



# Vision statement

language stimulation and multilingualism

Kind & Gezin

**This vision statement is the product of the cooperation with the external advisory group on 'Language Stimulation and Multilingualism':**

Sanghmitra Bhutani, Minorities forum (Minderhedenforum)

An Bistmans, Flemish Support Centre for Adult Education (Vlaams Ondersteuningscentrum voor het volwassenenonderwijs - VOCVO)

Ann Boeraeve, Flemish Minority Centre (Vlaams Minderhedencentrum)

Caroline Boudry, the Resource and Research Centre for Early Childhood Care and Education (VBJK)

Mieke Coulebier, Federation of Centres for Adult Basic Education

Els Deslé, Dutch Language House of Brussels

Hilde Vanderheyden, Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Training (AKOV)

Tania Van Acker, Stichting Lezen

Piet Van Avermaet, Centre for Diversity and Learning (Steunpunt Diversiteit en Leren - SDL), Ghent University

Siska Van Daele, Flemish Community Commission (Vlaamse Gemeenschapscommissie - VGC)

Sandra Van der Mespel, VBJK

Sarah Van Tilburg, Stichting Lezen

Machteld Verhelst, Centre for Language and Education, KU Leuven University

Tine Rommens, Kind en Gezin (K&G), Coordination Department

Katleen Govaert, Kind en Gezin (K&G), Coordination Department

Els Pauels, Kind en Gezin (K&G), Child care Department

Kathy Jacobs, Kind en Gezin (K&G), Preventive Family Support Department

## Content

<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2. Why work on language stimulation and multilingualism?</b>	<b>4</b>
2.1. The right of every child to development	4
2.2. The right to participation	4
2.3. The right of every child to support	4
2.4. The right of every child to the development of the home language as part of his or her identity	5
2.5. Conclusion	5
<b>3. Language in facts, figures and research</b>	<b>6</b>
3.1. Delayed language development	6
3.2. Attachment and language development	6
Safe stable relationships between child and parents or primary caregivers	6
Mutually stimulating interaction between child and parents or primary caregivers	6
3.3. Home languages	6
3.4. Language and disadvantage	7
3.5. Research and practice	8
The language acquisition of a child goes through a strong individual process Social status of the child	8
Language skills	9
Language development as a natural occurrence	9
Factors in terms of services that promote language development	9
Home language and common language	9
Child and family focused	10
<b>4. The current offer of language stimulation support and importance of multilingualism in preventive family support and child care</b>	<b>11</b>
4.1. The services provided within preventive family support	11
4.2. The services provided within child care.	12
<b>5. Policy choices of Kind en Gezin (K&amp;G) regarding language stimulation</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Annexes</b>	<b>14</b>

## 1. Introduction



Before a baby utters his or her first words, he or she has already made a lot of attempts to establish contact with the people in his or her environment. A baby is an expert in charming smiles or cute pouts and can produce a whole range of sounds. Sometimes he or she imitates entire dialogues in a babble; other times he or she loudly expresses his or her displeasure. Crowing, singing, crying all at once, an infant 'welcomes' everyone in his or her vicinity.

No greater wonder than a baby who suddenly, very clearly says "Mummy" or "Daddy" and over time produces his or her very own vocabulary with which to express his or her basic needs such as hunger, thirst, sleep, movement, affection, safety, etc.

Language development is not only wonderful; it is also an essential part of the overall development of the child. Language is a means of communication: through speech, thought, imagination... children come in contact with their environment and can explain 'with words' how they have experienced what surrounds them.<sup>1</sup> Where the environment is designed to produce a response, this gives children a sense of safety, making it easier for them to pursue their development. It develops the individual child's own identity, which is also in line with its need for closeness with other children and adults.

Language has an impact on the child's thought process and vice versa. Language is a kind of filter for reality. It helps to process and interpret sensations. Words are linked to things, for example the word 'pain' is connected to the feeling of discomfort. Language also helps develop one's self-image and identity. Gradually, the pronoun "I" acquires meaning. Finally, language is also an important tool for social development. It supports the individual so that he or she can belong to a group and function in a group.

Some parents have questions about their child's language development. Especially in situations where the language development of children does not happen that smoothly or when parents are worried about their child. Furthermore, in situations where the home language is not Dutch, or when both parents speak a different language, parents often have questions. Language is a subject that requires suitable consideration in both child care and preventive family support. Within *Kind en Gezin*, the expertise on the language development of children from birth to the age of three years is rather limited and fragmented at the moment. There is also a lack of a sound vision and underlying framework. This vision statement is a first step towards remedying those shortcomings.

This document focuses in the first place on two policy departments of *Kind en Gezin*: Child care and Preventive Family Support. On the basis of this text, it is possible to formulate in an action plan how the needs of children, parents and their environment can be supported within the remit of preventive family support and child care.

The policy choices developed in this vision statement are in compliance with the applicable language legislation.

<sup>1</sup> By 'language' we mean the words with which we express our feelings and thoughts. This text deals primarily with the spoken language. By 'communication' we refer to the wide range of means used to convey and receive messages.

