



Language Nest Handbook

FOR B.C. FIRST NATIONS COMMUNITIES



FIRST PEOPLES'
CULTURAL COUNCIL

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Handbook Development Team

Aliana Parker & Suzanne Gessner
(First Peoples' Cultural Council)

Kathryn A. Michel (Chief Atahm School)

Feedback on this Handbook

This handbook is available on our website at: www.fpcc.ca/about-us/Publications. Like all of our resources, they are considered works in progress, and we welcome your feedback so that we can improve future editions of the handbook. Please contact us at:

First Peoples' Cultural Council (FPCC)

Language Programs

1A Boat Ramp Road

Brentwood Bay, B.C. V8M 1N9

T (250) 652-5952

F (250) 652-5953

E info@fpcc.ca

www.fpcc.ca

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction to Language Nests

If you're reading this book, it's probably because you are interested in, if not already involved in a language nest program. Great! This book provides information and support to anyone interested or involved in language nest programs. The goal of this handbook is to answer the question: "what is a nest and how do you do it?" This first chapter introduces the handbook and explains what a language nest is.

Introduction to this Handbook

This handbook has been developed for First Nations communities who are currently running a language nest program, as well as for communities who wish to start up a language nest. The handbook will be useful to everyone involved or interested in early childhood immersion programs, including administrators, teachers, Elders and support staff, as well as parents and family members.

Every community is different, but the principles of a nest are the same for everyone.



Tips

This handbook is for:

- ☒ Anyone interested in language nest programs
- ☒ Language nest administrators, coordinators, teachers and staff
- ☒ Elders and community members
- ☒ Family members of pre-school aged children

The purpose of this book is to clarify what a language nest is and what it looks like. It is intended to provide the inspiration and information necessary for starting and running a language nest. This book addresses common questions about language nests including what they are, how to start one and how to overcome common challenges when running one.

This book was developed with substantial input and feedback from First Nations communities around British Columbia (B.C.) that have had experience with language nest programs. In particular, this handbook and corresponding resources were developed with the invaluable support and input of the administrators of the Cseyesten Language Nest at Chief Atahm School.

It is important to note that B.C. is a diverse province with many different First Nations languages and cultures, as well as distinct regional geography. Every community is

A language nest is a program for children aged 0-5 years where they are immersed in their First Nations language.



different, so every language nest will also be different. If you are planning to start up a language nest, or if you are currently running a nest, please remember that there is no “one-size-fits-all” answer to the challenges you may be facing. However, the main principles of a language nest will be the same for everyone.

What is a Language Nest?

A language nest is a language program for children from birth to five years old where they are immersed in their First Nations language. A language nest provides a safe,

Language Nest Handbook Online Companion Toolkit:

While this handbook provides the overall vision for language nests and strategies for overcoming common challenges, the *Online Companion Toolkit* contains a variety of practical resources to help you with the day-to-day running of a language nest. There you can also find an additional guide titled *First Nations Language Nests. Your Guide to Operating a Successful Language Immersion Program for the Very Young* (Michel & Manuel, 2009). This guide was developed by the Chief Atahm School Curriculum Team for the First Peoples' Cultural Council and includes practical advice and ready-to-use resources including sample lesson plans, song and game ideas, and templates for craft activities.

Check it out: www.fpcc.ca/about-us/Publications

home-like environment for young children to interact with fluent speakers of the language, often Elders, through meaningful activities.

The goal of a language nest is not to “teach” children the language, but rather to create an environment where language can be acquired naturally, as infants acquire their first language. It may be useful to think of a language nest as like “Granny’s house”, where children are cared for in a traditional, cultural way *in* the language.

A language nest is not necessarily a daycare or pre-school program — it is a *language immersion program*. One of the greatest challenges is to educate people on what a language nest is and what the goals of immersion are. The term “language nest” itself may be confusing or unfamiliar to people within your community. Most will be familiar with other early childhood programs, such as daycares and Head Start programs. However, since the language nest concept has been borrowed from the Māori people in New Zealand, it is not widely familiar in Canada.



Language nests incorporate culture into all aspects of the program.

Nutsumaat Lelum Language Nest - Stz'uminus First Nation

Be careful to not equate a language nest with existing programs (such as daycares or pre-schools) because people may expect your program to look like and act like existing programs that have been designed for purposes other than language and cultural development. In a nutshell, a language nest can be explained as a place for very young children to go to be nurtured and cared for by fluent speakers in the hopes that they too will grow up to be speakers of the language.

A language nest is not the same as existing English-based childcare programs.



Qaqauiilas – Heiltsuk House of Learning

Only full immersion in the language makes a program a language nest.

It is important to recognize that a language nest is not just any language program for young children. Many daycares and pre-schools give language lessons for a few hours each week within their existing English-based program. They may have an Elder come in to speak to the children in the language, or they may sing songs or tell stories in the language during circle time. This is good, but it does

not make the program a language nest. Only full immersion in the language will make the program a language nest.

Essentially, a language nest “offers intensive exposure to only one language, focuses on learning the language through meaningful content, and is aimed at the youngest members of the community, who are best equipped to learn the language.”¹

It is hoped that immersing children in the language will have an impact beyond the nest, through inspiring parents to learn and use the language in the home. “Children alone should not have to shoulder the responsibility for revitalizing the language; they require active support to practice their language skills and to see the value of the language and its relevance in daily life within their own homes.”² The ideal language nest functions as just one of many strategies for language vitalization in a community.

History of the Language Nest Program

The very first language nest program may have started with a group of Samoan and Cook Island mothers, who set up an immersion early childhood program in the 1970s.³ Since then, the language nest movement has spread across the world.

Some early international programs that started in the 1980s include the Māori Te

¹ Johnston & Johnson, 2002, p.108

² Chambers, in progress, p.9

³ Utumapu, 1998, p.28

Kōhanga Reo program in New Zealand and the 'Aha Pūnana Leo program in Hawai'i. In fact, the term “language nest” is a direct translation of the Māori name Te Kōhanga Reo, which symbolizes the act of nurturing young children in the language like a mother bird does in her nest.

In Canada, the first language nest programs began in the Kahnawà:ke Mohawk community in the early 1980s, and in Adams Lake, B.C., with a Secwepemctsin program in the late 1980s. These programs each began from a realization that the fluent speakers of the language were aging, and that it was necessary to begin passing the language on to the children if the language were to survive.

Each of these early language nests shared some common characteristics:

- “ They created an immersion environment to pass on language to the children*
- “ They based the program design and activities on their culture, in order to raise the children in a cultural way*
- “ They involved family members and Elders in the development, governance and day-to-day running of the program*

Now that awareness of these programs is spreading, more communities are starting their own language nests. While many communities have been successful in implementing similar programs, the four nests mentioned above remain valuable models of effective language immersion for young children.



Chief Atahm School

Very young children can learn language more easily than adults.

Tips

Successful language nests:

- ☒ Use full immersion to pass the language on to the children
- ☒ Incorporate their culture into all aspects of the program
- ☒ Involve family members and Elders in the day-to-day activities

Why Bother with a Language Nest?

There are two main benefits of a language nest. A language nest is one of the most effective means of revitalizing a language. Moreover, raising children in the language with a strong sense of identity and culture promotes academic excellence and a lifetime of health.

The children are the future of the community, the culture and the language. Long-term language revitalization depends on passing

the language and culture on to the children and on building close relationships between generations.

Tips

Benefits of a language nest:

- ✓ Helps revitalize the language by creating new fluent speakers
- ✓ Promotes the health, well-being and future success of the children

Children can learn languages more quickly and easily than adults, and often with greater success. Young language learners are more likely to develop a greater aptitude or “ear” in that they are better able to recognize sounds that are unique to particular languages.

From birth, all infants are able to make sense of any speech sounds they hear over and over. However, sometime between eight and ten months of age, children begin to gradually lose the capacity to recognize certain sounds in languages they don't hear on a regular

basis. Not only that, but they lose the ability to reproduce those sounds accurately.⁴

By puberty (or likely by as young as age 7), most humans lose the ability to develop native-like pronunciation if they have not been previously exposed to the language.

