization. Through its unique combination of expert research, advocacy, programs, and an Affiliate Network of nearly 300 community-based organizations across the United States and Puerto Rico, UnidosUS simultaneously challenges the social, economic, and political barriers that affect Latinos at the national and local levels.

For more than 50 years, UnidosUS has united communities and different groups seeking common ground through collaboration, and that share a desire to make our community stronger. For more information on UnidosUS, visit [www.unidosus.org](http://www.unidosus.org) or follow us on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).

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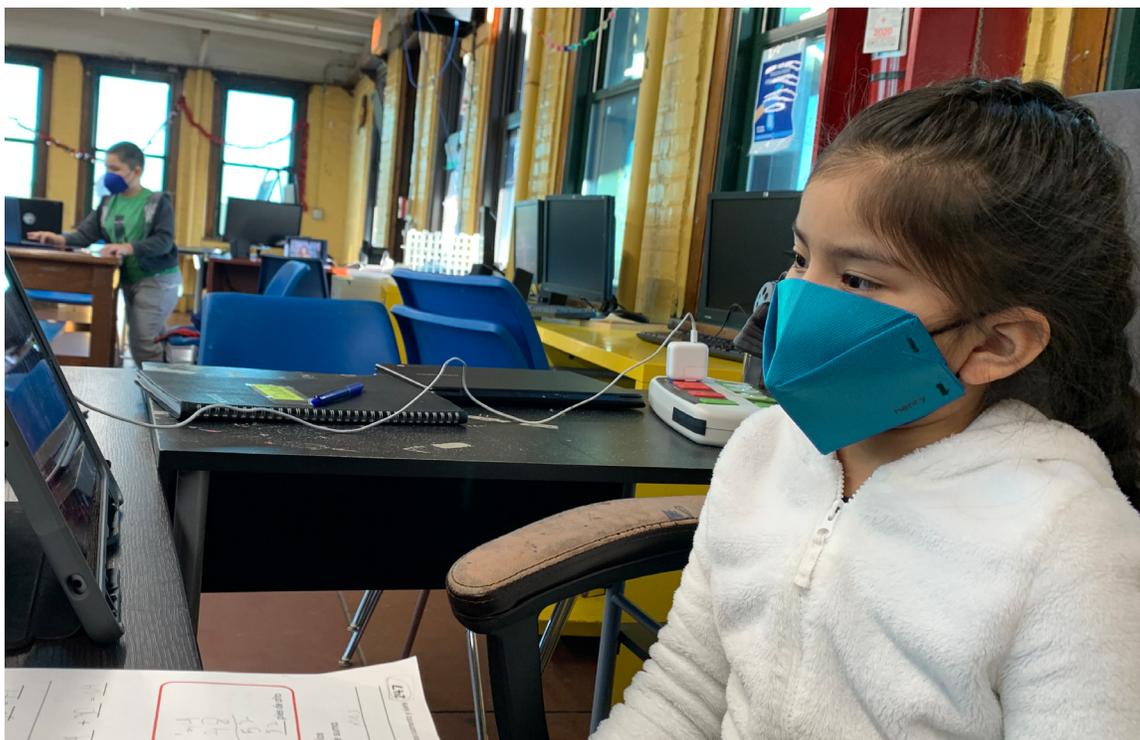
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# **THE IMPORTANT ROLE OF LANGUAGES**

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## HEADLINES FROM AROUND THE WORLD PAINT A GRIM PORTRAIT of how COVID-19 is presenting serious impacts upon young children and their development:

- "From their academic success to their social skills and mental health, the pandemic is a crisis for today's children—and the fallout may follow them for the rest of their lives." **BBC**
- "The full toll of COVID-19 on children's mental health won't be known for years." **CNN**
- "The coronavirus pandemic and the unprecedented measures to contain its spread are disrupting nearly every aspect of children's lives." **World Economic Forum**

**For more than a year now**, COVID-19 has brought uncertainty, anxiety, stress, and trauma to Latinx families in the United States. This crisis, including job loss and school closures, have exacerbated the inequities that have always existed in the lives of many families, such as food insecurities, lack of affordable housing, and health care access.

UnidosUS Affiliate [Gads Hill Center](#) supports more than 4,500 children and their families through comprehensive programs and services to meet their educational, employment, and health-related needs.

They report that, during the past year, of the parents they serve:

- **NEARLY ONE IN FOUR CONTRACTED COVID-19.**
- **25% LOST THEIR JOB.**
- **53% REPORTED HAVING THEIR HOURS OF EMPLOYMENT REDUCED.**

Similar data have been gathered by other UnidosUS Affiliates across the United States. Unfortunately, these health and economic statistics have become the context of young Latinx children's development. Children are seeing their parents and family members become sick and, in some cases, hospitalized. They observe and feel the impacts of their parent's job loss and reduced access to basic needs. Perhaps most of all, children see and hear family members struggling with their own mental, social, and emotional well-being. Clearly, the effects of the pandemic will be multigenerational, having long-lasting effects in the Latinx community.

