



Informing Culturally Responsive Training for Home Visitors: Supporting Dual Language Learners



Introduction

1 in 4 babies born in the United States today are Latino, and by 2060, this number is projected to rise to one in three.¹ Despite their critical role as the workforce of tomorrow, Latino children face significant barriers to early childhood education. Only half are enrolled in early learning programs, with one in three families citing the high cost of childcare as a major obstacle.²

Home visiting programs offer crucial support to Latino families, providing guidance on child development and health in the comfort of their homes. Research shows that families who participate in evidence-based home visiting programs experience improvements in parenting skills.³ However, according to our research, home visitors often lack access to training and resources tailored to the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse families.

UnidosUS conducted a survey with over 100 respondents and interviewed 21 home visitors. This report presents the findings of this research, offering an overview of home visitors' knowledge, practices, and experiences in dual language development. **The insights gained will guide the co-design of training programs with home visitors** to ensure they receive the practical support needed to better serve Latino families.

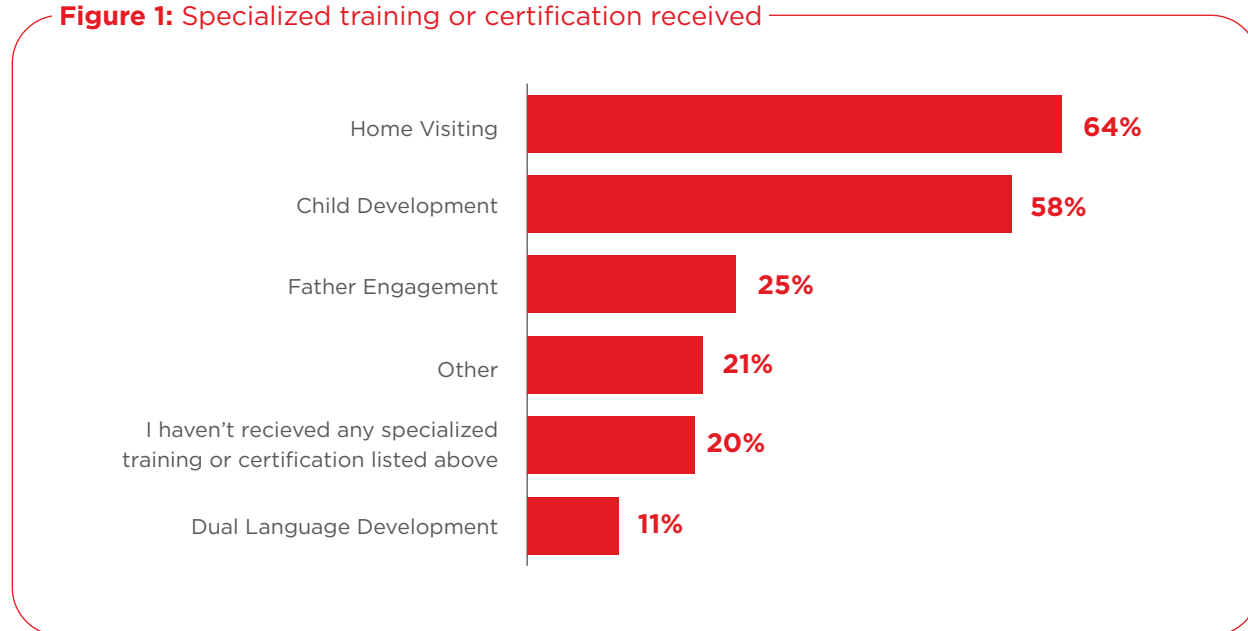
This work is part of the **Early Learning Nation (ELN) Collective** which seeks to harness the power of communities to help children — from prenatal to age 8 — grow and thrive.

I. Home Visitors' Knowledge and Perspectives

The survey and interview insights provide a comprehensive picture of home visitors' experiences in supporting dual language learners, reinforcing the value of bilingualism while acknowledging the varying linguistic and cultural dynamics within each family.

