

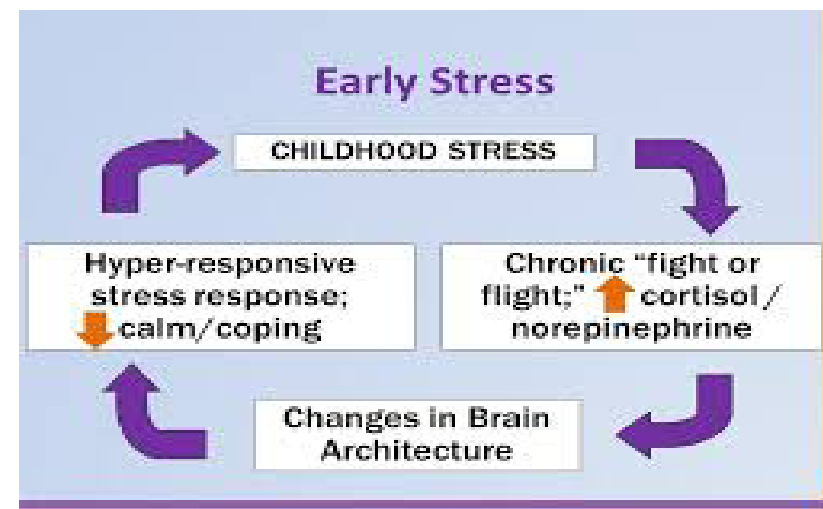
TOXIC STRESS

One of the challenges of working with children and families is understanding that all of their experiences impact the child and their behavior—either negatively or positively. All families experience stress, which affects the children, but when families experience deep, chronic stress it not only affects the child's behavior it affects how they learn as well. As providers, it is important to understand this so we can modify our teaching strategies to accommodate for the different ways that children learn.

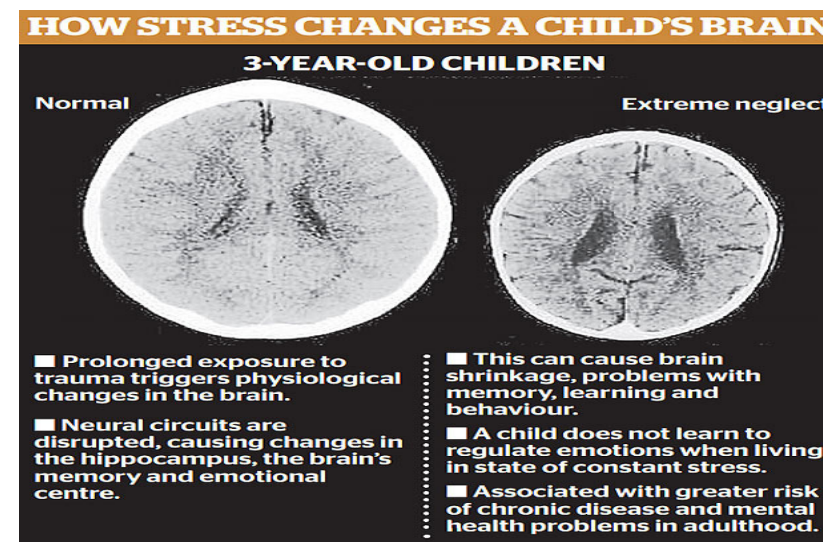
First, we must understand the difference between stress and toxic stress. According to Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child¹, there are three types of stress:

1. The *positive stress* response is a normal and essential part of healthy development, characterized by brief increases in heart rate and mild elevations in hormone levels. Some situations that might trigger a positive stress response are the first day with a new caregiver or receiving an injected immunization. These are situations that we all encounter and although they may make us nervous or upset, they are brief experiences and we come through just fine and maybe with some new coping skills as well.
2. The *tolerable stress* response activates the body's alert systems to a greater degree as a result of more severe, longer-lasting difficulties, such as the loss of a loved one, a natural disaster, or a frightening injury. If the activation is time-limited and buffered by relationships with adults who help the child adapt, the brain and other organs recover from what might otherwise be damaging effects.
3. The *toxic stress* response can occur when a child experiences strong, frequent, and/or prolonged adversity—such as physical or emotional abuse, chronic neglect, caregiver substance abuse or mental illness, exposure to violence, and/or the accumulated burdens of family economic hardship—without adequate adult support. This kind of prolonged activation of the stress response systems can disrupt the development of brain architecture and other organ systems, and increase the risk for stress-related disease and cognitive impairment, well into the adult years.