## 2. Why work on language stimulation and multilingualism?



Since the scope of *Kind en Gezin* is to offer every child as many development opportunities as possible, stimulating language and handling multilingualism is one of their concerns. Development is viewed in the broadest sense; it covers the development of gross and fine motor skills, mental, sensory and social-emotional development, language development, etc. The choice to tackle the issue of language stimulation is also included in the 2009-2014 policy letter of Flemish Minister for Welfare, Public Health and Family Jo Vandeurzen. It states namely: "Language stimulation in child care is also an important matter. Through child care, children are able to further develop their language, which is so important."<sup>2</sup> *Kind en Gezin* believes that it is important to fully integrate the matter of language stimulation into the different policy domains and not limit it to child care.

As two core values, *Kind en Gezin* puts children's rights and diversity at the heart of its activities: these constitute the drivers for making strategic choices and implementing associated projects and actions. The United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) contains several articles in which the right of the child to develop in an environment characterised by equality and respect for diversity is central.

The CRC is one of the guiding principles supporting the policy choice of *Kind en Gezin* to encourage language stimulation in young children. In addition, the Convention may also provide a framework for the further implementation of the actions.

### 2.1. The right of every child to development

Article six of the CRC defines the right of every child to development and the duty of governments to ensure this right.<sup>3</sup> One of the aspects of the development of a child is the development of language. The development of language is important for the intellectual and emotional growth of children. *Kind en Gezin* seeks to stimulate children's development of language as an important aspect of their overall development.

### 2.2. The right to participation

The right of children to participation in society is at the centre of the CRC. This right is implied again and again throughout the Convention. It includes, among others, the right of every child

to privacy, the right to unite, etc.

The ability to speak a language fluently promotes the participation of children in society. Children with special needs or children who do not speak the common language well or at all run the risk of not being able to fully participate in society.

*Kind en Gezin* seeks to support language development in all children. In addition, *Kind en Gezin* would also like to encourage young children to learn the Dutch language. Making parents aware of the importance of this is an important task. Learning Dutch can offer children great added value in the pursuit of their schooling, their participation in associative life, their general development (cognitive, socio-emotional, etc.).

### 2.3. The right of every child to support

Non-discrimination is one of the basic principles of the Convention. This principle is explained in article two of the CRC.<sup>4</sup> The article states that all rights apply to all children, without any exception, and that the State Parties are obliged to protect children against any form of discrimination. All children are equal.

In the policy and services of *Kind en Gezin*, these principles constitute a prerequisite implying the need for constant efforts. This is illustrated by the demand-oriented work in preventive family support, inclusive child care for children with special needs, the search for accessible and effective communication carriers, etc.

It is important to stimulate and to monitor the language development of children already at a very young age, considering that it determines their further language development and language capital when they become adults. In addition, language plays a role in the social status of children: being able to speak Dutch fluently is an element of citizenship.

*Kind en Gezin* strives to stimulate the development of language in all children. This means that it is necessary to find methodologies and angles that appeal to all parents and children, are effective, and meet the questions of all parents. In addition, *Kind en Gezin* intends to monitor each child as much as possible and offer further support when there is concern about the language development. Actually, a great deal of factors may affect the development of language: long-term illness, insufficient stimulation, autism, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Welzijn, Volksgezondheid en Gezin (2009). Beleidsnota 2009-2014 [Welfare, Public Health and Family (2009). Policy document 2009-2014], p. 29.

<sup>3</sup> See Annex 3

<sup>4</sup> See Annex 4

## 2.4. The right of every child to the development of the home language as part of his or her identity

Article 29 of the CRC contains a description of the objectives and principles towards which education should be directed.<sup>5</sup> One of these principles is the respect for the child's parents, for his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate and for civilisations different from his or her own. Article 30 expressly states that every child has the right to 'use his or her own language'.<sup>6</sup>

To acquire the home language amounts to learning the language used in the primary social environment of the child.<sup>7</sup> The child acquires a specific home language from his or her immediate environment, including certain peculiarities (such as lisp) or dialect forms. It should be pointed out here that there can be several home languages within one family.

*Kind en Gezin* seeks to stimulate the development of the home language. Learning and experiencing one's own language is one of every child's basic rights. It constitutes a very important part of his or her identity.

Furthermore, having learnt the home language well provides a solid foundation for learning other languages.

## 2.5. Conclusion

Children have the right to development. Children have the right to participation in society. They have the right to their own language and their own identity. All children are equal. Consequently, the role of *Kind en Gezin* is to encourage language stimulation in young children.

On the one hand, *Kind en Gezin* strives to stimulate the overall development of language in all children. This relates to learning the home language and supporting children with special needs in the area of language development. And on the other hand, *Kind en Gezin* seeks to encourage children to learn the Dutch language.

This should create a maximum of opportunities for them, while fighting discrimination.

