



**Canton of Zurich
Department of Education**

Supporting Early Language Acquisition

A Practical Guide



Why is early language education important?

This *Practical Guide* is based on *Supporting Early Language Acquisition: A Conceptual Framework for Improving Language Education in the Early Years*, authored by the Thurgau University of Teacher Education in collaboration with the Marie Meierhofer Children's Institute and published by the Department of Education of the Canton of Zurich in 2017. It also refers to the video clips on learning opportunities for young children that are available at www.children-4.ch.

Supporting Early Language Acquisition: A Conceptual Framework (2017) presents research evidence on early language education and, based on that, provides six guidelines for early language education. It is intended for experts and decision makers in the field of early childhood.

This *Practical Guide* offers education professionals and other interested persons tips for putting the six guidelines into practice, with illustrative examples. It is suitable, among other things, for education/training and continuing education and for the further development of whole teams.

Both *Supporting Early Language Acquisition: A Conceptual Framework* and *Supporting Early Language Acquisition: A Practical Guide* are based on the educational concept in *Orientierungsrahmen für frühkindliche Bildung, Betreuung und Erziehung in der Schweiz* [Orientation framework for early childhood education and care in Switzerland] (Wustmann Seiler & Simoni, 2016). Children actively shape their own learning processes. Here they need support and stimulation from attentive caregivers. This assistance from adults is often called 'early childhood education and care.'

Children need language always and everywhere: in family life and in educational settings, when playing with other children and learning at school. Later, as adults, they need good language skills when comprehending and writing texts, completing education or training, or using digital media. The foundations for this are laid in the first years of life. That is why early language education is so important – from the very start.

Children learn best when they have lots of conversations with adults and with other children in everyday life. As an educator or caregiver, you play an important role. How can you support children in their acquisition of language skills? This *Practical Guide* provides answers to that question.

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Symbols

Examples of conversations in everyday life in educational settings:

- Situations
- Dialogues



Tips for observation and reflection:



How you can use this *Practical Guide*

Chapter 1, Guidelines, presents the six guidelines and highlights what is important in early language education and what opportunities you have as an educator or caregiver to support children's early language acquisition.

For each guideline there is a section outlining:

- Concrete ways to support children's early language development
- Examples of conversations in everyday life in educational settings
- Tips for observation and reflection
- Examples (photos) of conversation situations from the video clips available at www.children-4.ch
- Especially suitable everyday opportunities for putting the guidelines into practice

The guidelines are designed to help you observe and reflect on your interactions with children in everyday life.

Chapter 2, Using the Guidelines for Professional Development, offers suggestions on how to improve your support of children's language acquisition – on your own or in your team – using the *Practical Guide* and the video clips available at www.children-4.ch.

Chapter 3, Resources, provides helpful information:

- Useful links and suggestions for further reading
- Overview of the guidelines and the video clips illustrating them
- Overview of tips for observation and reflection

Guidelines 1–6

1

Guideline 1:

Identify and utilize everyday opportunities for conversations

Washing hands, having a snack, taking a walk – Daily life offers abundant opportunities for communicating. Adults can keep an eye out for such opportunities and make use of them together with the children.

Use everyday situations as opportunities to engage children in conversations. Children seek to interact with their adult caregivers in all kinds of everyday situations. The adults should respond to the children's actions and talk with them, taking up their interests.



Everyday life example

Joshua and the educator are washing their hands. Joshua notices that the today's soap has a different scent than usual. Together they think about the different scents of soaps and new scents that could yet be invented.

Establish and maintain shared attention. Whether it is a broken fire truck or remembering a trip together to the zoo – for children and adults to understand each other and be able to stay on the same topic, they have to establish shared attention to the same things. Here adults support children through eye contact or pointing things out, using language, facial expressions, or gestures.



Give children space to express themselves. Exciting conversations develop when children can talk about what interests them. This means that adults have to respond to the children's interests and allow children to participate in shaping the conversation.

Focus on understanding and support it with all means. «My grandma is in the hospital!» Children use language to fulfill important needs, such as to share a worry. It is important that adults try to understand exactly what is on the child's mind. Facial expressions, gestures, and voice signals can support understanding. The focus here is not on correct use of language.

Everyday life example

Child:
«Grandma has a stroller in the hospital!»

Adult:
«I don't quite understand. What do you mean?»

Jointly spin sustained conversational threads. Staying with a topic and further developing it together with others is essential for children's learning. Adults can encourage longer threads of conversation of this kind and protect them from being interrupted too soon.