The COVID-19 pandemic is demonstrating more than ever that all aspects of a child's life impact their well-being and opportunities for learning. According to the [CDC](#), some children may react immediately to an emergency, while others may struggle with the situation much later. Some preschool and kindergarten children may return to behaviors they have outgrown, if they see or hear reminders of what happened or will show new behaviors such as toileting accidents, bed-wetting, or feeling afraid of being separated from their parents and family members. They may also have mood changes or a hard time sleeping. This is why it is critical to pay very careful attention to how your children are feeling and reacting during these challenging times.

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## WHAT YOU MAY NOTICE IN YOUR PRESCHOOL-AGE MULTILINGUAL CHILD

With the continuation of the global pandemic, multilingual children need parents and other adults in their lives to actively and intentionally cultivate their sense of belonging and well-being, self-concept and identity, and linguistic practices and intellect. For example, it is important to understand that multilingual children may use all of the features of languages they know in their linguistic repertoire (e.g., Mixteco and Spanish) to make connections and communicate with different people in their lives.

Children demonstrate significant development between the ages of three and five. This includes expanded language practices and increased memory as well as the capacity for “reflective” thinking. Each of these aspects is important for long-term learning and has been shaped by the pandemic.



- **Language Practices and Increased Memory.** Many families notice that their three-year-old multilingual child will repeat—verbatim—something they said a week earlier. A child will overhear something that is said and repeats not only the exact words, but also the tone, pitch, phrasing, and pronunciation.



- **Reflective Thinking.** Preschool-age children not only demonstrate increased memory but the capacity to “replay” past events in their memory. For example, a child may begin talking about a trip that they made to the store last week. This “active recall” is seen by many researchers as an important aspect of development, as the child reconsiders and rethinks past experiences. Parents and family members can encourage the development of this thinking by responding to instances when children remember and talk about their past experiences.

Children’s daily experiences drive their development. Amid COVID-19, young children are observing—and remembering—how important adults in their lives are talking, describing, and responding to the impacts of the pandemic.

Another key developmental step that preschool children demonstrate is the ability to *connect pieces of information*. For example, a child may say, “Yo necesito mi chaqueta, porque está haciendo frío afuera.” Here, the child is connecting the idea that a jacket provides warmth with information about the temperature outside. While this type of language is rare in two-year-old children, children ages three through five begin to demonstrate this ability. Over time, children develop logical reasoning skills.

Given the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts upon children’s development, parents can support children by connecting important pieces of information, noting that children may not be successful in connecting information in every situation. For example, parents can explain that we wash our hands because this removes the germs that can make us sick.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO TO SUPPORT YOUR MULTILINGUAL CHILD

Here are some recommendations you can consider to help your multilingual child during the pandemic:



1. Nurture your child in the development of linguistic practices and their use of all of the features of the languages in your home (e.g., Nawat, K'iche', Mixteco, Quechua, Haitian Creole, Spanish, Portuguese, English, etc.)



2. Celebrate all of the linguistic practices and language features your child is expanding.

- Acknowledge and affirm your child's use of all of the language features they have in their linguistic repertoire to make connections and communicate in different contexts and people in their lives.



3. Talk with your child in the language(s) you feel most comfortable with.

- Ask your child about what changes they are experiencing right now.
- Ask your child about what changes might be happening and how their preschool program/classroom might be different.
- Ask your child about what they are feeling amid the pandemic.
- Ask your child what they learn throughout the day.
- Ask your child if they have any questions, comments, or observations they want to share.



4. Talk with your child about their questions responding to their comments or having conversations about the changes they are currently experiencing in their lives.



5. Encourage conversations with your child by repeating your child's ideas.

- Your child will form longer sentences and articulate ideas if you model the same.



6. Use multilingual resources available in your home and community to promote culturally responsive and sustaining literacy (e.g., books, newspapers, videos, television shows, street signs, etc.).



## THE BOTTOM LINE

Parents and other adults can play large roles in helping their multilingual, preschool-age children cope with the additional stresses and trauma they experience during the continuing pandemic. Supporting children's multilingual development through daily conversations and by affirming and celebrating all of their language practices is a great way to foster social and emotional learning.

All language practices of multilingual children deserve to be respected and nurtured. Taking time to answer children's questions and making time for using multilingual resources in your home are critical ways adults can continue loving, embracing, and centering the voices of multilingual children so they can grow happy, confident, and whole.