<sup>5</sup> See Annex 2

<sup>6</sup> See Annex 3

<sup>7</sup> Education defines 'home language' as the language used for common communication within the family. In reception education for non-Dutch speaking newcomers in main stream education (onthaalonderwijs voor anderstalige nieuwkomers - OKAN), 2006

### 3. Language in facts, figures and research



#### 3.1. Delayed language development

On the basis of extensive literature research, Dr. Reep-van den Bergh et al. indicate that the prevalence of developmental language disorders in children around the age of two is globally estimated at 5%.<sup>8</sup> A child has a speech and/or language disorder if speech, language comprehension and/or language production are slower or develop differently in comparison with other children from the same age group.

Van Agt et al. indicate that the delay already has real consequences at a young age on the behaviour and the quality of life of the child. Early diagnosis of a language delay is therefore crucial.<sup>9</sup>

#### 3.2. Attachment and language development<sup>10</sup>

##### Safe stable relationships between child and parents or primary caregivers

An emotional bond is created between the child and the parents or primary caregivers. A child needs this affective bond to feel safe and have the opportunity to discover the world. In the knowledge that he or she can rely on a secure base, the child will want and be able to explore more and more of his or her surroundings and will be able to develop well.

##### Mutually stimulating interaction between child and parents or primary caregivers

Repeated research shows that mutually stimulating interactions are prerequisites for the development of healthy brain activity and increasingly complex skills.

A mutually stimulating interaction consists of the following components:

- Sensitive and responsive actions

This is the ability to be receptive to the signals sent by one's child and respond to these in a correct and direct manner.

- Mentalisation

This is the parent's ability to understand the real state of mind of the child, to reflect and express it and, in doing so, to reassure the child. One thus gives children verbally and physically the impression that one acknowledges their feelings and thoughts, without assimilating them.

Reciprocity is very important in this case as it is the basis of every communication. If the communication goes well, the attachment is strengthened, the child feels better and there is a better interaction.

Based on the attachment theory, it can be argued that acknowledging and giving the home language a place in the life of young children is positive for the well-being and the emotional bond that children have with others. It ensures that they can feel safe and happy.

#### 3.3. Home languages

For an increasing number of children it is normal to grow up using several languages within their family. In everyday life, many children will naturally use two or more languages. In the 'Kinderen in Europa' [Children in Europe] journal, Perregaux writes on the subject of language: "Today, multilingualism is the norm. (...) The idea that people can know only one language if they want to speak and write it perfectly (which in reality is almost impossible), brings discredit to those who know different languages partially. This can be in the spoken and/or written form."<sup>11</sup>

8 Reep-van den Bergh, C.M.M., de Koning, H.J., de Ridder-Sluiter, J.G., van der Lem, G.J. & van der Maas, P.J. (1998). Prevalentie van taalontwikkelingsstoornissen bij kinderen [The prevalence of child developmental language disorders]. *Tijdschrift voor Gezondheidswetenschappen*, 76, 311-317.

9 Van Agt, H.M.E. & de Koning, H.J. (2005). Vroegtijdige onderkenning taalontwikkelingsstoornissen 0-3 jaar. 8 jaar follow-up studie. [Early identification of developmental language disorders 0-3 years. 8-year follow-up study]. Rotterdam: Erasmus Medical Center.

10 Geenen, G., Van den Bruel, B. & Vanden Avenue, S. (2009). Belangrijke elementen voor de basishouding van een regioteamlid vanuit een psychodynamische invalshoek en vanuit de gehechtheidstheorie. [Important elements for the basic attitude of a regional team member from a psychodynamic perspective and based on the attachment theory.] *Kind en Gezin*: unpublished text

11 Perregaux, C. (2007). Als een jonge haan kon miauwen: een vroege passie voor talen ontwikkelen [What if a young rooster could meow: developing an early passion for languages.] *Kinderen in Europa*, 11, 12-13.

Figures from the 'Kind in Vlaanderen' [Child in Flanders] 2009 annual report tell us that 78.8% of the children born in 2008 in the Flemish region have Dutch as their home language.<sup>12</sup> The language that the mother speaks with the child is used as an indicator.<sup>13</sup> In 21.2% of the newborns, the mother speaks another language at home, especially French (4.2%), Arabic (3.7%) and Turkish (3%).

In the provinces of Flemish Brabant and Antwerp in particular, Kind en Gezin identified a lot of mothers who speak a language other than Dutch with their child: 31% in Flemish Brabant, almost 28% in Antwerp. In Flemish Brabant, close to Brussels, that language is mainly French (16.4%). In Antwerp Arabic (6%) and Berber (4.6%) are the most common foreign languages.

The presence of a large number of children of immigrant origin presents new challenges for the educational institutions in Europe. Within the European Commission, a Green Paper on this subject was adopted in 2008 which opens the debate on how policy can take on these challenges.<sup>14</sup>

### 3.4. Language and disadvantage

The Annual Report 'Armoede en Sociale Uitsluiting 2008' [Poverty and Social Exclusion 2008] shows that poverty reduces development scores of children already from the first year of their life. This includes various development domains: not only cognitive and linguistic areas, but also motor skills, self-reliance and social-emotional development.<sup>15</sup> Language delay does not affect solely the target group of non-Dutch speakers. It has nothing to do with a specific language, such as Dutch. In fact, it has to do with insufficient language skills.