Clearly mark conversations between adults and engage in them sparingly. Conversations between adults are not a problem for children, as long as they do not compete with paying attention to children. If quarrels or other urgent incidents occur, children need to regain the adults' immediate and full attention.

Tips for observation and reflection

I will:

- use all kinds of everyday situations for conversations with children.
- make sure that in conversations we are paying attention to the same things.
- speak with the children about their own interests.
- ask questions, when I do not understand a child.
- take time for longer conversations.
- remain attentive to the children also when I am speaking with adults.

Opportunities

When putting on her coat in the cloakroom, a child tells me that she saw a snail on the path.

While tidying up, we discover a broken toy car. We talk about how we could fix it.

Mia and I talk about the cow in the picture book. When Mia looks toward the window and laughs, I ask her: «What do you see that is funny?»

Guideline 2:

Facilitate conversations between children

Negotiating play ideas, inviting others to play, exchanging objects – Children communicate particularly actively and independently when they are together with other children. Adults can bring children together frequently and give them space for their shared interests and activities.

Ensure regular contact with other children. Frequent and regular contact with other children allows children to build trusting relationships with one another, which forms an important basis for engaged communication.

Make possible, protect, and acknowledge conversations between children. For children to be able to talk to one another, they need to feel comfortable and have enough time. Conversations are easier in small groups of familiar children. Adults make sure that peer conversations are not interrupted.

Support individual children in conversations with other children. When children do not know each other well, adults can create opportunities for children to meet and get to know each other. And they can help newcomers to find a place in an existing group.





Everyday life example

Levin would like to play with Linda and Timur at the grocery store in the play area but does not dare to join them. The educator asks him if he would like to go shopping with her at the store. Once Levin and Tim engage in conversation, the educator withdraws.

Temporarily support and encourage conversations between children if needed. When children are not yet familiar with a game or when a conflict arises, adult support can help. Once the children are managing on their own again, the adults can step back.



Everyday life example

Caregiver:
«Selma would like a turn on the bicycle. What should we do?»

Child:
«Selma can use the scooter for now. And then Devin and Selma can trade.»



Tips for observation and reflection

I will:

- facilitate interactions between children.
- make sure that games and conversations among children that are going well are not interrupted too soon.
- help new children in the group to start conversing with the others.
- moderate and support conversations between children if needed and then step back.



Opportunities

Three children play in the kitchen in the play area. They negotiate on what kind of cake they will bake.

Four children want to play the new game that has been in the daycare center only since yesterday. The educator supports the children as they talk about the rules of the game. After two rounds of the game, the educator withdraws.

Nine-month-old Enzo stretches out his hand towards Pia, who is sitting nearby on a cuddly blanket. The educator puts him on the blanket with Pia and watches how they interact.

3

Guideline 3:

Assure the quality of interactions

Children want to communicate with adults and be understood by them. Adults can contribute a lot towards successful conversations.

Frame and steer interactions. When does a conversation begin, and when does it end? When is it your turn to speak, and when do you listen? A clear framework helps children to participate actively in conversations. For this, they need, for instance, their own safe place, a touch on the arm, eye contact, or an inviting gesture. Adults also protect conversations from interruptions.



Everyday life example

Nevin is explaining his new game to the educator. Elisa comes by and wants to show her something. The educator puts her hand on Elisa's arm, thus signaling that she should wait for just a moment but will soon have the educator's attention.



Adapt interactions to individual children. Children enjoy it when adults take up their interests. Adults can listen carefully to children and give them sufficient time to respond verbally. If they do not understand what the child is saying, they ask questions and allow the child to respond in turn.

Everyday life example

Child:
«Why is the snow melting?»

Caregiver:
«Because it is warm now.
What does it look like on the
lawn at your house?»



Provide stimulating input in conversational interactions. It is important for children to engage in extended conversations. Stimulating questions from adults – such as «What happened to you at the zoo yesterday?»; «What do you think?»; or «I hurt my thumb this morning» – invite children to talk or to extend and deepen an ongoing conversation.

Offer new words and grammar and clarify them. What does «fluffy» mean? Adults can explain unfamiliar words, reinforcing their explanations through gestures, facial expressions, and voice. If the children lack the words or expressions, adults can offer answer options or new phrases.





Tips for observation and reflection

- I will:
- make sure that all interested children find their place and their role in the conversation.
 - make sure that a conversation is not interrupted too soon.
 - give the children enough time to verbalize.
 - include children who are listening in the conversation.
 - ask whether I have understood correctly.
 - expand the conversation by asking further questions.
 - also contribute my own thoughts.
 - encourage the child to continue speaking.
 - provide the children different ways to say things.