When children are living in chronic, toxic stress environments, they have increased levels of cortisol entering their developing organs and staying there for prolonged periods of time. This can damage developing brain architecture and create a short fuse for the body's stress response systems, leading to lifelong problems in learning, behavior, and both physical and mental health².



American Academy of Pediatrics



<http://www.smh.com.au/national/health/a-toxic-legacy-20130706-2pj5z.html>

Children experiencing toxic stress may exhibit the following behaviors and learning difficulties:

- Problems with emotional regulation
- Delays in cause and effect thinking
- Difficulty with empathic responses (conscience)
- Inability to articulate own emotions
- More impulsive responses to experiences
- Lessened ability to encode stimulus into memory (learning)
- Lessened ability to recall stimulus stored in memory (remembering)
- Lessened ability to inhibit behavioral responses (impulsiveness)
- Depression

As providers, we cannot always change a child's circumstances, but we can change how we teach to more effectively help children and families. Below are several recommendations from Upside Down Organization to help all children, but specifically those children enduring toxic stress conditions.

Provide time for regular physical activity. Play and physical activity is an essential nutrient of brain development and young children need 60 minutes of physical activity every day.

Immerse children in language. Children cannot learn to explore or explain their feelings and emotions if they lack the language skills.

Focus on skill building. Skills needed are behavior, understanding of rules in different contexts, persistence, and cognitive support. Activities for skill building should be interactive as this contributes to brain development.

Enriched experiences and environments. Highly interactive and enriching experiences and environments increase cognitive development and learning efficiency.

Help children manage stress levels. Provide time for physically active play, provide healthy snacks and meals, increase predictability by following rules and routines and provide warnings when schedules change. Also, teach children how to manage their stress and their emotions. Resources like the Second Step Curriculum and Social and Emotional Foundations of Early Learning (SEFEL) are very useful and effective in teaching children emotion management skills.

Allow time. Changing behaviors and helping young children to manage stress does not happen overnight. It takes a group effort and, most importantly, consistency. Over time, children will make improvements and will be successful.

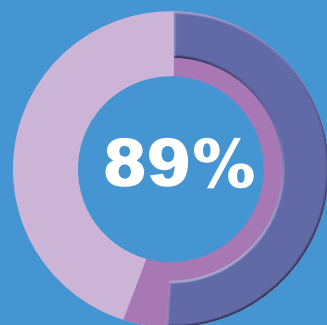
Inform parents and families. Explaining to families the importance of sleep, nutrition, and consistency in rules and schedules allows them to make small changes that will have big and long lasting impacts on their children.



EVOLVING AS CULTURALLY PROFICIENT EDUCATORS AND PROVIDERS FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION



Statistics help us to understand who Maryland's students are, their racial/ethnic background, and the special services they receive to be ready to learn. Students' racial/ethnic, linguistic, socio-economic, gender/gender identity and abilities can and should inform how we teach students and engage families in their children's development and learning. To honor and affirm every student and their family as valuable education partners, we must evolve as culturally proficient educators and providers.



In **2015**, out of **874,514** students enrolled in grades PreK-12 in Maryland, **56%** were students of color. **89%** of those students were receiving special services such as 504 plans, special education services, free or reduced priced meals, limited English proficient, migrant, and/or Title I.

What is cultural proficiency?