The Unicef Report Card 8 of the Innocenti Research Centre from 2008 states in particular:  
*"educational disadvantage is strongly associated with home background and becomes measurable even before formal schooling begins. Three-year-old children of more educated parents, for example, often have double the vocabulary of children from poorer, less educated homes and are significantly more likely to achieve higher qualifications by the age of 15."*<sup>16</sup> It is clear that language delay is not only linked to the fact of speaking a different language, but primarily to the socioeconomic status of families.

Not having Belgian nationality undeniably increases the chance of ending up in the underprivileged group. The 'at-risk-of-poverty threshold' has been calculated within the European Union. This is an indicator to show the degree of financial poverty. A family has reached the 'at-risk-of-poverty' threshold if its disposable income per person is lower than 60% of the median disposable income of the country.

At European level, it has been established that children who are part of an 'immigrant household' are at much greater risk of poverty than children whose parents were born in the host country (EU - The Social Protection Committee, 2008). In Belgium this disparity is particularly striking: the risk of poverty of children who live in an 'immigrant household' is more than 60% here and is therefore five times greater than the risk of poverty of children whose parents were born in Belgium.<sup>17</sup>

Based on the Health Survey of 2001 and 2004, 10.5% of the Flemings live below the poverty line (60% of median standardised monthly disposable income).<sup>18</sup>

The risk of poverty is much greater for non-EU citizens: between 2001 and 2004, 49% of this group were living below the poverty line.

Out of all the children born in Flanders in 2009, 8.3% were born in an underprivileged family. Disadvantage is hereby defined as a long-term condition where people are restricted in their opportunities to participate sufficiently in high-valued social goods, such as education, employment and housing. In comparison with 2008, this percentage has slightly increased. And compared to 2001, this ratio has increased by 2.4%. The mother of almost 6 out of 10 children born to a poor family did not have the Belgian nationality at the birth of her child.<sup>19</sup>

12 Kind en Gezin (2010). Het kind in Vlaanderen 2009. Brussel. [The child in Flanders 2009. Brussels]

13 According to registrations with Kind en Gezin.

14 Commission of the European Communities (2008). Green paper Migration and Mobility: Challenges for EU Education Systems. Go to: [http://ec.europa.eu/education/focus/focus842\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/focus/focus842_en.htm)

15 Vranken, J., Campaert, G., De Boyser, K., Dewilde, C. & Dierckx, D. (red.) (2008). Armoede en Sociale Uitsluiting. Jaarboek 2008 [Poverty and social exclusion. Year book 2008] (p. 147-149). Leuven/Voorburg: Acco.

16 UNICEF, Innocenti Research Centre (2008). Report Card 8, The child care transition. A league table of early childhood education and care in economically advanced countries (p. 35).

17 Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities (2008). Child Poverty and Well-Being in the EU, Current status and way forward (p. 63-65), 2008, p. 63-65

18 Gezondheidsenquête 2001 en 2004, OASeS-berekeningen [2001 and 2004 health surveys, OASeS calculations], in Vranken, J., Campaert, G., De Boyser, K., Dewilde, C. & Dierckx, D. (red.) (2008). Armoede en Sociale Uitsluiting. Jaarboek 2008 [Poverty and social exclusion. Year book 2008]. Leuven/Voorburg: Acco, p. 333-334.

19 Kind en Gezin (2010). Kansarmoedegegevens 2009 [2009 data on disadvantage].

### 3.5. Research and practice

In her paper 'Fostering language acquisition in day care settings. What does the research tell us?' Simone Beller suggests that there is insufficient and only patchy empirical research on the acquisition of a first and a second language in young children.<sup>20</sup> It is often based on assumptions which are insufficiently tested. Consequently, there is insufficient evidence that the language development of children of immigrants should progress at a slower pace. However, their language development is different and there are significant individual differences. It is also unfair to assume that children who use at the same time words from their home language and from the common language are not able to properly distinguish between the two. Essentially, children will keep trying to communicate. If need be, they will use another communication strategy.

There is no proof either that pre-schoolers will learn a second language faster in comparison with older children. In addition, there are misconceptions as to what should be the parents' role. It has not been proven that, at home, parents should focus on the acquisition of the second language.

On the contrary, Beller states that parents should be advised to keep communicating in the home language, or in a language through which they can provide their child with a rich and stimulating verbal environment. A review of the literature also shows that the relationship between language development and school success is complex and cannot be explained in simple terms.

Despite the lack of empirical research on language acquisition in young children, there are a number of research reports and practices which are relevant within this vision statement.

#### The language acquisition of a child goes through a strong individual process

Children go through 'sensitive periods' during which they are more susceptible to acquiring language. In this respect, the first three years of their life are crucial. During those years, children are the most open to influences from parents and primary caregivers in their environment.

The development of language can be subdivided in a number of major development stages:

- The pre-language stage: from sounds of comfort to babble
- The early language stage: from one-word to two-word phrases

- The differentiation stage: longer and more complex sentences, refined pronunciation, explosion in the vocabulary, extension of the communicative function of language with non-verbal communication
- The completion stage

The pace at which a child learns a language, however, differs significantly from child to child. The structure and the connections in the brain of a child evolve during the first three years of his or her life. Even though this is partly genetically determined, the individual experiences of a child nonetheless play a very decisive role.