The Māori language program leaders acknowledge that raising children with two languages ensures that children can be comfortable in two cultures, have good interpersonal and problem solving skills, be creative thinkers and have a strong sense of belonging in their own community.⁵ Studies from the Mi'kmaq immersion programs in Nova Scotia showed that students in the immersion programs attain high academic achievement.⁶

"The only way to save a language is to teach it to a child."⁷



Early childhood is a critical time for the development of cognitive and social skills, as well as cultural and personal identity. A language nest is an excellent place to grow and nurture all of these aspects of a child's development.

In the next chapter, we will look more at the benefits of raising children with two languages.

Nutsumaat Lelum Language Nest - Siz'uminus First Nation



Raising children in your language builds their cultural confidence.

CHAPTER 2

Principles of Language Immersion

A language nest uses the immersion method to help the children learn the language. But what is language immersion anyway? This word is being used more frequently in a variety of contexts, but sometimes what is labelled “immersion” isn’t true immersion. This chapter will explain what language immersion is and isn’t, and will explain how young children learn language.

What Is Immersion?

Language immersion is a method of language teaching that “immerses” students in another language. For example, a First Nations immersion program would present all instruction, activities and communication in the First Nations language; *no English would be used at all!*

Immersion education for First Nations languages is modeled after the French Immersion movement that began in Canada in the 1960s. The idea is that learners will

In an immersion environment, all communication is in the language, not English!



Immersion uses the language constantly for real communication.

Wo'umxh Simalgayex - Citwagak Education Society

pick up the language faster if they are placed in an environment where it is used constantly for real communication in meaningful and context-rich settings.¹

The most important characteristic of immersion is that no English is used whatsoever! All communication is done in the language. When the child has difficulty understanding, the speaker uses non-verbal communication such as gestures, facial expressions, actions or pictures to convey meaning, instead of switching to English.

True immersion is "all or nothing".



What Is Not Immersion?

Immersion is not a bilingual program! We sometimes talk about a program being “50% immersion” or “80% immersion” but if the program includes English, it is a *bilingual* program, not an immersion program. True immersion is “all or nothing”.

¹ Swain, Lapkin, & Andrew, 1981, p.56

The goal of your nest is to create a place for the language away from English.



Many people feel that a bilingual program is better than immersion because the children can develop their English skills and be ready to go to school in English once they reach kindergarten. However, a bilingual approach will sabotage the purpose of your language nest.

The reason the children are in the nest is because they are not getting the language anywhere else. They are getting English everywhere they go — from their parents, family members, friends, television, radio, internet, games and books. The purpose of the nest is to bring the language up to equal status with English; to create a place where the language learner gets a break from English, and gets to enjoy being surrounded by another language.

Why Does Immersion Work?

Language immersion works well for two reasons. First, it creates a meaningful environment where language is used purposefully. It is much more useful to be able to say in the language, “I am thirsty; can I have some water?” rather than, “one, two, three” or “red, blue, green”.

Second, immersion supports language *acquisition* instead of just language *learning*.

Acquisition is a subconscious process that happens naturally, whereas learning is a conscious process that comes from direct instruction. Infants and very young children *acquire* their first language; they do not *learn* it until they begin to learn to read and write.

Tips

Language learning versus acquisition:

- ☑ **Learning** is a conscious process that requires direct instruction
- ☑ **Acquisition** is a natural, subconscious process

Think of how you speak to a very young child. You say things like: “Are you thirsty? Do you want some water? Here’s some water. Drink your water!” The child will learn the word water from the context *without* you ever having to point to it and say “Water. Say water: wa-ter.”

Most children attending a language nest in B.C. have likely already acquired English as their first language, but nonetheless you re-create a first-language learning environment for them in the First Nations language.

Learning a language is a long and complex process. It takes years to develop a solid foundation in order to successfully

Learning a language is a complex process that takes many years.



communicate in the language. Although children, especially those under six years old, are quite adept at learning languages, it is not true that children can just quickly “pick up” a language. Think of how long it takes a child raised in an all-English home to begin to say a few simple words.

Use lots of actions and gestures to help the children understand you.



Language immersion provides an environment where children are surrounded and engaged in language for many hours, day after day. Within an immersion program children learn to speak by hearing people talk to them in many different circumstances. Language development in the early stages depends on building a solid foundation of vocabulary knowledge, along with consistent exposure to grammar through conversational speech. The more words children know, the better they will be able to build phrases and sentences to communicate. Language immersion provides a strongly supportive

and rich environment that helps develop the communicative skills necessary to become fluent speakers.

Language Development in Young Children

When children first start attending the language nest, they must rely entirely on visual, non-verbal clues to understand what is happening. This is especially the case for children who have no previous exposure to the language. Because they do not yet know or understand the language, they need lots of actions and demonstrations to understand what is being said.

It is important to use lots of large, expressive gestures at this stage to help the children understand you. Think of this as true “show and tell”: you *show* the children what you mean while you also *tell* them in the language.

Language immersion helps children develop the skills they need to become fluent speakers.



Visual, non-verbal cues help children understand the language.

As you surround the children with language paired with meaningful action, they will begin developing their “ears” to distinguish the different sounds and patterns, and to attach meaning to words. Repetition is crucial at this stage, as it will take many repetitions before the children can link the action (meaning) with the words (sound).

Use lots of repetition to help build familiarity with words and phrases.



Very soon, some children might begin repeating or “parroting” the words you are saying. They may not understand what the word means or how to use it properly, but they will begin experimenting with producing the sounds of the language. It is important to be supportive of all attempts to use the language, even if it seems nonsensical.

As the children spend more time in the nest, they will begin to understand a wide variety of simple words and sentences, though they may not yet be able to speak. They will be able to respond with action to commands like “sit down,” “stand up” and “take off your coat,” but they cannot yet say, “I am taking off my coat.” Using yes-no questions so that the child can respond by nodding or shaking his head is a valuable way to reinforce your interactions.

Tips

Encourage language development:

- ✓ Always respond positively to a child's speech
- ✓ Model the correct speech
- ✓ Always use complete, grammatical language
- ✓ Use lots of repetition

Use simple yes-no questions that the children can answer to reinforce your interactions.



The children may continue to “parrot” the language at this stage, but they may also begin to use simple responses in the language, like “yes” or “no.” They may also use English to respond to your questions in the language. This is good because it demonstrates their understanding of the language. However, it also brings English into the immersion environment. Encourage them to answer in the language as much as possible.

After several months, the children will begin to speak! Their speech will not be perfect, complete, or grammatically correct, but they will be using the language to communicate. It is crucially important at this stage to encourage all of the children's attempts at speaking. Don't worry too much about trying to correct their speech, as they will continue to learn correct grammar and pronunciation as they receive more “input” — hear more of the language.

Chief Atahm School; Photo Credit: Opal Michel



Repeat the language through familiar routines.

STRATEGIES TO ENCOURAGE LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Here are some strategies that will help you encourage the children's language development.

Remember, in an immersion environment, all of these strategies would be done in *your* language.

The examples here are given in English.²

STRATEGY	EXAMPLE
Ask a yes/no question: This allows the child to respond with a yes or no or a simple nod of the head, which tells you she/he understands the question.	<i>Do you want a glass of milk?</i>
Ask a choice question: This allows the child to respond with a choice that is provided in the question itself. It shows that the child understands the question and allows her/him to respond with an easy answer.	<i>Do you want a glass of milk or a glass of juice?</i>
Ask an open-ended question: This requires the child to both understand the question and ask for what they need.	<i>What do you want to drink?</i>
Imitation: The child is asked to repeat the model provided by the adult.	Caregiver: <i>Look, I am rolling the clay. You are too.</i> Can you say, "I am rolling the clay"? Child: <i>Roll clay!</i>
Imitation with open-ended question: The request for imitation includes only a question prompt.	Caregiver: <i>Look, I am rolling the clay. You are too.</i> <i>What are you doing?</i> Child: <i>Roll clay!</i>
Recasting (imitation with correction): The adult responds to the child's spontaneous language by repeating the child's sentence with the correct form.	Child: <i>I runned really fast!</i> Caregiver: <i>Yes! You ran really fast, didn't you?</i>
Modeling: The adult models a target form, such as the past tense.	Caregiver: <i>I washed my hands then I dried my hands, now I'm ready to eat. What did you do?</i>
Scaffolding: The adult provides the sentence structure to support the child's own attempt at speaking.	Caregiver: <i>Look, here is a big dog. This dog is big, and this one is _____.</i> Child: <i>Little!</i> Caregiver: <i>Right! And this dog is standing, and this one is _____.</i> Child: <i>Sitting!</i>
Focused stimulation: The adult provides several example sentences to the child, and then asks a question that requires the target form.	(Target is the verb swimming .) Caregiver: <i>Look, the dog is running, the cat is running, and the bear is running. Is the fish running?</i> Child: <i>No, the fish is swimming!</i>
Expansion: The adult responds to the child's spontaneous language by including additional information.	Child: <i>Baby sleeping!</i> (Said about a doll.) Caregiver: <i>Yes, your baby is sleeping, isn't she? She must be tired. We should be quiet so we don't wake her up, shouldn't we?</i>
Prompting: The adult gently reminds the child of the expected response.	Caregiver: <i>What do we say when someone gives us food?</i> Child: <i>Thank you!</i>
Reinforcement: Praise the child for appropriate language use.	Caregiver: <i>I like the way you said "thank you"!</i>

² Adapted in part from Ratner, 2013

Always encourage the child's speech by responding to it positively, even if something is incorrect. If it is ungrammatical, model the correct speech by using one of the strategies above rather than saying, "That's wrong! That's not how you say it!"