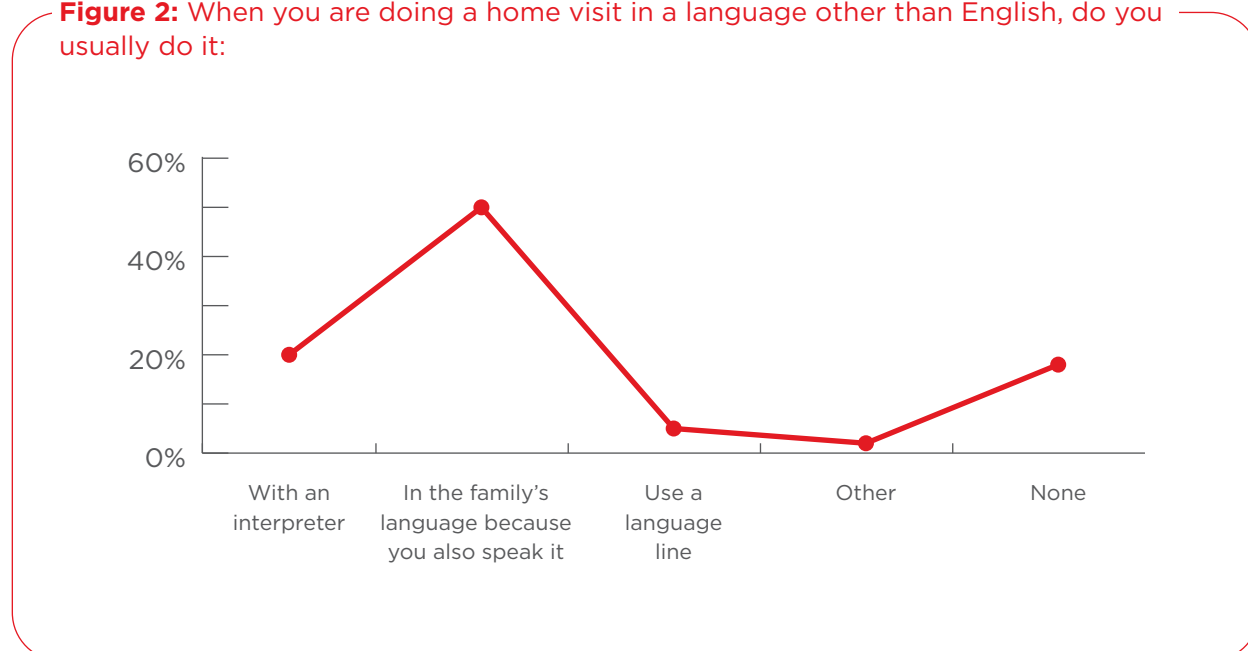
The majority of Home Visitors received training or certification in Home Visiting (**64%**) and Child development (**58%**). However, only **11%** had training or certification in Dual Language Development.

Figure 1: Specialized training or certification received



When doing a home visit in a language other than English, most Home Visitors speak in the family's language (**59%**), while others use an interpreter (**18%**) or a language line (**6%**).

Figure 2: When you are doing a home visit in a language other than English, do you usually do it:





During the interviews, home visitors shared the following insights:

Language Preferences and Comfort: Many home visitors work with Hispanic/Latino families, where the ability to speak both English and Spanish is highly valued. Families often express relief and gratitude when home visitors can communicate in their native language, which helps to build trust. For example, one home visitor described the joy a family felt upon learning she spoke Spanish, as it alleviated their fears of being misunderstood.

Supporting Language Learning Across Cultures: Some visitors work with non-Latino families who express a desire for their children to learn Spanish. For instance, a family requested that their child be taught Spanish to better communicate with friends in their neighborhood. This reflects the growing value of bilingualism across different cultural groups, beyond just immigrant communities.

Adaptability in Visits: Home visitors also discussed the flexibility needed in their approach, switching between languages depending on family preferences and comfort levels. In some cases, visitors tailored visits to include both English and Spanish, allowing families to decide how much of each language to use based on their needs and goals for their children's development.

Language Flexibility: Home visitors emphasize adapting to the families' preferred language during visits, whether Spanish or English, to ensure effective communication. One visitor pointed out that while many families prefer to communicate in Spanish, they will switch to English when necessary to accommodate the family's comfort level.