Simultaneously with the development of the brain, certain neural patterns or connections occur, and the child acquires a number of skills. The language development of children goes through a whimsical pattern and is very susceptible to influences.

For example, some children may not utter their first word before the age of two.

The foundations of the cognitive, linguistic, social and emotional skills, which are interlinked, are laid in these first years of their life.

#### Social status of the child

The researchers Blommaert and Van Avermaet indicate that a ban on the use of the home language in an educational context does not automatically lead to more language proficiency in standard Dutch.<sup>21</sup> On the contrary, a ban reinforces the stigma, the growing gap and segregation between the language groups. The central assumption of the researchers is that the approach to language and proposed language pedagogy do not take into account the crucial factor that determines opportunities, i.e. the child's social status. To illustrate this they comment that a deficiency in the Dutch language is not a problem for the children of Eurocrats for instance. They just go to an expensive international school, thus turning the fact that they do not speak Dutch into an advantage instead of a disadvantage. "Multilingualism in the former language is an advantage and a bonus on the labour market, while multilingualism in the latter language is an obstacle to integration."

For example, the multilingualism of a child in Flanders may be viewed differently if a child has Turkish or English as his or her home language.

<sup>20</sup> Beller, S. (2008). Fostering language acquisition in day care settings. What does the research tell us? (p.54) Bernard van Leer Foundation.

<sup>21</sup> Blommaert, J. & Van Avermaet, P. (2008). Taal, onderwijs en de samenleving. De kloof tussen beleid en realiteit (p.120). [Language, education and society. The gap between policy and reality]. Epo.

## Language skills

The framework for the acquisition of a second language among toddlers of the Dutch Language Union, emphasizes language skills, the ability to understand and produce language messages in a communicative context.

The person who does not have sufficient language skills runs the risk of being socially excluded. The person who cannot understand the language messages in his or her environment, and who is himself or herself limited in the messages he or she can produce, cannot fully participate in what is happening around him or her, with all the negative consequences this implies. A shortage of language skills can – directly or indirectly – impact all kinds of aspects of a person’s development and personality.

Van den Branden and Verhelst say the following in this respect: “Toddlers must, above all, use language as a means to develop fully – i.e. in social, emotional, and cognitive terms, as well as motor skills – in their environment.”<sup>22</sup>

## Language development as a natural occurrence

Young children acquire language better in informal situations and in daily acts rather than in formal classroom settings. Language development therefore is a natural occurrence. Language stimulation works best if it is done in a fun and casual way, in response to the children’s own contribution, and is sufficiently concrete. Language stimulation should therefore not be limited to fostering teaching of the Dutch language at school.

## Factors in terms of services that promote language development

Research carried out by e.g. Hart and Risley shows that especially the amount of verbal interaction between parents and children has a very strong influence on the language development of young children.<sup>23</sup> Especially at times when parents practice small talk with their child, when no direct instructions are involved, young children learn a lot, which in turn has positive effects on their language development.

Also the research of Dr. Verhelst on language acquisition in pre-schoolers reveals important findings which are also relevant for younger children.<sup>24</sup> Consideration should be given to provide every child with a rich and varied range of languages.

Toddlers should be implicitly prompted to produce words spontaneously and get practice opportunities, rather than having early production that is enforced or forced. Failing that, one often sees that students are fearful at the prospect of facing a second language.<sup>25</sup>

Research shows that nursery school teachers tend to give feedback especially on the toddlers’ production of language. Toddlers who produce less, i.e. whose productive acquisition must therefore be stimulated, are addressed less and obtain fewer opportunities to speak.

It is also a misunderstanding that a toddler who produces a lot of words, also performs well when it comes to understanding. Consequently, it should not be assumed that one no longer has to worry about the receptive skills (understanding) of a toddler who has good productive language skills, or about the productive language skills of a toddler who has receptive skills.

Children who have less self-esteem and exhibit a lower social-affective profile are less receptive to the range of languages offered and they also utter less language.

A tolerant child-oriented attitude should be able to offer every child the time he or she needs, without putting pressure on the children to express themselves verbally. The non-verbal communication attempts of each child should be recognised and systematically expressed.

For example: “Do you want this? Do you want me to take this for you?” The more directly the children are addressed, the greater the likelihood that children will understand what is being said.

## Home language and common language

Beller and other researchers advise caregivers to learn to speak some important words in the home language of the child.

This is a positive signal for the child; it means that his or her language is welcome and is equally useful in communication as the other language. This can motivate a child to integrate more within the group.

It is important that parents be informed about the importance of language stimulation and language activities at home, whether this concerns the first or the second language of the child. Research shows that contacts with peers and contacts with media (watching television and reading books together) have a positive influence on the language development of the child.

22 Van den Branden, K. & Verhelst, M. (2008). Naar een volwaardig talenbeleid. Omgaan met meertaligheid in het onderwijs. [Towards a comprehensive language policy. Dealing with multilingualism in education.]