Always use complete, grammatical language yourself, so the child has examples to follow. Repetition of language used during familiar routines (snack time, bathroom break) provides a good opportunity for learning.

Common Questions About Language Immersion

Learning more than one language is a skill humans have had for thousands and thousands of years. Yet for some reason, some people have been led to believe that multilingualism is a problem and not the asset that it is. In particular, some educators and medical practitioners have been known to perpetuate the myth that language learning will negatively affect childhood development. As a result, some parents may be reluctant to place their child in an immersion program. The following sections answer some of their common questions about language immersion for young children.

Learning two or more languages does not cause language disorder or delay.



Children worldwide are raised bilingually without ill effect.

Nutsumaat Lelum Language Nest - Sł'umunus First Nation

WILL LEARNING ANOTHER LANGUAGE HARM OR DELAY MY CHILD?

Misconceptions such as this seem to persist despite there being evidence that learning two languages positively enhances the cognitive development of children. However, some well-intentioned people, doctors and speech therapists among them, may caution parents of the dangers of "confusing" their children by using more than one language.

These common misconceptions were based on the belief that learning two languages simultaneously would result in delays in the first language. After witnessing a child who is struggling to develop language skills in English, some educators or health practitioners may suggest only surrounding the child with more English to help make up for the delay.

However well-intentioned the advice is, language research has discovered that hearing two or more languages in childhood

is not a cause of language disorder or language delay.³ Furthermore, studies have shown that children in immersion programs with pre-existing language delays in English progress in English at the same rate as children with language delays who are exposed to an English-only environment.⁴ In fact, some research has shown that the English of bilingual children tends to catch up to and then surpass the English of monolingual children.⁵

A loving language immersion environment will strengthen children's intellectual, social and emotional skills.



Within a language nest, children are immersed in the language in a loving environment that develops not only their intellectual abilities, but also their social and emotional intelligences. And since language is strongly linked to emotion and identity, all of the children's needs are met holistically.

IS IT TRUE THAT CHILDREN LEARNING TWO LANGUAGES WON'T LEARN TO SPEAK PROPERLY IN EITHER LANGUAGE?

Some people fear that if a child is learning two languages at the same time, he or she will confuse the two languages and will not learn either properly. It might seem to be the case while the child is learning the languages, but it is not true.

Since every language nest program varies in intensity and number of hours devoted to

Mixing two languages is a common phenomenon and not a sign of confusion.



language, children's progress in the language will vary. However, when assessing the progress of your children in the language you must keep in mind that all language learners use "code-switching," which is the use of English and another language in one sentence. Often you will notice that young children who are learning another language go through stages of mixing the two together. This is a common phenomenon, and is not a sign of confusion on their part.

Tips

"Code switching" means mixing two languages in the same sentence:

- ☒ It is a strategy of communicating using the language skills available
- ☒ It demonstrates complex grammatical knowledge of the two languages
- ☒ It is not a sign of confusion!

Children, as well as adults, tend to speak using words that best communicate what they want to say. They do not always distinguish between two languages, but in fact, are selecting vocabulary that best expresses their social needs at the time. In order to help develop stronger speakers, language nest staff should work on helping them develop the words they want to communicate in the target language.

³ Abbott, Caccavale, & Stewart, 2007

⁴ Genesee, 2007 ⁵ Collier & Thomas, 2007

Research has shown that if English is accepted and the children get a positive response from using English, then they will continue using it. Language nest staff can assist their language development by not accepting, or feigning lack of comprehension, of their English so that the children have to use the language to communicate.

If children get a positive response to using English, they will continue to use it!



WILL LEARNING ANOTHER LANGUAGE HURT MY CHILD'S CHANCES AT ACADEMIC SUCCESS?

Not at all! In fact, learning another language may help your child academically. Learning a language is a complex process that involves problem-solving and making meaning. Children are required to pay greater attention to the clues and patterns of communication.

Bilingual children have better cognitive flexibility than monolingual children.



This in turn results in bilingual children having higher levels of cognitive flexibility than monolingual children.⁵ This higher level of processing is supported through research that has indicated increased mathematical skill development in bilingual children.⁶ Moreover, fluency in a First Nations language can be used to meet second-language requirements for post secondary programs.

Overall, recent research has repeatedly demonstrated that having two or more languages will actually help children's academic and social success throughout their lifetime.



Lower Nicola Indian Band

Language immersion strengthens creativity and problem solving skills.

⁵ Cartwright, 2008

⁶ Abbott et al., 2007

CHAPTER 3

Essentials of a Language Nest

This chapter provides an overview of the essential components necessary to develop and maintain a strong and healthy language nest program.

The language nest “is the home of our language and the children who learn it. The top priority is the language.”¹



Achieving Language Immersion

The single most important rule you can follow in your language nest is: *No English!* This is essential to creating an immersion environment. Every time a staff member or an Elder uses English in the nest, the children miss out on an opportunity to learn their own language. Every time you use English in the nest, you miss out on an opportunity to revitalize your language. It may be useful to designate one space (i.e. an office, storage room or outside) as the only place where staff and parents may use English to communicate, but only when absolutely necessary. Note pads can also be used to write notes in English if something really has to be communicated.



Always respond to the children in the language.

Wo'umxh Simalgayex - Citwagak Education Society

When the children start in the nest, they won't be able to communicate in the language, so they will use English. That's okay, but *be sure to respond to them in the language.*

This will be really tough! At first, they often won't understand what you are saying. You will need to reinforce the meaning by demonstrating it. Don't just say it in the language: act it out. For example, when they arrive at the nest, greet them in the language. Help them take off their coats and shoes in the language. Say, “take off your coat,” and help them take it off. Mime taking off a coat. Put your own coat on, and then take it off, saying “take off your coat.” When you want them to sit down, don't just tell them — show them.

Teach the children some basic phrases and responses that they can use in the language. Have them memorize a basic greeting, yes/no answers and simple requests like “I am

Every time you use English in the nest, the children miss an opportunity to learn their language!



¹ Kipp, 2000, p.13

Teach the children simple words and phrases they can use communicate.



thirsty,” or “I need to use the bathroom.” These memorized “chunks” of language will be useful building blocks as they acquire more language, and will help the nest stay in immersion.

Tips

Some ways to avoid using English in the nest:

- ☑ Use gestures and actions to show what you are saying
- ☑ Use pictures or objects to convey meaning
- ☑ Give children traditional names and use them in the nest
- ☑ Have the children memorize simple responses in the language

Using children’s traditional names in the nest is a way to encourage more language use. “It set[s] the tone for heritage language learning and remind[s] the children that when they walk through the doors into the language nest, it is time to speak the language.”² If the children don’t already have traditional names, you may be able to give them names, if that is appropriate in your culture.

Building Your Team and Sharing the Vision

For a language nest to be successful it takes a team of dedicated people. The task of raising

children in a second language is a difficult one that often requires superhuman patience and determination. It is essential to develop a strong vision and leadership that can support everyone through the challenging times.

It is helpful to view the team as if they are a family working together raising children. The language nest family is like an extended family, with everyone sharing the responsibilities. It is important that each person knows her or his roles and the responsibilities she or he share.