Opportunities		
At story time, we make sure that everyone can see the picture book from where they are sitting on the cushions.	A child who does not speak much German would like to tell us about his birthday. I ask him: Who came to your birthday? What did you play?	Lea tells us about going to the pizzeria. I tell her that pizza is my favorite food. I ask Lea what her favorite food is and why she likes it so much.

4

Guideline 4:
Use language in many different ways

Children need language to discover their environment, express their needs, and talk about things that are not visible in the here and now. Adults can create opportunities for children to use language in many different ways.

Name objects, activities, and characteristics. «Do you see the bird on the branch? It is chirping so beautifully and has colorful feathers.» Adults can name objects and embed the words in a greater context. They can also provide ongoing commentary on what they or the children are doing. This helps children to expand and connect their vocabulary and concepts.

Express inner processes verbally. To talk about emotions or intentions, language is needed. Adults can tell children about inner processes. But they can also help children to talk themselves about feelings or thoughts – whether their own or those of others.

Everyday life example	
Caregiver: «What do you think? How's the cat in the book feeling?»	Child: «I think the cat is happy because it's her birthday soon.»



Water, lots of water, right?



The gorilla has a baby gorilla.

Encourage challenging language tasks. Talking about a visit to Grandpa, telling the story from a picture book, or explaining why leaves turn yellow in the fall – Children provide many opportunities for conversations about things that are not visible in the here and now. Adults can support children by asking questions like: «What did you play with Grandpa?»; «What is the rest of that story about the gorilla?»



Everyday life example

Alis rushes excitedly to the educator, who is fixing the morning snack. «A squirrel just buried a nut in the garden!» she says. The educator stops what she is doing, takes a moment, and asks Alis, «Why did it do that? What do you think?»



Tips for observation and reflection



- I will:
- describe characteristics of the things that I name.
 - ask children for their opinions.
 - speak with the children about feelings and thoughts.
 - encourage children to share their experiences.
 - together with the children, seek explanations of how things work.
 - together with the children, tell made-up stories.

Opportunities	
During dramatic play, we talk about what could happen next.	On the playground we discover a cat. Together, we watch it and describe what it is doing.
In conversations during story time, we connect the story with the children’s everyday experiences.	After a conflict has been resolved, I ask the children how they are doing.

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Guideline 5:
Provide access to early literacy
Children’s books, shopping lists, or smartphones – Many children are interested in print and media and want to participate in using them. For this, they need our support.

Recite rhymes and verses and sing songs. Once children have heard songs and rhymes several times, they begin to participate actively in singing and reciting them. Adults can hand over the leading role to the children more and more.

Play with and explore language. Even infants love preverbal play with sounds and syllables. With older children, adults can talk about funny misunderstandings or compare a word in different languages.



Everyday life example	
Child wanting to play badminton game: «There aren’t any more birdies.»	Caregiver (playing with the meanings of the word ‘birdie’): «Sure, there are; there are plenty of birdies out there in the trees!»



bones are glowing on this dinosaur.



Look, there is an E in Elena.

Discovering symbols and the alphabetic print system. There are abundant opportunities in daily life for interpreting symbols (e.g., ‘reading’ traffic signs). Many children recognize some letters of the alphabet and certain words, such as their names, before they can read and write. Adults should allow interested children to discover and explore the world of symbols and print through play.

Everyday life example

The family daycare provider notes down an address. When Leila asks about this, she explains to Leila that the letters on her note stand for the town, the street, and the house number and that if she forgets the address, she can look it up in her address directory.



Use and enjoy picture books and other children’s media. Picture books and other children’s media broaden the child’s knowledge and nurture the child’s imagination. Children need access to a variety of age-appropriate media. It is important that they can share their thoughts and feelings about the contents with trusted caregivers. As they listen to or look at stories over and over again, they gain a deeper understanding of them.



That’s white glass,
it goes in here.



Let’s turn Mummy up loud
so you can talk to her.



Tips for observation and reflection

- I will:
- provide the children with picture books and a variety of children’s media.
 - repeat songs, rhymes, and verses, and also let the children take the lead.
 - talk with the children about language phenomena (such as words in other languages, similar words, funny misunderstandings).
 - together with the children, think about what symbols stand for (such as symbols on traffic signs).
 - explain to the children what I am doing when I read or write something or when I use my smartphone or tablet.
 - talk to the children about stories.

Opportunities		
It’s Luella’s birthday. As she is sick, she has to stay at home. We sing a song for her, record a video of us on the smart-phone, and send her mother the video.	While taking a walk, we talk about the different traffic signs and what they mean.	When reading a picture book to the children, I ask them what might happen next before I turn the page.

