

# More Than Baby Talk



10 Ways to  
Promote the  
Language and  
Communication  
Skills of Infants  
and Toddlers

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# Why Promote the Language Development and Communication Skills of Infants and Toddlers?

EARLY LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS are crucial for children's success in school and beyond. Language and communication skills include the ability to understand others (i.e., receptive language) and express oneself (i.e., expressive language) using words, gestures, or facial expressions. Children who develop strong language and communication skills are more likely to arrive at school ready to learn.<sup>1</sup> They also are less likely to have difficulties learning to read and are more likely to have higher levels of achievement in school.<sup>2</sup>



During the first years of life, children's brains are developing rapidly and laying the foundation for learning. The interactions that children have with adults influence how children develop and learn.<sup>3</sup> As a result, early childhood educators have a prime opportunity to provide children with interactions that can support children's growth and development, particularly their language and communication skills.

As past research shows, when teachers provide children with higher levels of language stimulation during the first years of life, children have better language skills.<sup>4,5</sup> When teachers ask children questions, respond to their vocalizations, and engage in other positive talk, children learn and use more words. A study found that one third of the language interactions between teachers and children were the type that support children's language development, while the other two-thirds included less complex language such as directions, general praise, and rhetorical questions.<sup>6</sup> Promoting more high-quality language interactions between children and adults provides children with the kinds of experiences that can foster their growth in language and communication.

This guide describes 10 practices that early childhood educators can use to support the development of language and communication skills of infants and toddlers. Because research supports the importance of adult-child interactions for infants and toddlers,<sup>5</sup> the practices are designed to be done one-on-one or in small groups. Each practice draws upon the types of interactions that research suggests promotes language and communication skills. These interactions include:

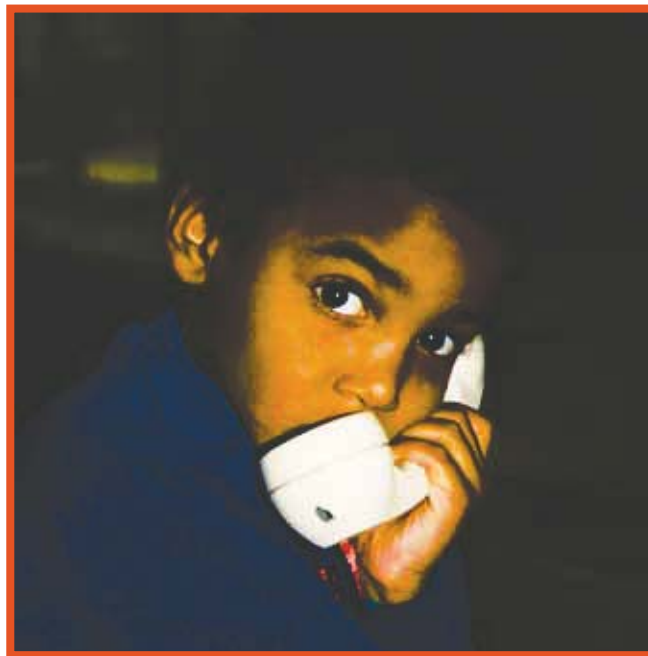
- Responding to children's vocalizations and speech
- Engaging in joint attention with children
- Eliciting conversations with children
- Talking with children more
- Using complex grammar and rich vocabulary
- Providing children with more information about objects, emotions, or events.

These interactions benefit children from a variety of language and cultural backgrounds, including children who are dual language learners. Children who are dual language learners may sometimes feel socially isolated and have difficulty communicating their wants and needs.<sup>7</sup> Educators may find the practices presented in this guide useful for helping dual language learners feel more socially connected and communicate better. Educators interested in learning more about supporting dual language learners will find additional information in the resources presented at the end of the guide.

