



Supporting parents when English isn't their first language

Many parents find helping with school work challenging, and it can be even harder if you're not a native English speaker. So how can you help your child to do their best?

If you're new to the country, or even if you have been here a while and your child is starting school in the UK for the first time, it can be an anxious time. You might be unfamiliar with the school system. You might be worried about how you will communicate effectively with your child's teacher or how you can support your child with school work. But there is support available to help you guide your child through primary school.

What help can you expect from your child's school?

Specialist support for English as an additional language (EAL) learners varies greatly across the country. 'Some areas have a team of specialist teachers and bilingual workers who work with schools to provide support and advice; some areas just have one or two specialists who can advise schools, and a few areas have no specialist support at all,' says Melanie Griffin of the British Council's [EAL Nexus project](#), which works with EAL learners, their schools, teachers and parents to promote effective teaching and learning and community involvement.

'All children in maintained schools are entitled to access to the national curriculum,' Melanie explains. 'EAL learners develop English at the same time as developing subject learning, and this works best when they are in the mainstream classroom, learning with their peers. This also has advantages for other children, who will benefit from a more language-focused curriculum and opportunities to discuss and explain their learning.'

If you're not sure if there is EAL specialist support for your child, ask at school or contact your local authority.

How can you improve your own English?

English as a second or other language (ESOL) classes are for adults learning English. You can ask at your local college, or search online for ESOL followed by the name of your town (e.g. ESOL Birmingham) to find classes in your area. [ESOL Nexus](#) and [LearnEnglish](#) also support adults learning English. You can find out more at <https://eal.britishcouncil.org/parents/improve-your-english>.

How can you help with homework if English isn't your first language?

All parents can help their children with homework and understanding what they have learned in school. 'For EAL parents, it's often best to spend your time talking to your child in your first language about homework and concepts learned at school, rather than focusing on more English-specific aspects of learning, such as reading in English and [phonics](#),' explains Melanie. '**Discussion in your first language will help your child to understand the ideas more thoroughly**, as they will be talking about them in the language they know best.' Melanie also suggests taking your child on visits to places that support their learning, such as museums or libraries, to find out more about the subject.

'If you can't read English yet and you want to help your child with their school reading, ask them to read you the story in English and then talk in your first language about what happened, what the characters said and did, what you both liked about the story, how it ended, and so on,' says Melanie. You could also find the same book in your first language and read it together.

What about parents' evenings?

Attending parents' evening can seem daunting if you don't speak much English. **If possible, ask beforehand if an interpreter will be available; if not, try to get a friend who speaks your first language and also speaks good English to go with you.** 'It's best not to use your child as an interpreter, as you're unlikely to find out how they are really doing at school if they are doing the interpreting!' Melanie says.

Even if you don't have a translator, go to parents' evening anyway. 'Your child's teacher will do their best to communicate with you, and you can see the school and your child's work,' Melanie explains. 'You will also meet your child's teacher and begin to talk about ways you can both help your child to learn.'

How can you improve your children's English language learning at home?

Always communicate with your child in your strongest language at home, as this will help to develop their language skills and their understanding of ideas, and help them to learn English at school and in the community. ‘It’s important to continue to use your first language whilst encouraging them to learn English, because learning a language fluently takes a long time, and it is very important that every child has age-appropriate language development in at least one language,’ explains Melanie. You can find more information about this at <https://eal.britishcouncil.org/parents/speaking-your-home-language>.

To help your child’s English, you can buy, or borrow from the library, books and audio books in English. Make sure that your child watches TV programmes suitable for their age, which help them with learning. **Encourage friendships with children who are first language speakers of English** as well as with those who share your own first language so that your child can develop both languages well, in a play context. The [EAL Nexus website](#) also has activities for helping them to develop their English.

What if you’re finding it hard to support your child's learning?

Ask your child’s teacher what you can do to help your child. They may suggest things you can do that don’t need you to speak English. ‘Remember that teachers may not have a lot of experience of working with EAL learners and parents, so they may feel as unsure as you do,’ Melanie adds. ‘Ask if there are any specialist EAL teachers who can advise the school and you about how to support your child.’

Think of the ways you would help your child if you were in your home country. You can do the same things here: read and tell stories in your first language, go to interesting places and talk to your child about them, take photos to remind your child and to talk about later.’ You can also look on the [EAL Nexus website](#) for ideas on how to help your child