6

Guideline 6:
Value and support multilingualism

Young children can easily learn and use several languages. It is important that their caregivers appreciate their languages. The focus here is on understanding each other, aided also by facial expressions and gestures.

Use your own strongest language. It is important for adults to speak their strongest languages with the children. Only in this way can they support the children adequately.

Use different languages in a clearly evident way. If several languages are used in an early education and care setting, it is important that it is clear to the children when a certain language will be used. It helps if the use of the different languages is stable and connected to different situations or persons.

Appreciate the children’s languages. Children are pleased when their languages are welcome in their early education and care setting. Adults can talk with the children about different languages or learn songs with the whole group in the children’s first languages.





Everyday life example	
Caregiver: «When you say 'pembe,' does that mean 'pink'?»	Child: «Yes, that's what I say at home!»

Ensure participation and communication also nonverbally. Multilingual children may have already learned to communicate complex content through words and grammar in their first language. But they may not have the words and grammar at their disposal in their second language, such as German. Adults can support children here by using facial expressions and gestures along with spoken language. And by showing clearly if they understand the child or not, they give the child additional information. Group activities such as singing songs or talking about picture books give children who do not speak much German opportunities to understand and participate.

Provide lots of opportunities for contact with the target language. Children have to hear the target language very frequently if they are to learn to speak it later. For this reason, they need a lot of contact with children and adults who speak the target language.



Tips for observation and reflection

I will:

- take time to have conversations with multilingual children.
- take care to ensure that children with German as a second language and I understand each other.
- show interest in children's first languages.
- make sure that children who do not speak much German can participate in group activities.
- support children who do not speak much German in talking about interesting things.



Opportunities

We sing songs in the children's different languages.	I am playing with Erkan, who speaks hardly any German, in the kitchen in the play area. I talk about what we are doing as we play, and I try to interpret what he says in Turkish.	At snack time, Jehona tells us about her birthday. I tell her that I do not yet understand everything and ask her questions until we understand each other very well.
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Using the Guidelines for Professional Development

This *Practical Guide* and the commentaries and video clips at www.children-4.ch can help you to further develop your support of children's language acquisition – on your own or in your team. What can you do? Here you find some ideas.

How can I, on my own, further develop my educational practices?

Get to know a guideline

I choose a guideline in the *Practical Guide* that interests me. First, I read the section on the guideline. Then I watch the commentary film on that guideline. Finally, I choose one of the tips in the *Practical Guide* that I would especially like to follow.

Study the video clips that illustrate the guideline

First, I choose a guideline that I am already familiar with and consult the overview of the guidelines and the video clips (in the Resources section below) to find video clips that illustrate it. Then I watch the first video clip and compare it to the tips provided for the guideline ('Tips for observation and reflection'). I do the same with other video clips.

Implement some of the tips in my everyday interactions with the children

First, I choose a guideline that I am already familiar with. Then I choose 1 or 2 of the tips provided that I want to pay particular attention to. I note down the tips on a card. In the coming weeks I try to implement the suggestions in my interactions with the children. Finally, I reflect upon my experiences.

How can we, together, further develop our educational practices?

Get to know a guideline

First, we choose a guideline. Then, we learn about it using the *Practical Guide* and the video clips illustrating the guideline. We clarify our questions and share our experiences.

Study the video clips that illustrate the guideline

First, together we choose a guideline. Then we watch a video clip illustrating the guideline (see the overview of the video clips in the Resources section below). Each of us takes notes on the tips ('Tips for observation and reflection'). Then we discuss our observations and questions. IMPORTANT: We carefully watch the parts of the video clips that we are discussing several times.

Examine our own interactions with the children and improve them

Each of us has a trusted person film us in our everyday work (for example, with a smartphone, for at least 30 minutes, showing both the educator AND the children involved). IMPORTANT: Permission must be obtained from the parents (a parental consent form is available at www.children-4.ch). The person filmed watches the video and chooses a successful interaction (for example, a longer conversation). In the team, we watch this sequence (with video projector and sound). Then we examine it, step by step (the overview of all tips in the Resources section below can be helpful here). IMPORTANT: We carefully watch the parts of the video clips that we are discussing several times. We choose tips that are important to us and write them down. We try to watch out for those things in our everyday work. At the next team meeting we share our experiences.