Initially, staff and parents will need to establish ways to communicate with each other. During the development stages it is important to discuss what expectations parents have of the program and for the staff to share what their needs are. Establish who is to be responsible for what and how communication will be shared, from the nest to the home. One or two people should take the lead and assign one person to keeping a pulse on whether the “team” is happy and functioning well.



A successful nest depends on a team of dedicated people.

Seabird Island Language Nest Pre-School

Tips

Building your team:

- ☑ Make sure everyone knows her or his own responsibilities and the group's responsibilities
- ☑ Clarify and discuss everyone's needs and expectations
- ☑ Create good paths of communication with staff and parents

Schedule a time to have a regular weekly meeting with your staff and Elders. Use this time to talk about what happened during the week and plan what will happen next week. Talk about any challenges you faced, and brainstorm ways to resolve them. Discuss your goals for the week ahead. What activities will you do? What kind of language will you focus on?

A strong, shared vision is essential to support the nest through challenging times!



These meetings are an essential time to develop your language nest vision, train your staff and strengthen your program. Many language nests in B.C. have noted that having regular staff meetings has made a huge difference in their success. Be sure to have these meetings after hours, so that the children will not hear you speaking English in the nest area!

Above all, it is important that *every member of the team shares the vision for the nest*. If the

staff members and Elders are not committed to the language or to passing it on to the children, it will be very hard to maintain an immersion environment in the nest.

WORKING WITH YOUR ELDERS

In B.C., most communities running a language nest program will rely on Elders to help provide the language, as very few younger people are fluent enough in the language to sustain an immersion environment. In the nest, Elders use the language through engaging in conversations, play, and nurturing the children. They may also assist with planning activities and schedules.

Remember that your Elder is not just a regular staff person; your Elder has the honoured role of speaker. The job of your Elder is to speak the language to the children, not to change diapers, clean toilets, make food or tidy up! It may be challenging for some Elders to be pulled once again into an employment situation, especially if they have a younger “boss”. Be sure to compensate your Elders in a way that respects their experience and expertise and work collaboratively with them as “consultants” or “mentors” for your language nest.

Your Elders are crucial to the success of your program, so it is essential that you take good care of them and treat them well! Many Elders have had negative past experiences with the language through residential schools and other aspects of colonialism. It may be

challenging at first for some Elders to be called upon to teach the language.

It is very important that you acknowledge your Elders' knowledge and experience, and that you know and understand their history. Some Elders may be reluctant to participate at first. Be patient with them, and spend time building a relationship with them so that you can share your vision for the nest.

Acknowledge your Elders' experience and expertise.



Many successful language nests have Elders who are confident in leading the group's activities and sharing their personal strengths and enjoyment with the children. Some nests are quite active, with Elders who enjoy doing traditional activities, while others, just as successful, are more home-based with plenty of time given to children during quieter, indoor activities.

Many of us have memories of the diverse personalities of Elders we have known and loved. Positive experiences with Elders can range from the funny uncle who loves to tell jokes and sing, to the quiet, ladylike grannies who love to work on their crafts and cook. The most important skill to have is the ability to connect and establish a real bond with children. Above all, make sure there are other people at the nest who can converse with

the Elders in the language so that they don't have to keep up one-sided conversations with the children for a long time. It may be best if the Elders come to the nest in pairs or even groups so that they always have multiple conversation partners.

Tips

Working with Elders:

- ☒ Make them comfortable; provide a cup of tea and a comfy chair
- ☒ Be clear about the schedule of the nest
- ☒ Provide food if they need it
- ☒ Arrange for travel to and from the nest
- ☒ Model respect and patience to the children
- ☒ If challenges arise related to past residential school experiences, connect the Elder with a traditional healer or a community counselor

Be very clear about the schedule of the nest. Make sure the Elders know which days and times the nest runs, and which days are holidays or professional development days. Also be clear about what time of day you need them to come and how long they should stay. Provide the Elders with professional development opportunities if they are interested, such as attending conferences and workshops related to language.

Take good care of your Elders: they are essential to your program!



Be sure to take care of your Elders' physical needs. Some may have mobility issues and may need rides to and from the nest. Some may be able to go on field trips with the children, while others may need to spend more time sitting.

Finally, pay attention to their dietary needs; be sure to have lots of water, tea and snacks on hand for your Elders. Depending on the time your program runs during the day, you may want to make lunch time a normal part of the routine. Have a staff member cook lunch for the Elders so that they can visit with each other and with the kids over a comforting meal.

Be sure to communicate clearly with your Elders and give them plenty of opportunities to tell you what they need. The Elders should communicate their needs so that the work environment is something they are comfortable with and can physically manage.

TEACHERS AND STAFF

Along with the Elders, there are also teachers or support staff in the nest. Depending on if your program is a licensed childcare facility, and whether or not you have staff certified in Early Childhood Education (ECE) or Early Childhood Development (ECD), your staff may include teachers, Early Childhood professionals, or just parents and community members who want to participate and contribute to the program.



Elders are essential to the success of a language nest program.

Okanagan Indian Band Language Nest

The staff should handle the administrative side of things like financial accounting, parent-nest communication, reporting, cleaning, organization and planning of physical space/equipment, childcare duties (including diaper changes, discipline, meal preparation and cleanup) as well as any of the physical play that is too challenging for Elders.

Invest in your staff through training and professional development.



It is important to invest in your staff through training and professional development. Provide opportunities to your staff to attend language conferences and workshops. Encourage them to pursue their ECE certification if that is part of your language nest goals.

Most importantly, if any staff members are not fluent in the language, it is crucial that they are actively involved in learning it. If they are going to be a part of the nest, they

Everyone who works in the nest should be actively learning the language if they are not completely fluent.



must have enough respect for the language and the vision of the nest to be learning the language.

For example, staff can improve their fluency by engaging in Master/Mentor Apprentice language learning outside of work time. This is a method of language learning for adults where a speaker and a learner immerse themselves in the language through day-to-day immersion activities done in the language.

Be sure to foster a supportive environment for staff who are learning the language. They may be too intimidated to practice the language in front the Elders or may be afraid of teaching the children wrong. Encourage the Elders to support these adult learners in their journey much the same as they support the children.

Tips

Staff can develop their language skills through a Mentor-Apprentice program. This method:

- ☑ Supports one-on-one language learning
- ☑ Uses language immersion
- ☑ Doesn't require expensive resources or training! ³

ADMINISTRATOR OR PROGRAM COORDINATOR

The administrator or program coordinator may also be thought of as the “manager” of the program. This person takes the responsibility to get the program up and running. The administrator may work in the nest, and may even be a parent of one of the children. S/he should arrange for the staff to meet on a regular basis to check in, and to see if there are any problems or concerns that need to be addressed. The administrator also:

- “ Provides funding and staff support
- “ Mediates any home/nest concerns
- “ Maintains financial accountability
- “ Writes funding proposals
- “ Develops community outreach initiatives
- “ Promotes the nest and its accomplishments to the leadership and the community

Parental involvement is essential to a successful nest.



Getting the Parents Involved

You may have heard the saying “it takes a family to save a language.” This is very true of the language nest. The long-term success of your language nest depends on support and involvement from the parents.

The language nest cannot be the sole place where the children hear the language. If

they are truly to become a new generation of fluent speakers, their language learning must be supported in the home.

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Involve parents in day-to-day nest activities.

For most language nest programs in B.C., the parents do not speak the language. Consider offering weekly language classes for the parents so that they can support their children's language development. These can be held in the afternoons or evenings at the nest, and can be structured to teach parents the kind of language they need to communicate with their children. Be sure to provide childcare so that parents are able to attend. Some nests in B.C. even make these classes mandatory for the parents, to ensure that the children's language learning will be supported in the home.

Apart from taking language classes, regular parental involvement in day-to-day nest activities is ideal. Not only does it help the parents begin to learn and/or use more of the language, but it also creates a healthy environment for the children where family

Tuition or childcare fees can be a valuable source of funding for the nest.



members are actively involved in their daily care and upbringing.