Tijdschrift voor Onderwijsrecht en Onderwijsbeleid, p. 315-332.

23 Hart, B. & Risley, T. (1995). Meaningful Differences in Everyday Experiences of Young American Children. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

24 Verhelst M. (2002). De relatie tussen mondeling taalaanbod en woordenschatverwerving van het Nederlands als tweede taal door 2,5-jarige allochtone kleuters in Brussel [The relationship between oral language offer and vocabulary acquisition of Dutch as a second language in 2.5-year-old immigrant children in Brussels]. Doctoral dissertation. Leuven: KU Leuven.

25 Dulay, H., Burt, M., Krashen, S. D. (1982). Language two. New York: Oxford University Press.

Van den Branden and Verhelst also state that ensuring Dutch language skills in the education of all pupils can be perfectly combined with dealing with multilingualism in a positive way.<sup>26</sup> The researchers are arguing that the issue regarding multilingualism should be made more explicit and be given a place in debates on education and the Flemish society. In addition to the pilot projects focused on positively handling multilingualism, teaching staff management and teacher training should be able to build up further expertise through networks. They also advocate actions for parents so that these may be more able to communicate with school teams and thus be in a position to fully participate in what is happening at school. The lines of communication with non-Dutch-speaking parents should be kept as open as possible, in conjunction with stimulating the acquisition of the Dutch language.

Parents whose home language is not the common language often struggle with the question of how they can educate their child in a bilingual setting. If parents can be reassured that their home language is recognised and supported in the fulfilment of the aspiration they have for their children, namely "How can my child learn fluent Dutch while also learning to speak my home language proficiently?", then it is possible to accompany them along the way. In many families, maintaining a one-sided focus on learning Dutch does not achieve much.

Furthermore, in efforts to make parents aware that they should send their children to nursery school (participation of young children), a unilateral focus on learning the Dutch language is often counterproductive. By reassuring parents that the use of the home language is positive in addition to Dutch and informing them about the positive effects of the nursery school on the overall development of their child, parents may be convinced to do so while putting their minds at rest.<sup>27</sup>

It is important to give the home language a fully fledged place. Learning a language makes children sensitive to language and they therefore develop the necessary language skills (including the ability to perceive sounds, the ability to form sounds, the capacity to understand words, the capacity to understand sentences, the ability to produce sentences) for good language acquisition.

Children who grow up in a 'language deprived' environment, later acquire any language with great difficulty and with deficiencies.

### Child and family focused

Researchers Magnuson and Waldfogel state that only very high-quality pre-school facilities, including day care, can reduce the educational gap, jointly with measures regarding group size, the ratio between the staff and children, and the training requirements for that staff.<sup>28</sup>

Long-term research also shows that child care can have positive effects on the cognitive and social development, including the language development of children, provided that the child care is of high quality.<sup>29</sup> The impact is greatest on disadvantaged children, especially when the pre-school care brings together children from different backgrounds. According to the data collected, there appears to be a positive link between the benefits and the quality of the programme and the qualifications of the staff.

The fact that the quality of many pre-school programmes is often substandard, that these are temporary and may lead to segregation is detrimental.

Based on numerous studies quoted in a recent publication of the European Commission, it appears that the 'combination model' is the most effective way to achieve long-term positive effects for children.<sup>30</sup> In this model, the involvement of parents in the operation of high-quality pre-school facilities is essential. In practice, this is often narrowly described as 'inform and advise parents'. Facilities that welcome parents with the aim to enter into a partnership with them remain limited to a number of recent projects. In the publication of the European Union, a facility that combines different services and adopts various care functions in a neighbourhood-based pre-school centre is presented as a possible model with lots of potential. This model is both child and family oriented and offers full-time child care, play groups, leisure activities for young children, as well as family-based support programmes.

26 Van den Branden, K. & Verhelst, M. (2008). Naar een volwaardig talenbeleid. Omggaan met meertaligheid in het onderwijs. [Towards a comprehensive language policy. Dealing with multilingualism in education] In: Tijdschrift voor Onderwijsrecht en Onderwijsbeleid, p. 315-332.

27 Balli, S. (2009). Opvoedingsondersteuning in een multiculturele samenleving. [Parenting support in a multicultural society] Lecture given at Second Flemish Parenting Support Congress in Brussels.

28 Magnuson, K. A. & Waldfogel, J. (2005). Early Childhood care and education: Effects on ethnic and racial gaps in school readiness. *Future of Children*, 15(1).

29 Siraj-Blatchford, I., Sylva, K., Taggart, B. Sammons, P., Melhuish, E. & Elliot, K. (2003). Technical Paper 10 - The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Intensive Case Studies of Practice across the Foundation Stage. London: DfEE / Institute of Education, University of London

30 Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (2009). *Early Childhood Educations and Care in Europe: Tackling Social and Cultural Inequalities*. Brussels: European Commission.

## 4. The current offer of language stimulation support and importance of multilingualism in preventive family support and child care



### 4.1. The services provided within preventive family support

Language development and stimulation falls within the internal services provided by the preventive family support of *Kind en Gezin*. All kinds of projects, from different angles and various local initiatives are put together for various target groups. This text is a perfect opportunity to take stock of the existing fragmentation and outline a clear framework, in order to clarify the vision and approach within preventive family support.