II. Benefits of Promoting Bilingualism

In response to the question of whether there are advantages or benefits to promoting dual language development with families and young children, the early childhood home visitors provided a wide range of insights that reflect both personal experiences and professional observations. These insights emphasize the multifaceted value of bilingualism, not only for children's immediate development but also for their future opportunities. Below is a narrative summary of the key themes that emerged from the responses:

The act of learning two languages, especially at a young age, fosters brain flexibility, which can have long-term benefits. Several home visitors noted that they understood bilingualism stimulates cognitive development, as children are constantly processing and distinguishing between two languages. Home visitors also recognized that bilingualism is closely tied to cultural preservation, especially for Latino families. Families often highlight the importance of speaking Spanish at home to ensure that their children can communicate with relatives, especially when visiting family abroad.

The participants were happy to explain the importance of early literacy in dual-language development. **Reading, storytelling and activities in both languages** help children build a robust vocabulary and understand narratives in more depth. One visitor emphasized that exposing children to books and stories in both languages ensures they do not miss out on the richness of the content, regardless of their primary language. **Home visitors play an active role in supporting families' efforts to foster bilingualism.** They provide resources such as bilingual books and materials and encourage parents to expose their children to both languages early on. Some visitors even offer families information about free ESL classes to help parents improve their own English skills.

Bilingualism also offers clear professional and economic advantages. Several home visitors stressed that **being proficient in both English and Spanish significantly broadens future job prospects** in our globalized world. As one visitor stated, being bilingual “opens doors” for children as they grow up, offering them a competitive edge in the job market. Another visitor reflected on personal experiences, explaining how their ability to speak both languages allowed them to help other non-English-speaking parents navigate complex situations, such as in hospitals, where communication barriers often create additional stress.

Finally, visitors highlighted the **emotional and social benefits of bilingualism.** Being able to communicate in two languages allows children to build stronger relationships with family members, especially grandparents and other relatives who may not speak English. It also **prepares children for diverse social interactions in the future.**



“ From my point of view, **there is no disadvantage in promoting dual language development.** However, we could call it a challenge when we (and our families) are not accepted in a specific place. They accept our culture but not our language. It is a wonderful thing to be Latino. **I'm proud to speak two languages.** My families are proud of their full identity. ”

— M. Carino, Oregon

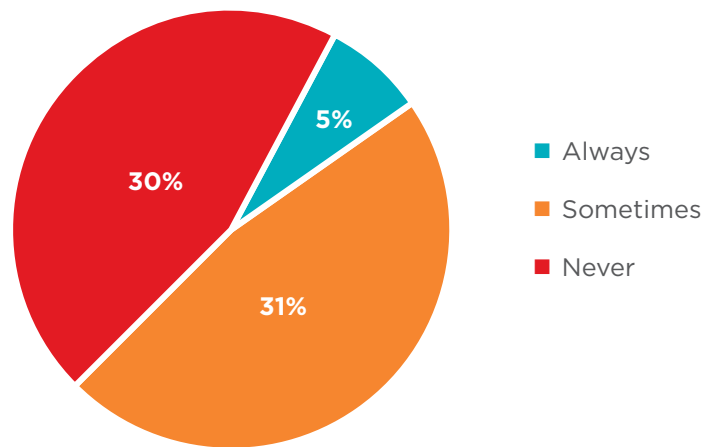
III. Challenges in Promoting Dual Language Development

While most responses were positive about potential disadvantages or challenges in promoting dual language development, there were also challenges to the positive ideas surrounding bilingualism. One visitor mentioned the **potential challenge of discrimination or lack of acceptance** in some professional environments. They also mentioned the **complexities of balancing two languages in daily communication**, as some children may struggle to navigate between languages at times, but this challenge is often outweighed by the long-term benefits.

One common challenge is the **concern some families have about children becoming confused** when exposed to both languages. Some parents worry that learning two languages simultaneously could hinder their child’s understanding or delay their language development. For instance, parents might fear that children won’t be prepared for school or may struggle with English, particularly if Spanish is spoken primarily at home. This concern sometimes leads parents to limit their focus on one language, particularly English, despite the potential benefits of bilingualism.