Language nests around the world take different approaches to parental involvement. The 'Aha Pūnana Leo nest programs in Hawai'i have parents pay tuition, which is rated on a sliding scale based on their income. Parents must also commit to eight volunteer hours at the nest per month and must participate in a monthly parent meeting. It is also a requirement for at least one family member to participate in weekly Hawai'ian language classes.⁴

Tips

Ways to get parents involved:

- ☒ Offer afternoon or evening language classes for parents
- ☒ Have parents volunteer at the nest
- ☒ Hold weekly or monthly parent meetings (with meals!)
- ☒ Have an open-door policy
- ☒ Invite parents to participate on field trips
- ☒ Charge tuition or childcare fees

⁴ Wilson & Kamana, 2001



Have the children participate in community cultural events.

Nests around B.C. use several different means to get parents involved. Some nests hold breakfast mornings once a week or more, providing breakfast to the parents when they drop off their children. Others have monthly luncheons or dinners at the nest when the parents come to pick up their children. Some have an open-door policy, inviting parents to drop in and observe the nest at any time. Parents are also invited to help out with special cultural activities and field trips.

Charging tuition is also a useful way to encourage parents' involvement. Not only does it provide a valuable source of funding for the nest, but it also encourages commitment from the parents. If the parents would otherwise be paying for childcare for the time the children are at the nest, then it is a reasonable exchange. Tuition can be offered on a sliding scale, based on parents' monthly income. If the program is licensed, then some parents may be eligible to receive childcare subsidies, which they can put towards the tuition costs.

Building Community Support

You may also have heard the phrase, “it takes a community to raise a child.” This, too, is true for a language nest. Although immersion offers an environment wherein children can spend many hours in the language, it is still important for them to be exposed regularly to the language outside of the program. A language nest is just one step among many in community language revitalization.

Tips

Get the community involved:

- ☒ Host community dinners at the beginning or end of the program year
- ☒ Host regular information sessions to tell the community what you are doing
- ☒ Send out a simple newsletter once a month and share the fun activities you have been involved in
- ☒ Get the children to participate in community events

Share your vision for the language nest with the community.



Having the support of the community is very valuable to the language nest. However, it may not be easy at first to get the community on board with what you are trying to do. You may even meet resistance to the program.

It is important to be open with the community about the language nest. Be prepared to talk about the nest and explain what it is and why it is important, as well as share the benefits it can bring to the children and the community.

There are many great ways to share your program with parents and with the community. Some language nests hold community luncheons or dinners at the beginning and end of the school year. They invite the parents, Elders and all interested community members to come see what they are doing. Other nests bring the children to participate in community cultural events. Often even the most resistant people are quickly won over once they hear one of the children speaking in the language!

Cultural Activities

Language and culture are inseparable. It is essential that culture be at the centre of the nest. There are two ways to think about including culture: you can include it through the daily running of the nest, and also through special activities and field trips.

Think about ways to build culture into the very structure of your nest. For example, start each day with a song. Make drumming and dancing a regular part of circle time. One language nest in B.C. has a set of regalia for all the children so that they can wear the regalia in their daily drum and dance circles.

Traditional songs are a good way to bring in the culture and help learn language.



Train children in the proper protocols for Elders, such as how to treat them respectfully.

Apart from building the culture into the daily routine of your nest, you can also bring it in through special activities. Find opportunities for the children to go on field trips in hunting and harvesting season. Field trips to fish camps or berry picking areas are not only a great way to bring children up with a strong cultural grounding, but also a good way to get parents and other community members involved.

Tips

Ideas for cultural activities and field trips:

- ☒ Harvesting and drying seaweed
- ☒ Fishing (summertime or ice fishing)
- ☒ Berry picking
- ☒ Gathering wood
- ☒ Smoking meat or fish
- ☒ Community cultural events (big house, powwows, etc.)
- ☒ Traditional arts projects such as basket or drum making
- ☒ Make singing and drumming a regular part of your daily activities

Evaluating Your Program

Evaluation is often a scary word that may have negative connotations for people. However, when we talk about evaluating a program, we are simply talking about looking closely at what is working and what is not working, so that it is clear how to improve. “One of the most important purposes of evaluation is as a means of paying attention, not only to everything that is going on, but also to what is not going on, and of finding meaning in what we do.”⁵

Evaluation means paying attention to what is going on and what is not going on.



The most important aspect of evaluation is to assess whether children are understanding and speaking the language. There are informal and formal methods of evaluating language proficiency. Informal methods can be done on an ongoing basis, and formal evaluations can be done on a monthly basis, or at the very least at the beginning and end of the year.

INFORMAL EVALUATION: CAREGIVER OBSERVATION

The Elders or fluent speakers in the nest are the best judge of a child's proficiency in the language. However, caregivers or teachers can help keep track of the children's progress. One handy way to keep track of each child is with



Tl'etinqox Head Start

Use index cards to keep track of the language children are learning.

the use of *language cards*. Keep an index card for each child. When they use a new word or demonstrate comprehension of a new word or phrase, note it on the card: words/phrases they understand on one side, and words/phrases they can say on the other side. This can help keep a record of the child's language growth, and it's also an easy way to show parents what the children are learning.

FORMAL EVALUATION

A nest may be able to team up with a university or an outside expert (such as a linguist or language teacher) to help them do formal evaluations. Or, if nest staff want to undertake this themselves, there are several ways of performing a more formal evaluation to assess the language development of the children. Firstly, *video-taping* the nest at intervals can provide a snapshot of language development. You can compare a child from

Use language cards to keep track of the words children understand and can say.



one video to another to see how her or his language is progressing. Video-taping the nest is also a good way to check whether English is creeping in. If it is, identify the circumstances where English is used, and consciously work towards ensuring English is not used in those contexts in the future.

Secondly, *comprehension assessments* can be used to assess a child's development in the language. Generally, an assessment is like a checklist with language items the child is expected to know. The assessment will provide an opportunity to more accurately measure how much the child has learned.

It is best to complete a comprehension assessment on a one-on-one basis in a quiet environment. It is better for a caregiver or teacher to perform the assessment rather than a stranger, because the child is used to speaking the language with that person. The assessment should be completed on a regular basis in order to assess a child's progress over time. Please see the Online Companion Toolkit for a sample assessment form, but you can also develop your own based on language that is commonly used in your nest environment.

INDICATORS OF SUCCESS

The indicators in the box on the following page are taken directly from the Indigenous Language Institute's *Awakening Our Languages handbook* on evaluating language programs.⁶ They were generated by members

of the Cherokee Pre-school Immersion Team. These indicators can be used to form the basis of an annual evaluation of your language nest.

In addition to the indicators listed on the following page, your nest administration may wish to evaluate how members of the nation are satisfied with the results of the program, how the contexts for language use outside of the nest expand as a result of the nest, the physical environment of the building and the evaluation process itself.

Above all, it is important to be honest about what is working and what is not. Keep returning to your goals. Running a language nest is not about providing child care; it is about creating the next generation of speakers for your language! If children in your nest are not developing basic conversational ability in the language, your goals are not being met. Time to evaluate and refocus your efforts!

Not sure where to start with evaluation? Contact us for ideas and resources that may help: info@fpcc.ca

⁶ Peter, 2004, pp.26–27

INDICATORS OF SUCCESS⁷

<p><i>Planning</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How much progress is made • How much learning takes place • How sufficient it is • How well it prepares us for the next step • How inclusive it is • How well it incorporates everyone's point of view 	<p><i>Training of Teachers</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How well it meets the teachers' expectations • How satisfied the teachers are with it • How well it prepares the teachers to meet the challenges of the classroom • How consistent it is • How well is it attended • How timely it is
<p><i>Caretakers/Parents</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How satisfied they are with their child's development • How involved they are in their child's learning, both in the classroom and at home • How enthusiastic they are in endorsing the program • How satisfied they are with the quality and quantity of orientation they were provided • How satisfied they are with the communication they receive from their child's teachers about upcoming events • How much they learn about Cherokee language and culture • How much they participate in the center activities • How much they participate in children's language and culture development outside the center 	<p><i>Immersion Preschool Teachers</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How much enthusiasm and pride they have in their work • How dedicated they are to the program • How patient they are with the children and themselves • How much they use Cherokee both in and out of the classroom • How much they feel supported and assisted by the immersion team, the parents, and the C. N. • How satisfied they are with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “ Materials “ Classroom environment “ Progress of their students “ Their own teaching abilities “ The hours of work they put in every day “ The respect they get from the others for the special work that they do “ Their emotional state “ The training they receive “ The expectations set for them and their students
<p><i>Immersion Team</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How much input is given according to individual styles • How satisfied they are with the progress of the program in meeting the goals they set • How involved they are according to their individual capabilities • How well they endorse the program • How well they cooperate and use teamwork to get tasks completed 	<p><i>Children</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How well they can understand and converse with others in Cherokee • How well they identify with Cherokee culture • How much their English continues to develop outside of the classroom as their bilingual skills grow • How well they develop: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “ Social skills “ Motor skills “ Cognition “ Emotion

CHAPTER 4

Overcoming Common Challenges

The process of starting a language nest is usually filled with anticipation and excitement. There is often a dedicated group that works tirelessly towards a common vision of children learning the language in a loving environment. An ideal picture is painted of how language will flow freely in the language nest and how children will soak up the language like sponges, effortlessly becoming fluent speakers. However, all too often we are rudely awakened from this dream when we are faced with the stark realities of operating a language nest.