Cultural proficiency, as defined by Lindsey, Nuri, Robins & Terrell, is "honoring the differences among cultures, seeing diversity as a benefit, and interacting knowledgeably and respectfully among a variety of groups." What does this mean? This means that we view culture as an asset, not as a deficit and we recognize the strengths that every student and family brings into our programs. To be culturally proficient begins with a reflection on who we are as individuals and as part of organizations, it looks deeply at our assumptions about diverse students, and examines our expectations

about diverse students' academic potential and their families' potential to be meaningful partners for learning. There are **five core principles** that culturally proficient leaders follow:

1. Culture is a predominant force in people's lives; it exists everywhere.
 2. The dominant culture serves people in varying degrees—both good and bad.
 3. People have both personal identities and group identities.
 4. Diversity within cultures is vast and significant.
 5. Each individual and each group has unique cultural values and needs.
- (Lindsey, Roberts, Campbell, Jones, 2005)



What does cultural proficiency look like in practice?

Cultural proficiency is a **mindset** that views diverse students and families as having assets that can contribute to their learning. So, what does being a culturally proficient early childhood provider or teacher look like? The culturally proficient provider: knows who their students and families are, their cultural backgrounds, can identify their assets, and understands how to meet their needs in a way that honors and affirms them (Gay, 2010). In an early childhood setting the center or classroom may display pictures or items representative of children's cultural backgrounds, bilingual books may be on hand, or staff may learn some key phrases such as "hello," "thank you," and "I can help" in the languages most spoken by the children and families they serve.

Therefore, the culturally proficient provider or educator will be able to:

- Establish cultural bridges between children, families, and staff who come from different cultural backgrounds and perspectives.
- Understand the benefits of diverse cultures and dual language learning.
- Combat deficit-thinking about a student or groups of students and/or families from diverse backgrounds and focus on the positive aspects of diversity.

What are the benefits of applying cultural proficiency principles and practice to learning environments for early childhood and family, school, and community engagement?

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has stated "for the optimal development of all children, educators must value children's home language, respect (hold in high regard) and value (esteem, appreciate) the home culture, and promote and encourage the active involvement and support of all families, including extended and nontraditional family units."

Students succeed when they and their families have regular and positive interactions with school personnel and they participate in school activities (Crosnoe, 2013). Strong parent-community-school ties have been shown to improve performance on state reading assessments as much as four times and ten times more in math assessments than schools without strong ties (Bryk, 2010). Culturally responsive teaching is reflected by teachers' use of student's experiences and infusing it in the curriculum (Banks, et al., 2005). This may occur by selecting bilingual books that affirm children being dual language learners or incorporating traditional nursery rhymes and songs from a child's home culture. Children whose teachers use culturally-responsive practices with greater frequency are more likely to demonstrate stronger reading comprehension skill growth than were children whose teachers used culturally responsive practices less frequently (Underwood, 2009). Learning environments that allow students to make use of **cultural elements**, **cultural capital**, and other **contextual knowledge** to learn new content and information enhance their schooling experience and propel academic success (Howard, 2013). If students and families feel honored and valued as part of the learning process, students feel at ease and have more success transitioning into new learning environments because the teacher is using prior knowledge and cultural elements to help the child feel comfortable.



ENGAGING YOUNG ENGLISH LEARNERS

Fostering children’s language skills is a major focus of the early care, pre-school and prekindergarten experience. The number of “kindergarten ready” language guidelines indicates that early childhood educators and providers need to spend a significant amount of instructional time on language development. This is particularly true for providers and teachers of English Learners (ELs). Early childhood educators of ELs face the task of developing the communication skills of children in not just one, but two or more languages. These children have a dual challenge — they are learning language skills and content in their home language, while simultaneously acquiring language skills and content in a second language.

Early childhood educators must also consider each EL’s, or dual language learners, stage of **language acquisition**. Children at different stages have different instructional needs. When teachers and providers are aware of these stages and where each learner falls, they can establish realistic expectations for what each dual language learner is able to do.