Resources

Links

Commentaries and video clips as well as further materials and aids to early language acquisition:

- www.children-4.ch

Recommendations on books and media for children (in German):

- www.sikjm.ch/literale-foerderung/medientipps
- www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/buecher/rezensionen/kinderbuch
- www.stiftunglesen.de/leseempfehlungen/lese-und-medienempfehlungen

Books, media, and verses in many languages:

- www.interbiblio.ch
- www.vers-und-reim.net

Suggested reading

Background knowledge on early language acquisition:

- Supporting Early Language Acquisition: A Conceptual Framework for Improving Language Education in the Early Years www.bi.zh.ch/fachkonzept_fruehesprachbildung
- Orientierungsrahmen für frühkindliche Bildung, Betreuung und Erziehung in der Schweiz www.netzwerk-kinderbetreuung.ch/de/publikationen/20
- Szagun, G. (2013). Sprachentwicklung beim Kind: Ein Lehrbuch (6th ed.). Weinheim: Beltz.
- Tracy, R. (2008). Wie Kinder Sprachen lernen: Und wie wir sie dabei unterstützen können (2nd ed.). Tübingen: Francke.
- Zollinger, B. (2015). Die Entdeckung der Sprache (9th ed.). Bern: Haupt.

Manuals on early language acquisition:

- Kannengieser, S., Kappeler Suter, S., Aggeler-Lätsch, F., Plangger, N. (2013). Nashorner haben ein Horn: Sprachförderung in Spielgruppen und Kindertageseinrichtungen. Seelze: Klett Kallmeyer.
- Zumwald, B., Itel, N., & Vogt, F. (2015). Zusammenarbeit mit Eltern in der Sprachförderung: Ein Praxisheft für Spielgruppen und Kitas (3rd ed.). St.Gallen: Pädagogische Hochschule St.Gallen.

**Overview of the guidelines
and the video clips illustrating them**

Overview of the guidelines and the video clips illustrating them		Recycled glass	Apricots	Brother John	Letters	Bus trip	Dinosaurs	Thorns	Family discussion	Television	Film	Finger	Gorilla	On the way home	Highland cattle	Kitten	Cook	Crocodile	Market stall	Chatterbox	Robot	Smartphone	A walk	Table drumming	World map	Hidden object book
1. Identify and utilize everyday opportunities for conversations		●	●		●		●			●		●	●					●	●		●	●		●		
2. Facilitate conversations between children									●	●					●		●	●		●						
3. Assure the quality of interactions					●	●	●	●		●	●	●		●									●	●		
4. Use language in many different ways		●					●			●		●			●	●	●				●	●			●	
5. Provide access to early literacy		●	●	●	●		●			●		●						●					●		●	
6. Value and support multilingualism				●				●	●			●	●			●	●			●				●		

● This guideline is a focus of the video clip (main message and expert commentary).

● This guideline is also mentioned in the expert commentary on this video clip.

Overview of tips for observation and reflection

Guideline 1: Identify and utilize everyday opportunities for conversations

- Use everyday situations for conversations with children
- Establish and maintain shared attention
- Speak with the children about their own interests
- Take time for longer conversations
- Keep adult conversations brief, remain present with the children

Guideline 2: Facilitate conversations between children

- Facilitate interactions between children
- Make sure that games and conversations that are going well are not interrupted too soon
- Help new children start conversing with the others
- Moderate and support conversations between children if needed and then step back

Guideline 3: Assure the quality of interactions

- Help all children participating to find their place
- Protect conversations from interruptions
- Give the children enough time to verbalize
- Ask questions to ensure understanding
- Ask questions that expand the conversation
- Contribute also my own thoughts
- Provide suggestions on how to say things, if needed

Guideline 4: Use language in many different ways

- Name things and their characteristics
- Talk about opinions, thoughts, and feelings
- Support children in sharing their experiences
- Support children in explaining things and circumstances
- Support children in telling made-up stories

Guideline 5: Provide access to early literacy

- Provide children's books and a variety of children's media
- Play with songs, rhymes, and verses
- Discover and decipher symbols and print
- Demonstrate and explain media use
- Talk to the children about stories

Guideline 6: Value and support multilingualism

- With multilingual children, pay special attention to understanding
- Show interest in children's first languages
- Make it possible for children who do not speak much German to participate
- Have interesting conversations also with children who do not speak much German

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Canton of Zurich
Department of Education

Authors

Thurgau University of Teacher Education (PHTG)
Dieter Isler, Katharina Kirchhofer, Claudia Hefti Christ

Thurgau University of Teacher Education.
teacher education – continuing education – research



Translator

Ellen Russon

Design

Wolf Studio

Illustration

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Photos: Film stills from www.children-4.ch

Address

Department of Education of the Canton of Zurich,
Division for Educational Planning
Walcheplatz 2, 8090 Zurich, Switzerland
bildungsplanung@bi.zh.ch
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