We need to remember that the vision of a language nest is essentially an adult vision. It is not as if children wake up one morning with an overwhelming desire to learn their First Nation's language. Children are enrolled in the program by their parents and are quite unsuspecting, and sometimes even unwilling, participants of the language nest experiment.

Some children may need time to become comfortable in an immersion environment.



A nest is an opportunity to “live” the language with the children.

Okanagan Indian Band Language Nest

Often, caregivers must contend with children who are leaving their parents for the first time and various other early childhood dramas. To add to the shock of leaving the comforts of home for the first time, a child's sudden introduction to another language can be a very unsettling experience for them.

Although some children readily adapt to an immersion environment, some children may require a longer period to begin to feel comfortable. Staff need to be aware of the challenges of working not only in an early childhood setting, but also within a second language setting. The more you learn about how children learn languages, the better prepared you will be to face the challenges that lie ahead.

A language nest is an opportunity to “live” in the language with children; it is not necessary to “teach” the language in a formal, structured way. “Living” a language means surrounding our children with the language while doing what we normally do with our children on a daily basis.

Children learn by watching adults and by experiencing the world around them. Children learn language through communicating with adults. In a language nest, all child-to-adult interactions take place in the language instead of in English.

There are no secrets to how language is learned. However, we must always be sure we are doing things that actively involve children when we plan our daily schedules. If we provide daily experiences that both adult and child enjoy we can ensure that meaningful relationships develop wherein language flourishes. In this chapter we will explore some common challenges to running a language nest and strategies to help overcome them.

Staying within the Language

Having Elders around to share their knowledge with young children creates an ideal opportunity for an intergenerational transfer of language that reflects the traditional role of grandparents in nurturing their grandchildren. However, this wonderful cultural connection often is at the root of the problem of English being used in the language nest.

Often it is the loving Elders themselves who bring the most English into the program. Their use of English can be seen as a natural, empathetic response to “rescue” the little ones struggling in the language. When they sense a child's discomfort or unease at

Once the use of English is accepted by staff, it becomes the norm and language immersion is lost.



hearing the language they quickly offer an English translation of what is being said. Gradually, as these “rescue missions” become accepted as a part of the daily routine, the use of English starts to become the norm. Unfortunately, this nurturing response can dismantle all of the groundwork that has been laid for establishing a language nest.

To further complicate things, many younger staff members resist bringing the matter to attention because they do not want to be disrespectful to the Elders. Thus begins the so-called “slippery slope” in running an immersion program. Once the use of English is accepted by staff as the norm, it tends to grow like a bad weed. Eventually, the use of English could become so prevalent that a visitor would find it hard to believe that the program was a full immersion program in another language.

So what is one to do when English begins to invade the language nest? The first thing to do is to look for forward-thinking solutions and not be too hard on yourself by dwelling on the past. There will be many challenges along the way so it is best to meet the problems head on.

Patience and perseverance are key to increasing language use in your nest. By

focusing on the positives you can ensure that everyone feels validated and that no one is singled out as the one speaking English in the nest. Perseverance is needed, because running a language nest is always challenging and always changing.

Tips

Dealing with challenges in the nest:

- ☑ Meet problems head on and look for forward-thinking solutions
- ☑ Don't be too hard on yourself by dwelling on the past
- ☑ Focus on the positive! Have patience and perseverance to keep going in spite of challenges

How to Keep English Out

The following list provides a few hints and reminders to help keep English from creeping into your language nest:

JUST KEEP TALKING

Children who watch adults utilizing and appreciating their native language and culture will be positively influenced to learn the language as well. We need to fill the environment with language in order to engage the children in authentic communication.

Staff should role model the language to the children.



Always talk a lot to the children in your language. Even when the child is too little to understand, just keep talking. Think of yourself as the ongoing commentator in your language. Talk to them about what you are doing, whether you are cooking, writing, playing or even washing up.

FIND ACTIVITIES EVERYONE ENJOYS

To help keep your language goals in sight, it is helpful to keep track of what activities your Elders and children enjoy the most. It is at these times that language seems to take flight! These magical moments help plant seeds of language in the brains and hearts of our young ones.

Keep track of the activities everyone enjoys so you can repeat them later.



Since the primary goal of a language nest is to develop language skills, don't stress about what the children are learning, or about keeping a schedule: if the language is flowing — keep the activity going. Children are adept at letting adults know when they have had enough. Once you get a feel for the group, you get better at finding and sustaining these “magical” language moments.

HAVE FUN!

Relax and enjoy living in the language with young children. Don't get caught up in the negativity; instead, remember that childhood

is about play and exploration. Although language nests are often built from lofty visions of language revitalization, the greatest asset to have is a genuine love of playing with children.

Our languages are not meant to be restricted to the classroom, but are built for action. Take as many opportunities to play in, and play with the language. Do goofy things like act like animals in the language, tell spooky stories, or yell out what you see outside at the top of your lungs. Anything goes, as long as it's in the language and as long as no one is getting hurt!

Our languages are built for action, so have fun!



MAKE MISTAKES

Learning happens when we make mistakes. We all make mistakes when we speak, even in our first language! These mistakes tend to multiply when we are speaking in a second language or in a language less frequently used. We need to give up on the notion of being perfect. Once we give ourselves permission to be human, then we can also shed any unrealistic expectations of accelerated language development in our children.

Language learning is a slow and gradual process for everyone. A language learner's first words will always be characterized with little or no grammatical correctness and



Find opportunities to play in and with the language.

Seabird Island Language Nest Pre-school

imperfect pronunciation. It is helpful to think of their first words as being like a baby's first words in English.

Think of when it is appropriate to begin correcting or expecting proper speech. Certainly, it is not a common practice of parents to correct their babies when they say their very first words. The usual response is one of joy and celebration if anything remotely intelligible comes out of a baby's mouth. In this sense, children's attempts at speech in the language nest should also be celebrated. All attempts at communication from the children need to be acknowledged and should never be ridiculed or laughed at.

GENTLY SHAPE THEIR SPEECH

In the beginning, your greatest challenge will be to get the children to understand what you are saying. Use lots of repetition

Learning happens when we make mistakes.



and body language to help them understand. Expect them to need to be “rescued” often through physical or verbal feedback, which could mean taking them by the hand and showing them what you are talking about.

Their first speaking attempts will generally be “parroting of words”. As they begin attempting speech, feed them the answers until they are willing to try on their own. After enough exposure, they will begin to be comfortable with one-word responses. By the end of their first year they should be comfortable with two to three word responses.

As they progress in the language, you will need to begin shaping their speech. When we are confident that our children are developing an ear for the language and beginning to comprehend basic words and phrases, we can then begin to expect them to form simple one to three word responses. Through providing constant modeling of the language in many forms we can begin to help them on their journey of learning to speak.

Provide constant modeling of the language in many forms.



Also, by repeating back to a child, we can gently model correct forms when appropriate. When a child uses incorrect words or grammar, simply model the correct vocabulary and/or sentence structure in response to the child’s utterance. For example,

if a child says, “want wawa” (“I want some water”), then an adult’s response could be, “did you want some water?” (in the language).

Even if the children tend to speak more in English, continue speaking to them in your language. For example, if your child utters a phrase or sentence partly or entirely in English, rephrase what they’ve said in the language, modeling correct usage.

Don’t be overly critical or try to correct every attempt at speech.