# Overview of 10 Practices to Promote Language and Communication Skills of Infants and Toddlers

Practice	Description
1. Get Chatty	Engaging in conversations with children
2. Be a Commentator	Giving descriptions of objects, activities or events
3. Mix It Up	Using different types of words and grammar
4. Label It	Providing children with the names of objects or actions
5. Tune In	Engaging in activities or objects that interest children
6. Read Interactively	Using books to engage children's participation
7. Read It Again & Again & Again!	Reading books multiple times
8. Props, Please!	Introducing objects that spark conversations
9. Make Music	Engaging in musical activities
10. Sign It	Using gestures or simple signs with words

Each practice is presented with a description of the practice, research evidence that supports the use of the practice, and examples of how educators may use the practice with infants and toddlers. Although each practice is presented separately, many of the practices can be used in combination with each other. For example, educators can practice focusing on children's interests (Practice #5, "Tune In") while providing a running commentary (Practice #2, "Be a Commentator") and labeling the names of objects (Practice #4, "Label It").



At the end of the guide is a list of resources that may be useful for more information on supporting the language and communication skills of infants and

toddlers. These resources include books, articles, and websites that contain more detailed information on the practices presented in the guide.

The practices presented in this guide can be used when working with any child. Educators should keep in mind, however, that children develop at varying rates and differently depending upon a number of factors, such as personality and age. These factors and home language exposure affect children's development of language and communication skills. By using these practices early childhood educators can provide all children with the rich language exposure and opportunities children need to enhance their language and communication skills.

# Key Practices



# #1 Get Chatty

**C**HATTING WITH CHILDREN is a great way to give them lots of examples of how we use words to share ideas and get information. The words adults speak to children make up the language “input” that children need to learn new words and ideas. The more input adults give children, the more opportunities children have to learn how to express themselves and understand what others are saying.

## What Research Shows

- The more words adults speak to children, the larger children’s vocabulary.<sup>8,9</sup>
- When teachers promote back-and-forth conversations with children, children show greater complexity in their speech.<sup>10</sup>
- When teachers use high-quality conversations in the classroom including using uncommon words, asking children questions, and commenting on their responses, children show better language development.<sup>11,12</sup>

## Working with Infants and Toddlers

- Talk through or comment on routines (e.g., when washing hands, “We are washing our hands. We are making lots of big bubbles.”).
- Comment on children’s actions or objects and events (e.g., “Billy is



drawing with the red crayon.”).

- Respond to infants’ nonverbal communication with words (e.g., “I see you reaching for the blocks. Would you like to play with the blocks?”).
- Ask questions and pause for answers. Provide the answers for preverbal children.
- Expand on children’s words (e.g., “I heard you say, ‘Cheese.’ Would you like to eat more cheese?”).



**C**OMMENTING ON ACTIONS OR EVENTS for children is a great way to give children examples of how to use language in everyday routines and activities. Commenting involves an adult talking about what he or she is doing, seeing, or thinking about in the presence of the child. An adult may also describe what children are doing or seeing. This kind of talk provides children with examples of the kind of language that is used in everyday activities. Commenting on actions or events may also help children learn and understand which words go with which actions.

#2

Be a  
Commentator

## What Research Shows

- The more words that adults speak to children, the better language skills children develop.<sup>8,9</sup>
- The more that teachers model language for children, the more often children talk.<sup>12</sup>

## Working with Infants and Toddlers

- Give detailed descriptions of what you or the child is seeing or doing.
- Comment on daily routines like hand washing, eating, or diaper changing (e.g., after playing outside, “We’re back inside now. We’re going to take off our jackets and put them in our cubbies.”).
- Model language for children by commenting on objects or events.
- Talk while demonstrating the different ways an object may be used.



# Mix It Up #3

TALKING TO CHILDREN is one of the most important ways adults can help them learn to communicate and develop strong language skills. By talking with them, adults provide children with language “input” that children can then use as models for how to talk. The more types of language input that children receive, the more their language skills can develop and grow over time. When adults “mix it up” by using lots of different types of words and grammar in their speech to children, children benefit by learning to use more complex and varied language.

## What Research Shows

- Repeated and varied exposure to unfamiliar words, along with meaningful contexts (e.g., pictures, verbal explanations) helps children learn new words.<sup>13</sup>
- Children whose teachers speak with more complex sentence structures have better understanding of complex, multi-clause sentences.<sup>14</sup>
- Using words from a child’s home language may help children to learn words in English.<sup>15</sup>

## Working with Infants and Toddlers

- During playtime or mealtimes, introduce new vocabulary by using rare or uncommon words (e.g., “I have a big *appetite*. I am eating a lot of food today!”).
- Repeat unfamiliar words in different contexts and on different occasions.
- Give children verbal explanations for unfamiliar words.