The topic of 'language development, language stimulation and reading promotion' is integrated in various ways within the project work of a number of teams. Here are some examples:

- Hasselt: 'Het project leesstimulerend' [project on fostering reading].  
The project aims to increase and reinforce in young children the pleasure derived from reading by raising awareness among parents to practice reading with their child in a pleasant and relaxing way using little books. Different actions have been or are being developed for that purpose:
  - Transformation of the infant welfare clinics into environments filled with books
  - Information and raising awareness of parents using flyers
  - Group activities for immigrant and disadvantaged parents
  - Group advice: reading together, design a do-it-yourself book in conjunction with a preparation for nursery school
  - College students will develop a game in relation to language stimulation
- Oudenaarde: 'Van zelf spreken, vanzelfsprekend?' [Naturally speaking, this goes without saying?] With this project, the regional team proposes to offer parents from the birth of their child a detailed package concerning the communication with their child and his or her language development.  
Through the provision of care services, too, they want to detect and refer as quickly as possible problems that may occur in the field. The goal is to achieve fast language acquisition in the child's case and better communication between parents and their child.

In the general preventive services to families with young children (0-3 years), monitoring of the various stages of language development and/or acquisition is achieved through screening (checks). Both the regional team members (district nurses and family support workers, each with their own remit) and the infant welfare clinic physician play an important role in this respect. For regional team members everything that concerns language and language stimulation is brought together under a learning objective.

For the infant welfare clinic physicians, the follow-up is carried out with the help of the Van Wiechen general language screening instruments.

Specific attention is given to language stimulation in the provision of parenting support services.

For instance, the DVD "Samen lukt het" [Together we will succeed], based on the ideas of Pnina Klein, a parenting expert, is distributed to parents. With "Je baby's eerste woordjes" [Your baby's first words], parents are given information on one of the issues regarding children and language. In addition, initiatives are being offered on a local basis (see above).

Through the "Bookbaby's" project, which is implemented in collaboration with Stichting Lezen (handing out of book packages in pilot regions, the "Bookbaby's" booklet in all infant welfare centres across Flanders), the concept of 'working on language' is clearly put into practice with the help of books that children can read or be read to. At the age of six months, and from 2010, fifteen months, infants and toddlers get a fun brochure which promotes reading activities.

In guiding and preparing toddlers towards nursery school (actions in the context of participation of young children), *Kind en Gezin* underscores the importance of language skills.

The aspect of language development and stimulation also plays a part in the support provided by the regional team members (regional health nurses and family advisors) in their professional actions, including during peer supervision activities.

Furthermore, the text "Language development and multilingualism" has been drafted in support of the regional team members, which can offer a sound foundation together with the "Language development" learning objective.

In addition to our internal preventive services, we can also claim that the external partners, especially the drop-in teams, the child care and family support centres (CKGs) and the Education Stores, offer language development, language stimulation, and multilingualism in their range of services, albeit depending on the context and needs.

Here are some examples to illustrate this:

- The 'Huis der Gezinnen' drop-in team, which is located in a local multicultural context in the District of Kuregem, has been working for years around three themes: parenting support, healthy food and language stimulation. In the language stimulation group, parents and families with children from 0 to 8 years can ask questions about language and communication in relation to their children.
- The Zuidrand drop-in team (Antwerp) organises thematic groups on 'Educating children in different languages'.
- The De Hummeltjes CKG (Hasselt) is a committed partner in the local "Wonderwel" project (originated in the context of participation of young children) which has reducing language delay as one of its objectives.

*Kind en Gezin* is also taking into account those parents who do not have sufficient language skills by deploying image-based visual material, "Kind in Beeld" [The child in picture] in particular. Parents are supported by making the messages more accessible. Different themes are clarified with photos and pictograms: the toddler from 0 to 3 years, pregnancy and contraception. New additions regarding the topic of child care and the development of the toddler from 0 to 3 years were published in 2010.

This text aims to provide a basis for further identification and the exchange of good practices within and between external partners.

## 4.2. The services provided within child care

Within child care, the provision of language stimulation services is currently fragmented and often unknown. In large cities such as Antwerp, Ghent and Brussels, child care is confronted with multilingualism on a large scale. But also in smaller towns such as Genk, there are children who are growing up in a multilingual environment from birth. In the manual "Kinderopvang met sociale functie" [Child care with a social function], a number of good practices regarding multilingualism have been mentioned and integrated:

*In order to help a child get through the first difficult transitional period, staff members often learn a few words taken from the child's home language. These can be comforting words or words used frequently like 'eat', 'come' or 'sleep'. However, during group activities and in the decoration of the room, the use of home languages also plays a part. Some hang posters listing welcoming words in the children's various languages. This signals to both young and old that they are welcome, with their own language, which is treated equally next to the common language of the child care initiative. During morning circle time children learn to greet each other in the various home languages. Parents are invited to come in and tell stories in their own language or to present nursery rhymes. If children experience that the child care system acknowledges their home environment, they get a sense of belonging. The individual culture of each child at home is made manifest: in this setting, every child finds elements from his or her home environment. We want to show, integrate and value the individual and very personal elements of every family.*<sup>31</sup>

Language assistants have been assigned to day care centres in Brussels with the purpose of providing language support to caregivers in children's day care; this is co-financed by the Flemish Community Commission.