When appropriate, gradually begin shaping their language by first affirming what she/he said and then by adding to what was said if the vocabulary or grammar usage was lacking. However, we need to exhibit restraint when a child is authentically expressing a need or emotion and to not always feel that we must correct speech. Be cautious of being overly critical and try not to correct every attempt at speech.



Use lots of repetition and body language to build understanding.

Wó'umxhl Simalgyex - Gitwángak Education Society

QUANTITY & QUALITY TIME

Immersion works by flooding the child with language. Use language in play, while eating, washing up, before sleeping — all of the time! While quality, one-on-one time is the ideal, just keep conversing and talking to the children all of the time even when you think they aren't listening. Chances are they are still able to pick up some language. When you run out of things to say or need a break put on an audio recording or video in the language so that they are still hearing the language around them.

PREPARE FOR DIFFERENCES

Everyone has a different way of learning language. Some children learn language best when they are engaged in a physical activity, others when settled in for quiet time. Just remember that everything you say or do is being noticed by someone. Take every opportunity as a learning opportunity.

Remember that everything you say and do is noticed by someone!



Some children seem to “absorb language like a sponge” and accelerate faster than other children. However, some require a lengthier “silent period” and are reluctant and less confident to try speaking.¹ If you give them the opportunity to express their comprehension in different ways other than speaking, it may help them develop the

confidence they need. Singing, group chanting, pattern games and carefully sequenced activities seem to assist reluctant speakers.

ADDRESSING BEHAVIOUR

Learning a language can be a very trying experience. Although our brains love new things, we have to remember that language learning takes time. Prepare to be challenged when children seem to be hitting learning blocks in the language. These are often externalized through “acting out.” They may respond negatively by crying, whining or lashing out. Keep calm, help console, distract and nurture them and then just carry on.

Be prepared for children to act out when they reach learning blocks in the language.



When children become frustrated with language learning we need to provide them with more experiences to help them establish more patterns and connections to the language. Language learning relies on establishing patterns to make connections to what we are learning. Therefore, repetition is key to help them make sense of the language.

Work with your team to develop a plan for how you will deal with behavioural problems when they occur. It can be challenging to deal with bad behaviour even in English — it might be more challenging to do so in your language. Having a clear plan will allow for consistency with the children and will help keep your team in the language at all times.

SEIZE ALL OPPORTUNITIES

Capitalize on “teachable” moments. Language teaching becomes easier when you realize that everyday activities such as mealtimes, getting dressed for outdoor play, washing up and playtime are all opportunities for talking, teaching and providing quality language exposure.

Everyday activities are language learning opportunities.



Be aware of each moment’s potential as a language teaching opportunity. All of the everyday, ongoing verbal interactions about things, routines and events in the children’s lives can and should be conducted in the language.

BE PERSISTENT

Keep on talking and don’t lose faith or give up even if you feel that the children’s language skills are not developing at the rate you would like to see. When it seems like an impossible task, remind yourself of the wonderful world that you are opening up for the children. Keep yourself surrounded by positive, supportive people and you will see your dedication and persistence pay off in the end!

DIVERSIFY

Language occurs in many places. Don’t feel stuck in one place in the same routine day after day. Arrange for varied opportunities for your children to experience the language. Visit Elders,

go to cultural events, watch videos — anything to keep variety happening. It is important for the child to have access to other speakers of the language as much as possible and in as many contexts as possible.

Some ideas for developing an interesting mix of language resources for the nest and the home are:

- “ *Easy to comprehend pattern books with colourful graphics*
- “ *Language DVDs and audios with read-aloud books, child-centred activities and songs*
- “ *Simple board games, such as snakes and ladders, bingo, matching games*

Find out what interests your children the most and see if families and language support workers can help create a library of resources to keep the children interested and involved.

Provide varied contexts for language.



BE SUPPORTIVE

Language learning takes time. Have patience with each child and acknowledge their attempts at using the language. Don’t try to rush the process or ever force a child to speak. Some children need to feel competent before they try to speak while others may be risk takers and try saying words even before they truly comprehend them. If you provide constant modeling and experiences that

involve them in the language, then be assured that all of them will gradually develop comprehension and speaking skills.

Don't ever rush a child to speak.



Your role as an adult in the language nest is to optimize learning opportunities and help make their journey to fluency as comfortable and nurturing as possible. Make sure you don't single out a child, or make them feel uncomfortable by asking them to speak in front of others when they are not willing to. Be aware of any potential situations where they may feel embarrassed or uncomfortable

BE AWARE OF AGES AND STAGES

We are all aware of the stages of development children go through in their lives. In the language nest we get to witness the “terrible twos” and other interesting developmental stages. During certain phases you may notice that children who were once model language

learners may begin to reject using the language. Some children may begin using English in situations where they had previously been able to respond in your language.

During these stages it is best to be patient. Generally, if you relax and try gentle reminders many will answer in the language with prompting. It often helps to delay your response until they switch back to using the language. For example, if you are asking them, “how many apples do you want?” and they respond with “two,” just move on to the next child then go back to ask the question again. Most children don't want to jeopardize their chance at eating. Just don't make it a power struggle.

All children go through different stages of development, which may affect their language use.



Toddlers are famously stubborn and may be able to outwait you or outwit you. For more stubborn cases, it is usually best to rephrase the question and give them an easy out by responding with a simple yes or no or even a nod of the head. For example, if they say in English “I want animals,” you could rephrase it as a question back to them in your language, such as, “do you want to play with the animals?” Later on, you could get them using one-word responses by asking, “do you want to play with the animals or the cars?”



Have patience with the children and support their learning journey.



Give children lots of opportunities to respond in the language.

BE A GOOD ROLE MODEL

Be aware that whatever you do in front of the children is being noticed by them. The greatest teaching methodology is teaching by example. What kind of example are you presenting to the children in the language nest? Are you using your language as much as possible? Are you protecting the language nest environment from being overrun with English?

Children will pick up on attitudes and messages about the language from the way you use it. For example, if you use English to discuss important things you want them to understand, they will learn that English is the better language for talking about important issues. If you use English when guests come, the children will learn to not speak the language in front of any others.²

HIDE THE ENGLISH

To help create an immersion environment, avoid using posters, signs and other visual resources that have English on them. It may

be tempting to put up the colourful posters and pictures commonly used in pre-schools and daycares, such as alphabets, numbers, calendars and weather charts, but these often contain English. Cover up the English with your own language or use pictures and posters without words. Even having written English visible in your nest space will hinder your attempts to achieve full immersion.

In order to achieve success in a language nest we need to optimize language opportunities while minimizing the use of English. However, it is understandable if there are times when English may need to be used to clearly communicate to parents or staff who are not fluent speakers. One suggestion is to make a plan ahead of time as to how and where these conversations will be held. Ideally, English conversations should be conducted in another room, or if there is no space, outside. In this way, it is emphasized to parents and staff that the nest is a “protected area.”

Teach by example.



Successful nests have a designated space for English — either outside or in an enclosed room away from the main areas, such as an office, storage area, or kitchen. When staff, visitors, Elders or parents need to speak English, direct them to the “English space”. Having a designated place will help keep English out of the rest of the nest.

² Murphy et al., 2005

CHAPTER 5

Planning for a Language Nest

Apart from simply staying in the language and supporting the children, there are several other variables involved in running a language nest. It is important to carefully consider these issues before starting your nest program and then also review them regularly to make sure you are always making the best choices for the nest.

Licensing

You will need to decide if or how you will license the nest as a child care program through the Ministry of Children and Families. Some nests in B.C. have chosen to license their programs and others have decided operate under the licensing exemptions. There are pros and cons to both options.

Many nests choose to license their programs for both safety and sustainability reasons. Though licensing the program may result in more restrictions on how you run the nest, it may offer you more support and better access to funding from the government. For example, parents may be eligible for subsidies in a licensed program. Also, licensed programs may be able to obtain operating funding offered

through the provincial government. Finally, by licensing the program, you can ensure that you are meeting the quality and safety standards demanded by the province. This may offer your program more credibility and sustainability. Parents may feel more comfortable sending their children to a licensed program.