- Use sentences that have multiple clauses when talking with children (e.g., “Can you put the blue ball in the box under the table?”).
- If possible, incorporate words from children’s home languages into the daily routines (e.g., when counting the number of children at the table, “We have 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 friends today. Let’s count in Spanish. Uno, dos, tres, cuatro, cinco!”).

LABELING AN OBJECT OR ACTIVITY is one way of helping children learn the names of objects and actions in their world. When children hear adults use labels for objects or actions, they have an opportunity to learn about how words are used and may be more likely to use the same words when trying to communicate with others. Adults can help children learn the names of objects or activities by focusing on one object or activity at a time.

#4

# Label It

## What Research Shows

- When an adult labels or comments on an object upon which a child is focused, the child is more likely to develop a larger vocabulary.<sup>16</sup>
- When an adult and child are engaged in joint attention, or focused together on one object, and the adult says the name of the object, children are more likely to learn the word for that object.<sup>17</sup>
- Gesturing toward or looking at an object while saying the object's name helps children learn the name of the object.<sup>18</sup>

## Working with Infants and Toddlers

- Use descriptors to help children learn the names of different colors, shapes and sizes (e.g., “The blue car is bigger and faster than the yellow car.”).
- Point to or gaze at an object while saying the name.
- Say the names of familiar and new objects or activities.





# #5 Tune In

CHILDREN ARE OFTEN CURIOUS about the world around them. Teachers can make the most of this natural curiosity by engaging children in conversations about the objects or activities that have captured their attention. By tuning in and talking to children about whatever is holding their attention, adults have an opportunity to support children's language development by responding to their interests. Teachers can use these moments to support children's language by initiating high-quality conversations that include rich vocabulary, give children information, or ask children to provide information.

## What Research Shows

- Children are more likely to learn the names for objects in which they are interested than objects for those of less interest.<sup>17</sup>
- Children whose parents talk about what the child is focused on have more advanced vocabularies than children whose parents try to redirect children's attention.<sup>19</sup>

## Working with Infants and Toddlers

- Notice on what the child is focused and ask open-ended questions like "What ...?", "Why...?" and "How...?" Pause for a response. Provide the answers for preverbal children.
- Provide information about the object or activity the child is focused on by commenting or describing the object or activity.



- Introduce the child to new words related to the object of his or her focus. Explain the meaning of the new word.
- If possible, provide a demonstration of the different ways the object the child is focusing on may be used (e.g., "You're rolling the blue ball. Let's see if we can bounce the ball too.").



**R**EADING BOOKS TO CHILDREN is one of the most effective ways to provide children with opportunities to develop their language skills. Books often contain words that children may not commonly hear in everyday conversations, along with pictures that help illustrate their meanings. Adults can use books to start discussions with children about the stories and pictures presented and connect the stories and pictures to children's lives.

The opportunities for helping children develop their language skills with books are greatest when adults help children to become engaged by: 1) encouraging children's participation in the story, 2) expanding on children's responses, and 3) giving feedback. By interacting with children in these ways, adults give children a chance to practice listening and speaking skills that foster language development.

## #6 Read Interactively

### What Research Shows

- When adults read to children by asking complex questions, expanding on children's responses and providing encouragement, children's expressive language develops faster than when adults read in less interactive ways.<sup>20</sup>
- Children learn more vocabulary when teachers involve them in discussions about books.<sup>21</sup>
- The more discussions children and teachers have about the reasons for actions or events in a story, the higher children's vocabulary scores.<sup>22</sup>



### Working with Infants and Toddlers

- Point to and label objects or actions in the book.
- Use an expressive, animated voice when reading. If appropriate, use voices for the characters and imitate sounds or facial expressions presented in the book.
- Talk about familiar subjects like family life, faces, food, and toys.
- Ask open-ended questions ("Who", "What", "When", "Where", "Why", and "How" questions). For preverbal infants or toddlers, pause after asking the question. When appropriate, provide the answer.
- For new words, say the word to the child and ask him/her to repeat it.
- Define new words or provide synonyms for new words.
- Expand and rephrase children's responses to questions.
- Make connections between the book and the child's life (e.g., when reading a book that has a picture of a dog, "You have a dog that's brown just like this one. What kinds of things does your dog like to do?").
- At the end of the book, recap the story, repeating any new words or ideas.