Here are a few recommendations that will help early childhood educators and providers engage and challenge beginning-level dual language learners:

Consider Each EL’s Stage of Language Acquisition

Be aware of and understand the five stages of second language acquisition, identified by Stephen Krashen and Tracy Terrell in The Natural Approach:

- **Preproduction Stage:** can last up to six months; is also known as “the silent period” because an individual may not hear children speak any English during this stage
- **Early Production Stage:** characterized by children using single words or two-word phrases in English, as well as yes-or-no responses, names, and repetitive language patterns (i.e., “Have a good weekend!”)
- **Speech Emergence Stage:** children are able to speak in short sentences (i.e., “I walked to the movie.”)
- **Intermediate Fluency Stage:** children can express sentences of increasing length and complexity
- **Advanced Fluency Stage:** children demonstrate a near-native level of fluency

By understanding this process, providers can set realistic expectations for what each EL should be able to do. Although ELs need to be held to the same standards as native English speakers on what they know and understand, how they get there and how they demonstrate that knowledge may look different depending on their level of proficiency in English.

Characteristics of Verbalization at Each Stage

Once a teacher or provider knows a child’s stage of second language acquisition, he or she can pose questions about content that match the way a child in that stage is able to understand and respond. As the child progresses, prompts or formats should be increased to the next level to match the child’s stage—a strategy called “tiered questioning”.

Here are explanations of the five stages of Second Language Acquisition and corresponding examples of “tiered questioning”:

Stage	Characteristics of Student Verbalization: The student ...	Tiered Questions (Prompts)
Preproduction	Has minimal comprehension without support May not verbalize Nods “yes” and “no” Draws and points	Show me ... Circle the ... Where is ...? Who has ...?
Early Production	Has limited comprehension when scaffolding is not in place Produces one- or two-word responses Participates using key words and familiar phrases Uses -ing verbs	Yes-or-no questions Either-or questions Who, what, and how many questions
Speech Emergence	Has good comprehension Can produce simple sentences Makes grammatical and pronunciation errors	Why ...? How ...? Explain ... Questions requiring short-sentence answers
Intermediate Fluency	Has excellent comprehension Makes few grammatical errors	What would happen if? Why do you think? Questions requiring more than a one-sentence response
Advanced Fluency	Has a near-native level of speech	Decide if ... Retell ...



Source: From *Using Classroom Instruction That Works with English Language Learners* (2nd ed.) (p. 12) by J. D. Hill and K. B. Miller, 2013, Alexandria, VA: ASCD © 2013 by McREL. Adapted with permission.

When teachers and providers ask questions at the child’s stage of second language acquisition, they increase the child’s access to, and comprehension of, the content and provide ELs with opportunities to practice their new language. Asking questions from the next stage of acquisition is a transitional strategy that keeps children moving through the continuum of learning English. With the aid of tiered questions, children in the stages of Preproduction and Early Production can be included in all early care and classroom instruction.

Engage ELs at the Same Level of Thinking as Other Children

It is not necessary to simplify curriculum and instruction for ELs at early levels of English language acquisition. When applying tiered questions with children who are in the process of acquiring English, it is important to distinguish between low-level questions, which lead to low levels of thinking, and high-level questions, which promote higher-order thinking.

Teachers and providers should design learning tasks for ELs that require the same levels of critical thinking we expect of other children. Teachers and early care providers must teach higher-order thinking skills while using language that is appropriate to the ELs’ levels of English language acquisition. The newer a child is to English, the more clear input he or she will need.

Be Aware of Your Own Language Use.

In early learning environments, there will be many times when information related to content is transmitted. Remember that words alone do not convey meaning for ELs. To help ELs follow the presentation of information, slow the

rate of speech, use nouns to convey more meaning, speak in complete sentences, and use one or more of the following:

- Manipulatives and objects
- Visuals (photos, pictures, and drawings)
- Gestures and body movement
- Facial expressions



Classroom Strategies and Frequently Asked Questions for Working with Young ELs

Practices early childhood educators use in the classroom every day are conducive to learning English language skills. Being aware of children’s stages of second-language acquisition along with these useful strategies below should help the teacher or provider and the student feel more comfortable in their early learning environments.