There are many different options for licensing, from very small home-based daycares to larger centre-run programs. For example, according to B.C.'s current Child Care Licensing Regulation, you can run a licensed program out of your own home for up to seven children. A staff member with Early Childhood Education certification is not required to achieve this license. Alternatively, you could license the nest as a Group Child Care program, for children two and a half to five years old. The number of certified staff required for the license depends on the number of children in the program; not all staff are required to have certification.

Be sure to review licensing regulations to determine what will best suit your nest.



If you operate as a licensed program, you will be assigned a licensing officer who will work with you to ensure your program meets the licensing requirements. Licensing officers come from a variety of different backgrounds and the officer assigned to your program may not have experience with First Nations communities or language immersion

programs. It is important to be proactive in developing a positive and collaborative relationship with your licensing officer. Inform your licensing officer of the goals of your language nest, and always be prepared to offer an explanation for the unique characteristics of your program.

If you choose to operate your program under a licensing exemption, you may have more freedom to adapt daily routines and activities to suit your culture and language. You will not be pressured to meet certain provincial standards, so it might be easier to tailor the program to best suit your community. You can focus on hiring fluent language speakers to work in the nest, instead of having to find certified Early Childhood Educators. You may also find that you have more freedom to do cultural field trips and serve the children traditional foods for meals and snacks.

If you do choose to operate under a licensing exemption, you should nonetheless take all precautions to make sure it is a safe and healthy environment for the children. It should be a requirement to have criminal record checks done for all the staff and Elders who will be in the nest. Make sure that all staff members have recent first aid and food safe training. Check smoke alarms regularly to make sure they are working properly, and ensure you have a proper fire extinguisher and first aid kit in an easily-accessible place in the nest. Finally, make sure to keep the space clean and safe for children at all times.

Tips

Safety Checklist:

- ☒ All staff have criminal record checks
- ☒ All staff have recent first aid and food safe training
- ☒ Smoke alarms are in working order
- ☒ Fire extinguisher and first aid kit are accessible
- ☒ All hazardous items are removed
- ☒ The space is cleaned regularly

It is up to you, your language nest staff and your community to decide which option is best for you. When making the decision about whether to license or not, it will be helpful to think carefully about what your priorities are for the program, and how much support you have from parents and community members.

Space

All language nest programs need a place to exist. One of the first things you may need to think about when you are planning a new program or evaluating an existing one is where the nest is and what that space is like. The quality of the language nest space will have a great impact on success of the program.

The quality of the nest space will influence its success.



Nests in B.C. and around the world have existed in a variety of different spaces. Some have been run out of homes, such as the home of the main speaker or the nest administrator. Others have been held in portables or small mobile homes. Some nests are even held in classrooms that are part of the main community school.

The type of space you choose will be determined by your goals for the nest and by what is available in your community. If your community school has or is working towards full immersion classes for the lower grades, it may be suitable to have the nest in a classroom at the school. This may help provide a smooth transition from the nest to the lower grades.

Otherwise, it is often best to have a home-like space, such as a small house or portable with a kitchen, living area and a “quiet room” where children can go for naps. A home-like space helps both the children and Elders to relax and feel comfortable in the language. It will also help the children realize that the language can and should be spoken in the home and not just at school.

All non-fluent staff should be actively learning the language.



It is also best for the nest space to be separate from a dominant English environment, such as an English-dominant school. This will ease the pressure to speak English within the nest, and helps signify to both the children and the staff that this is a place reserved for the language.

Speakers and Teachers

One of the biggest challenges facing many nests in B.C. is the lack of fluent speakers who can work in the nest. The lack of speakers in communities is the very reason why nests are necessary, but it also makes it challenging to find people who are able to work in the nest. The people in the community who have training in Early Childhood Development or Education (ECD or ECE), and the younger people with the energy to care for children, typically do not speak the language fluently. Those who are fluent in the language are most often Elders who are retired and may have little energy for running after young children.

As you start your nest, you might need to rely on a combination of fluent Elders paired with staff or Early Childhood Educators who are not yet completely proficient. However, your ultimate goal is for all staff members to be proficient in the language—not just the Elders. For the nest to be successful it is vitally important that



Find ways to bring your culture into the language nest space.

Qaqaualias – Heiltsuk House of Learning

all staff members — fluent or not — be fully committed to the language. Staff working in the nest who are not yet completely proficient should be actively learning the language. They must commit to using the language in the nest at all times. Without this commitment to the language it will be too easy for English to creep in and take over.

Resources

Most nests in B.C. face a lack of age-appropriate resources. Many communities are just beginning to develop language resources and have yet to develop resources suitable for the early childhood level. It can be frustrating to try to run a program without having these resources, but remember that the most important thing you can do is simply speak to the children in the language. Children don't learn to read and write until they are five or six years old, so don't worry about having written language resources for them.

A label maker, colour printer and laminator will help you create your own resources for the nest.



You can develop your own simple resources and adapt other resources to make them suitable for the nest. You can use blank labels or masking tape to cover up the English in storybooks to help keep English out of the nest. You can also use a label maker to put labels on objects around the room and to put your own words in storybooks. This can be

helpful reminders for nest staff and Elders to stay in the language at all times. Find out if your language has a FirstVoices archive.¹ If so, you can download words and flashcards from the archive to use in your nest.

A colour printer and a laminator are two good investments for a nest. They will allow you to print and laminate resources suitable to your language and culture, including posters and simple games for the children.

Funding

You will probably find that your language nest needs some kind of funding to be able to operate. The amount of funding required will depend on the nature of your program. If you are running it as a small program out of someone's home with only a few children, you will only need a bit of funding to pay the Elders and other staff and to provide food for the children. Larger programs may need funds to rent space, hire staff and purchase food and supplies.

All language nest programs in the province currently face challenges finding sufficient ongoing, sustainable funding to support their programs. It is best to search out a variety of different funding and fundraising opportunities to support your nest, including government funding and subsidies, tuition fees, grants, community and band support, and fundraising initiatives.

¹ www.firstvoices.com

Funding can be accessed through grants, such as those offered by First Peoples' Cultural Council's Pre-school Language Nest Program or by the Vancouver Foundation.² If you are operating as a licensed day care or pre-school, you may also be able to access funding through the provincial government or Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC). Parents may be eligible to receive child care subsidies, paid as tuition to your program. You may need to work with parents to help them fill out the paperwork necessary to access these subsidies.

You may also want to consider various fundraising options. Annual art and craft sales, music or dance performances or other events can be held to support the language nest program. Creative thinking is essential to accessing the most funding possible for your program!

You may face a variety of challenges when starting or running a language nest program in your community. Some creative thinking and perseverance will help you overcome most of these challenges. And remember: your first priority is simply to speak the language to the children!

Conclusion

Children are our future. In order to guarantee that languages will live on in our communities, we must ensure that our children become the next generation of speakers. Immersing children in a 100% First Nations language environment is one of the best ways to achieve this.

After reading this handbook, we hope you now have a *clear vision* for what a full-immersion language nest should look like. This handbook is also meant to be used as a *trouble-shooting guide* to help your immersion nest face everyday challenges as they come up. In other words, the goal of this handbook is to answer the question: "What is a nest and how do you do it?"

The next question you might ask is: "Now we've got a nest going, what do we do every day?" The Chief Atahm School Curriculum Team has developed a guide for First Peoples' Cultural Council entitled *First Nations Language Nests. Your Guide to Operating a Successful Language Immersion Program for the Very Young*.³ This guide provides very practical advice on the day-to-day running of a language nest. It includes a variety of ready-to-use resources including:

- „ The immediate and long term goals of a language nest
- „ A sample daily schedule
- „ Vocabulary ideas
- „ Lesson plans and activity ideas
- „ Song and game ideas
- „ Templates for craft activities using the language

This *Online Companion Toolkit* is available on our website at: www.fpcc.ca/about-us/Publications

For further information or assistance on starting a language nest, please contact us at: info@fpcc.ca



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Feedback on this Handbook

This handbook is available on our website at: www.fpcc.ca/about-us/Publications. Like all of our resources, they are considered works in progress, and we welcome your feedback so that we can improve future editions of the handbook. Please contact us at:

First Peoples' Cultural Council (FPCC)

Language Programs

1A Boat Ramp Road

Brentwood Bay, B.C. V8M 1N9

T (250) 652-5952

F (250) 652-5953

E info@fpcc.ca

www.fpcc.ca



FIRST PEOPLES' CULTURAL FOUNDATION

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