# #7 Read It Again & Again & Again

**S**HARING PICTURE STORYBOOKS WITH CHILDREN is one way to help them to learn new words. Some of these books will become favorites that children will ask for again and again. Re-reading the same book multiple times helps children to learn new words.

When an adult reads a story to a child for the first time, children are faced with many tasks that may make paying attention to new words difficult. They may need to focus on the plot, setting, characters and so forth. The second time a child hears a story they are more familiar with it and can begin to predict what is going to happen. After hearing a story many times, children can pay less attention to the other parts of the story and can focus attention on other details, like learning new words.

## What Research Shows

- The more often adults read to children, the better children's language skills.<sup>23</sup>
- One encounter with a new word is not enough to support word learning. Children often need to hear words many times before learning them.<sup>24</sup>
- Children learn more new words if a story is read to them multiple times than if several stories are read to them only once.<sup>25</sup>

## Working with Infants and Toddlers

- If time permits, after reading a book to a child, ask if she or he would like you to read it again. If "yes," read the book again!



- Each time you read a book, draw children's attention to different words, details, pictures, or actions in the book.
- With each reading of a book, ask different open-ended questions ("Who", "What", "When", "Where", "Why", and "How" questions). Pause after asking the question. When appropriate, provide the answer.

**T**OYS ARE THE TOOLS of children's work. Yet certain toys, and other materials, can also be helpful in providing children with opportunities to practice their communication skills. By choosing materials that can encourage children to talk or listen to an adult or a peer, teachers can supply children with "props" to help support children's language development. These props are objects that may stimulate conversations and include old phones, cell phones, puppets, dolls, wordless books, familiar books, pictures, play dough, and felt board cutouts.

## #8 Props, Please!

### What Research Shows

- The more children use an object to represent another object (e.g., using a plastic banana as a telephone), the stronger their language skills are.<sup>26</sup>
- Dramatic play activities are often when the most complex language interactions occur between teachers and children.<sup>27</sup>
- When adults and toddlers talk about an object on which they are both focused, children develop better language skills.<sup>16</sup>

### Working with Infants and Toddlers

- When using a prop, ask children open-ended questions like "What...?", "Why...?" and "How...?" Pause for a response. Provide the answers for preverbal infants and toddlers.
- Label props and provide explanations about their function or purpose.
- Use props to draw an infant's attention to interacting (e.g., shake a rattle to get the infant's attention, then draw it to your face, shaking. When the infant looks at your face, remove the rattle and begin a conversation).
- Use props to engage in pretend play.
- Introduce children to new vocabulary when possible.
- Talk about the different ways a prop may be used.





# #9 Make Music

**A**DULTS CAN HELP CHILDREN develop strong language skills by incorporating music into everyday routines and activities. Musical activities can help children develop an awareness of sounds that may help with phonological awareness, or awareness of sounds found in speech. Singing and listening to songs can give children an opportunity to practice using and listening to words. Musical activities may also enhance children's language development since they can provide an opportunity for dialogue between teachers and children.

## What Research Shows

- Musical activities are linked with improvements in children's communication skills.<sup>28</sup>
- Songs and musical activities have been shown to increase children's vocabulary.<sup>29</sup>
- Children's with stronger musical skills are more likely to have greater phonological awareness.<sup>30</sup>



## Working with Infants and Toddlers

- Sing simple songs with gestures (e.g., “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” and “The Wheels on the Bus”).
- Change the words of well-known songs to make new songs (e.g., sing “Happy snack time to you” at the beginning of snack time).
- When singing well-known songs, pause to let children fill in the blanks (e.g., “Twinkle, twinkle, little \_\_\_\_\_”).
- Use songs to tell stories. Try using props like puppets, photos or pictures.
- Have children act out parts of the song that involve body movements (e.g., “I’m a little teapot”).
- Create little songs to sing during transitions or routines (e.g., “Brush, brush, brush your teeth before work and play. Brush your teeth twice a day and keep the germs away.”).
- Sing songs in children's home languages.