Commissioned by Brussels ondersteuningscentrum [Brussels support centre] 'Taalvaart' the "Peuterprikkels" [Toddler incentives] package was developed by the Centre for Language and Education (CLE) of KU Leuven.<sup>32</sup> The package is meant for day care facilities and offers a range of language stimulation activities. Child minders and nursery school teachers of the youngest toddler groups can also use that package.

In 2009, at the request of the FCC, the VBJK (the Resource and Research Centre for Early Childhood Care and Education) developed the DVD "Het verhaal van taal" [The story of language] focusing on multilingualism and language stimulation in child care. Using concrete examples, the DVD shows how staff in child care can support the language development of young children in a context of multilingualism.

In 2008, ECEGO (the Centre of Excellence for Experiential Education) developed a child monitoring system called ZiKo-Vo.<sup>33</sup> It is a method used to follow up in child care the experience and development of a child.

Among other aspects, the system examines the well-being and the involvement of the child and his or her language development.

<sup>31</sup> VBJK (2008). *Kinderopvang met sociale functie*.

<sup>32</sup> François, S. & Verhelst, M. (2008). *Peuterprikkels* [Toddler incentives]. Leuven: Centre for Language and Education.

<sup>33</sup> For more info about ZiKo-Vo go to [www.cego.be](http://www.cego.be)

## 5. Policy choices of Kind en Gezin (K&G) regarding language stimulation



Policy option 1: Kind en Gezin strives to stimulate the development of language in all children

The development of language is one of the main aspects of children's development. But language development is affected by all kinds of factors from a very young age. The language capital in adulthood is determined very early.

On the one hand, good language development has an impact on the well-being of children and, on the other, the relationships that children have with other people. It is important for both their emotional and intellectual growth. A timely referral should there be any concerns in this respect can prevent the occurrence of bigger problems.

Policy option 2: Kind en Gezin considers language stimulation as one of the aspects that can create more opportunities for children. At the same time, Kind en Gezin asks that the socioeconomic circumstances be viewed as a vital factor which will determine opportunities for children

Language stimulation is just one of the instruments that can be deployed to combat exclusion. However, the socioeconomic status of children is the biggest predictor of the number of opportunities they will get. *Kind en Gezin* does not want to ignore all other possible causes for exclusion. Tackling social exclusion and poverty requires a structural approach. *Kind en Gezin* intends to raise awareness on the matter amongst partners and public authorities.

Policy option 3: Kind en Gezin advocates encouraging the home language and learning the Dutch language

*Kind en Gezin* implements a language policy in which the development and acquisition of the home language first and foremost is encouraged and supported. It is important to give the home language its proper place as it makes these children sensitive to language. As a result, they develop the necessary language skills (including the ability to perceive sounds, to form sounds, to understand words, to understand sentences, to produce sentences) for good language acquisition. This makes learning a possible second language easier for them. If the home language is not Dutch, *Kind en Gezin* puts emphasis on the importance of acquiring the Dutch language as well, for both parent and child. Actually, speaking Dutch is an element of citizenship.

In its policy and concrete actions *Kind en Gezin* supports the link between appreciating the home language and stressing the importance of the Dutch language.

Policy option 4: Kind en Gezin has adopted a positive approach to language stimulation

*Kind en Gezin* approaches the development of language in young children from a positive angle. The notion of 'not yet being able' is not stressed during contacts with parents. The emphasis is on what the child can already do and on the individual progress of language development. Parents get positive reinforcement for their parenting efforts, including in the field of language stimulation.

As regards the child himself or herself, any attempt at communication and language is positively reinforced. For example, he or she is encouraged in his or her communication, resulting in a positive self-image.

## Annexes



### Annex 1

#### Article 6

1. States Parties recognise that every child has the inherent right to life.
2. States Parties shall ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child.

### Annex 2

#### Article 29

1. States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to:
  - a) The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential;
  - (b) The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations;
  - c) The development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilisations different from his or her own;
  - d) The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship between all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin;
  - e) The development of respect for the natural environment.
2. No part of the present article or article 28 shall be construed so as to interfere with the liberty of individuals and bodies to establish and direct educational institutions, subject always to the observance of the principle set forth in paragraph 1 of the present article and to the requirement that the education given in such institutions shall conform to such minimum standards as may be laid down by the State.

### Annex 3

#### Article 30

In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities or persons of indigenous origin exist, a child belonging to such a minority or who is indigenous shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her own group, to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practise his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language.

### Annex 4

#### Article 2

1. States Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status.
2. States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that the child is protected against all forms of discrimination or punishment on the basis of the status, activities, expressed opinions, or beliefs of the child's parents, legal guardians, or family members.