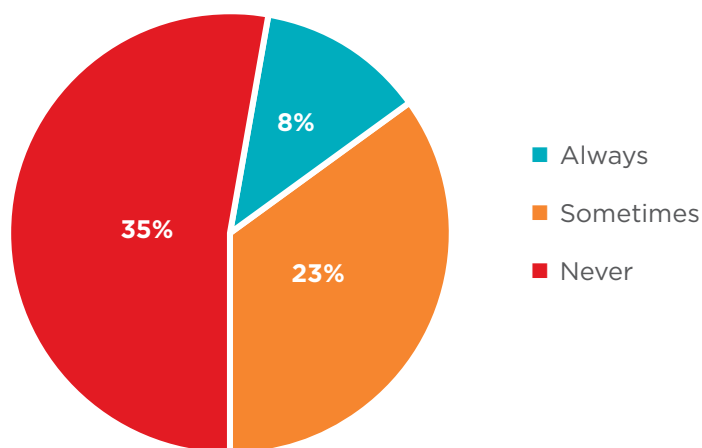


Figure 3: In the past 12 months, how often have you heard families say that children are “confused” if they grow up with two languages?



Another challenge mentioned was the **societal pressure and stigma** that some families face when using their native language. Several home visitors noted that families might feel judged or embarrassed when speaking Spanish in public, which can discourage them from fully embracing bilingual development. Also, some parents worry that learning two languages simultaneously could hinder their child’s understanding or **delay their language development**.

Figure 4: In the past 12 months, have you heard families say they feel pressured to speak English and/or not speak their home language?



There is also the possibility that families speak different languages or dialects. Home visitors shared examples of families where parents speak Spanish, but the children primarily speak English, which can create communication barriers within the household. Additionally, some families speak native dialects that differ from Spanish. Lastly, there is a generational aspect to these challenges. Younger families and parents appear more open to the benefits of bilingualism and are less concerned about the myths surrounding language confusion, as compared to older generations who may still hold on to these misconceptions.

However, some home visitors did not perceive any significant disadvantages to dual language development, especially when children have support from both home and school. They believe that with the right guidance, such as teaching children how to differentiate between languages, potential confusion can be mitigated.

Home Visitors’ Current Practices

Home visitors play a pivotal role in fostering dual language development, adapting their approach to meet the diverse needs of the families they serve. A common challenge they face is working with families who have limited literacy skills. One visitor shared, “I have some families that don’t know how to read, so they have a difficult time showing their children the books or reading to them.” To overcome this, visitors encourage parents to engage with the pictures in the books, discussing colors, characters and other visual elements. However, even this can be challenging for some parents. Visitors also encounter families who are literate in Spanish but struggle with English, or those who are shy about seeking help due to fear of judgment. “They feel like if they don’t say it perfectly, someone will think something, so they don’t even try,” one visitor explained.

Cultural and linguistic diversity further adds complexity. Some families speak dialects or use different vocabulary within the same language. One visitor recalled, “I had a little snake, and in Spanish it can be ‘culebra.’ But before I even said it, the little girl said, ‘es una serpiente,’ using the more formal word. You realize you need to adjust to the family’s level of language use.”

Understanding and respecting these linguistic nuances is key to building rapport with families and ensuring that language support is culturally and linguistically appropriate.

Bilingual materials are essential for supporting both languages in the home, and visitors make a concerted effort to bring resources that meet the needs of each family. “All my materials are bilingual — songs, activities, and books,” one visitor shared. Others use specific programs like “Plan and Play” and “Partners for a Healthy Baby,” which are available in both English and Spanish. These materials provide a foundation for language-rich interactions between parents and children. As one visitor explained, “From the beginning, I let them know I’m there to provide materials for them to do with their child. We model the activity and then have the parent try it with their child, whether it’s stacking blocks or pretend play.”

During home visits, visitors emphasize the importance of language immersion in everyday activities. Parents are encouraged to incorporate both languages into their daily routines. “We talk about the shapes, the colors, what they can construct and we do it in both languages,” one visitor shared. This extends to tasks as simple as naming items on the refrigerator or describing pictures and household objects. Even if parents cannot read, visitors stress the importance of having conversations with their children: “It doesn’t matter if you can’t read, as long as you’re having that conversation. They are listening, and it will help them with vocabulary later.”