LONG BEFORE CHILDREN SAY THEIR FIRST WORDS, they use their hands and bodies to let adults know what they want and need.

Children typically start using gestures between 8 and 12 months old. They often begin by pointing to things to get an adult's attention. Later, children use gestures as if they were words. For example, when a child flaps his or her arms, he or she may be communicating the idea "bird."

Because gestures are a natural way that children learn to communicate, teaching children signs for words can help them strengthen their language and communication skills. Using baby sign language, which is based on the American Sign Language, gives children and teachers a standard set of gestures that they can use in everyday interactions and routines to provide children with visual support for language. Using signs or gestures may allow children to communicate their needs and understand others before they can talk. Even after children begin talking, signs can be used along with speech to help strengthen their language and communication skills.

## #10 Sign It

### What Research Shows

- Children whose parents started using signs when the children were babies had better language skills when they were two and three years old than children whose parents did not use signs.<sup>31</sup>
- The more gestures toddlers know and use, the more vocabulary they know as preschoolers.<sup>32,33</sup>
- Toddlers who combine gestures with speech are more likely to use more complex sentences.<sup>34</sup>

### Working with Infants and Toddlers

- Start with simple signs for everyday needs (e.g., more, cup, milk).
- Demonstrate the sign while speaking the word.
- Repeat the word with the sign often.
- Use simple signs or gestures in finger plays and songs (e.g., "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star").
- Guide children's hands when making a new sign or if the child needs assistance with the movements.





## Summary

This guide contains ten key practices that help early childhood educators enhance the language and communication development of infants and toddlers. Using these practices, early childhood educators can increase the amount and complexity of the language they speak to children, be more responsive to children's vocalizations and speech, and engage in more conversations with children. These practices can be adapted to working with children of different language and cultural backgrounds to support the language and communication development of all children.

By giving children a rich language environment in infancy and toddlerhood, early childhood educators can play an important role in supporting children's development. By providing children with multiple, varied opportunities to engage in language and communication, early childhood educators can help equip children with the skills they need to thrive in preschool and beyond.

# Resources

The following resources are listed to provide additional information related to the practices presented in this guide.

## Language Development

The *Zero to Three* organization has a range of resources geared toward promoting the early language and literacy of infants and toddlers. The resources may be found at: <http://www.zerotothree.org/child-development/early-language-literacy/tips-tools-early-lit-and-lang.html>

*Early Head Start* has a tip sheet on supporting infant and toddler language development. The tip sheet (Number 42) can be found at: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/ehsnrc/Early%20Head%20Start/family-engagement/language-culture/EHS-Tip-Sheet-42.htm>

*Indicators of Individual Growth and Development for Infants and Toddlers (IGDI's)* are a set of measures designed and validated by the Juniper Gardens Children's Project for use by early childhood educators to monitor infant and toddler growth and progress. One of the IGDI's measures growth in children's early communication. Additional information can be found at: <http://www.igdi.ku.edu/index.htm>

*Strategies to Promote Communication and Language in Infants and Toddlers* (2009). This guide provides early childhood educators with information on how to promote communication skills in infants and toddlers. Published by the Juniper Gardens Children's Project, the guide can be found at: [http://www.igdi.ku.edu/interventions/Promoting\\_Communication\\_rev3-19-09.pdf](http://www.igdi.ku.edu/interventions/Promoting_Communication_rev3-19-09.pdf)

*My Toddler Talks: Strategies and Activities to Promote Your Child's Language Development* (2012, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform). This book by Kimberly Scanlon is geared toward parents, but has tips, techniques and activities that early childhood educators may find helpful when working with children 18–36 months old.

*Bridging the Vocabulary Gap: What Research Tells Us about Vocabulary Instruction in Early Childhood* (2010). This article written by Tanya Christ and X. Christine Wang and published by the National Association for the Education of Young Children gives early childhood educators information on how educators can help children learn new words. The article can be found at: <http://www.naeyc.org/files/yc/file/201007/ChristWangOnline.pdf>

## Sign Language

*Baby Signs: How to Talk with Your Baby before Your Baby Can Talk* (2009, 3RD edition, McGraw-Hill). This book by Linda Acredolo and Susan Goodwyn is a guide for teaching parents how to sign to their babies starting at 7 months old using the American Sign Language approach. Although the book is targeted to parents, early childhood educators may find it helpful for teaching young children the most common signs. The book includes ASL signs and “baby-friendly” alternatives.