Classroom Strategies for Working with Young ELs

- Use visual aids
- Model appropriate behavior and language for children
- Use gestures, body language, and facial expressions to develop understanding
- Perform demonstrations to ensure comprehension and in depth understanding
- Provide vocabulary previews of forthcoming lessons
- Ask children to make predictions when reading stories aloud
- Adapt material in books to make it more comprehensible
- Use cooperative learning groups
- Provide multicultural content in early learning environments
- Provide home language support for children
- Create a non-threatening environment where students feel comfortable taking risks with language
- Make connections between content being taught and children’s prior knowledge and experiences
- Provide more time for engagement and interaction between the child and the teacher or provider
- Allow time for children to practice and apply daily lessons
- Provide wait time for children’s responses

Frequently Asked Questions for Working with Young ELs

Here are some of the most often asked questions by providers and teachers who are new to working with ELs that will help your ELs to feel safe and comfortable in their classroom.

Communicating with ELs

How can I communicate with a child who doesn’t speak English? Is there anything else I can do to help my ELs understand what I am saying?

Use hand gestures, facial expressions, and visuals to communicate. You will be surprised at how much you can convey with these alone. Just like any other young child, ELs will also pick up on your body language, so be relaxed and confident, smile often, and let them know when things are going well. Speak clearly, enunciate your words, and avoid use of regional idioms and slang such as, “having a blast”, “goofing off”, or “bling”.

Try to provide visuals and props whenever possible to help ELs better understand a concept. For example, use pictures to communicate



classroom rules. When singing a song, use a prop or puppet. For example, if singing the song Five Green and Speckled Frogs, model what happens in the song using five frog props (stuffed animal type or puppets) to help ELs. Every time a new unit of study is introduced, use a thematic word wall with pictures of each word and lots of hands-on learning with manipulatives whenever possible to strengthen understanding.

The Silent Period

Help! My ELL children never talk; I don’t think they’re learning. What should I do?

Don’t worry, most ELs will go through a “silent period” that can last anywhere from six weeks to three months or more. During this time the ELs are acquiring their new language and are often afraid of speaking and making a mistake. It is very important that the teachers and providers do not force ELs to speak during this time or punish them for not speaking. However, a lot of praise and encouragement often works wonders in helping ELs through the silent period. Try enticing ELs to speak through the use of props and music. What four year old doesn’t love speaking into a microphone and hearing his own voice or singing along to a song with a big alligator puppet? By making English less scary and more fun, ELs are often talking freely and with confidence by the end of the year.

Native Language

I have several ELs who all speak the same language and they are always talking to each other in their home language. Is this bad? Should I put a stop to it? How can they learn if they don’t speak English in my program?

Discouraging the use of the home language in an early learning environment or at home is counterproductive. Often, ELs will discuss concepts they are learning in their home language, which improves comprehension.

English shouldn’t replace the ELs’ home language; English should be learned as a second or other language. Banning ELs home language in the classroom will force ELs to lose their identity and have the feeling that neither their language nor their culture is valued. Sometimes parents mistakenly think they are helping their children by banning the use of their home language in the home, forcing them to speak English only. However, this only results in children who have no home language or cultural identity which can lead to problems later in life.



Social Interaction

My ELs are extremely shy and never interact with any of their peers. What can I do?

The buddy system is a great way to help ELs adjust to their new classroom or program environment; pair new ELs with English speaking peers. The native English speaker acts as a shadow and a helper so there is less worry about the new EL getting lost on the way to the bathroom or wandering away when the class transitions outside. Make sure the pair is a good “fit” for both children, and be sure to pair children up carefully based upon their personality traits.

Communicating with Parents

How can I communicate with the parents of my ELs if they don’t speak English?

It is as important to communicate with the parents of ELs as it is to communicate with other parents. To help communicate with families, a monthly or weekly newsletter might be very helpful. Use lots of clipart for visuals and break the text up into smaller chunks of information. Provide the information in a language that is understood by the parent to the best extent possible. Provide real visuals at parent orientation and conferences. For example, to explain that a backpack is required, hold up an actual backpack. For a “no flip-flop” policy, hold up a pair of real flip-flops and shake your head in the no motion.