Home Visitors reported that the three topics they are the most comfortable discussing with families were: children’s play as a source of learning and development, Early Language Development (birth through age five years), and the importance of school readiness.

The home visitors’ approach is also shaped by their sensitivity to families’ comfort levels with language use. Some families express a strong preference for maintaining Spanish at home, particularly in the early years, while others want a balance between English and Spanish. “One mom wanted to focus on Spanish at home because she knew her child would hear English everywhere else — at school, in doctor’s appointments, even on TV,” one visitor recounted. Meanwhile, some families are eager for their children to become proficient in both languages from an early age, recognizing the long-term benefits. “Two languages open many more doors for them in the future,” one visitor emphasized.

Through bilingual resources, culturally responsive practices and a strong focus on modeling, home visitors play a crucial role in helping families navigate the challenges of raising dual language learners. By tailoring their approach to each family’s unique needs and encouraging parental involvement, they foster an environment where children can thrive in both languages.

Conclusion

The early childhood home visitors overwhelmingly agree that promoting dual language development offers numerous cognitive, cultural, social and economic benefits for young children and their families. Bilingualism supports children’s cognitive growth, preserves their cultural identity, expands future job opportunities, and prepares them for academic success. Home visitors are key advocates in this process, providing resources, encouragement and strategies to help families navigate the journey of raising bilingual children. Despite



some potential challenges, the advantages of dual language development far outweigh the difficulties, making it a priority for many families and home visitors alike.

However, the survey results underscore the need for ongoing professional development to support both home visitors and parents in the realm of dual language development. For example, when asked, “In the past 12 months, how often have you heard families say that children are ‘confused’ if they grow up with two languages?” **5% of respondents answered “Always,” and 31% said “Sometimes.”** Although **30% of respondents noted they had never encountered this view**, the fact that nearly one-third of home visitors occasionally hear families express concerns about potential confusion signals that misconceptions about bilingualism persist.

Similarly, responses to the question, “In the past 12 months, have you heard families say they feel pressured to speak English and/or not speak their home language?” reveal that **23% of home visitors reported hearing this sentiment “Sometimes” and 8% hearing “Always.”** These findings indicate that a considerable number of families experience external pressures regarding language use, which can adversely impact dual language development.

Together, these results highlight a critical gap: while some families receive balanced messages about bilingualism, many still encounter misconceptions and pressures that could hinder the full development of their children’s linguistic abilities. This evidence strongly supports the need to continue and expand professional development training. Such training will equip home visitors with evidence-based strategies to address these challenges, enabling them to better support families and empower parents to appreciate and nurture their children’s bilingual capabilities.

One home visitor beautifully stated, **“I think that one of the finest things we have as human beings is language.”** This deep appreciation for language drives their dedication to supporting both parents and children in their language journeys.

Through bilingual resources, modeling and culturally responsive practices, home visitors empower families to support their children’s dual language development in ways that align with their literacy levels, linguistic backgrounds and personal preferences. By fostering rich language interactions in everyday routines and creating a supportive environment where parents feel confident using both languages, they help lay the foundation for lifelong bilingualism. Their tailored approach ensures that children not only develop strong language skills but also gain the cognitive, social and academic benefits of being bilingual, positioning them for long-term success.

Endnotes

- 1 Hamilton BE, Martin JA, Osterman MJK. Births: provisional data for 2023. Vital Statistics Rapid Release; no 35. April 2024. DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.15620/cdc/151797>.
- 2 Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors (AP/OD) and UnidosUS, National Latino Family Report (Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors and UnidosUS, 2024), <https://nationalsurvey.ap-od.org/2024-report/#education> (accessed January 2025).
- 3 Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center. (2024). Prenatal-to-3 policy clearinghouse evidence review: Evidence-Based Home Visiting Programs. Peabody College of Education and Human Development, Vanderbilt University. <https://pn3policy.org/policy-clearinghouse/evidence-based-home-visiting-programs/>