*Sign Language With Babies: What Difference Does it Make?* (2010). This article written by Susan Kubic Barnes in the *Dimensions of Early Childhood* (volume 38, number 1) provides readers with background information on using sign language with babies and summarizes the research findings. The article can be found at: [http://sprechende-haende.de/cms/upload/pdf/Sign\\_Language\\_With\\_Babies\\_What\\_Difference\\_Does\\_It\\_Make\\_Susan\\_Kubic\\_Barnes\\_Volume\\_38\\_Issue\\_1.pdf](http://sprechende-haende.de/cms/upload/pdf/Sign_Language_With_Babies_What_Difference_Does_It_Make_Susan_Kubic_Barnes_Volume_38_Issue_1.pdf)

*Baby Signing 1-2-3: The Easy-to-Use Illustrated Guide for Every Stage and Every Age* (2007, Sourcebooks). This book by Nancy Cadjan describes how to use signs with infants and toddlers and includes a baby sign language dictionary.

## Music Activities

The *eXtension Alliance for Better Child Care* has a list of favorite children's rhymes, finger plays and songs that early childhood educators can use with young children. The list can be found at: <http://campus.extension.org/mod/data/view.php?id=9296>



*Songs, Rhymes, and Finger Plays. Zero to Three* has compiled a list of songs, rhymes and finger plays in English and Spanish. The list can be found at: <http://www.zerotothree.org/early-care-education/early-language-literacy/songsengspan.pdf>

*Beyond Twinkle, Twinkle: Using Music with Infants and Toddlers* (2010). This article provides early childhood educators with information on how to use music activities with infants and toddlers in a child care setting. The article can be found at: <http://www.naeyc.org/files/yc/file/201003/ParlakianWeb0310.pdf>

## Book Reading Activities

*The eXtension Alliance for Better Child Care* has a list of book reading activities, or story stretching activities that educators can use to connect activities with children's favorite books. The activities can be found at: <http://campus.extension.org/mod/data/view.php?id=6759>

## Emergent Literacy

*Reading Rockets* is an organization dedicated to teaching children to read. The website contains articles and videos on topics related to teaching children how to read, including information on strengthening children's language skills. While the information on the website is primarily focused on school-age children, there is a section of the website devoted to young children and early childhood educators. This information can be found at: [http://www.readingrockets.org/atoz/preschool\\_child\\_care/](http://www.readingrockets.org/atoz/preschool_child_care/)

## General Early Childhood Education Practices

*Teaching Our Youngest: A Guide for Preschool Teachers and Child Care and Family Providers* (2002). This guide provides early childhood educators with research-based activities that can help children develop strong language skills, as well other emergent literacy skills. The guide was published by Early Childhood-Head Start Task Force of the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and can be found at: <http://www2.ed.gov/teachers/how/early/teachingouryoungest/index.html>

*Creating Language-Rich Preschool Classrooms and Environments* (2004). This article by Laura Justice provides information that early childhood educators may use to set up classrooms that offer children language opportunities. While the article is geared toward preschool-age children, professionals working with infants and toddlers may find the information helpful. Published by the Council for Exceptional Children, the article can be found at: <http://ici-bostonready-pd-2009-2010.wikispaces.umb.edu/file/view/Creating+Language+Rich+Preschool+Classroom+Environments.pdf>

## Dual Language Learners

*One Child, Two Languages: A Guide for Early Childhood Educators of Children Learning English as a Second Language* (2008; 2ND edition, Brookes Publishing Company). This book by Patton O. Tabors describes second language learning for young children and provides educators with suggestions for techniques to facilitate children's language learning.

*Selecting Culturally Appropriate Children's Books in Languages other than English and How to Use Bilingual Books.* The National Center on Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness has published guides for educators on strategies they can use to support the language development of dual language learners. The guides can be found at: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/cultural-linguistic/center/NCCLRQuickGuide.htm>

*Strategies for Supporting All Dual Language Learners.* This guide present different ways that educators can support the language development of dual language learners. The guide is available at: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/cultural-linguistic/docs/dll-strategies.pdf>



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