TIPS TO PARENTS

THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND SCIENCE OF THE REPUBLIC OF LITHUANIA

the second LANGUAGE in the early years
In kindergartens, Lithuania’s ethnic minority children have the opportunity to learn both their native language and Lithuanian as the official language.

The Law on Education of the Republic of Lithuania provides that the pre-primary educational curriculum of kindergartens and schools for ethnic minority children shall provide not less than four hours per week for education in the Lithuanian language.

The involvement of parents in the process or their children’s language education is extremely important because children will learn Lithuanian language easier and better when their parents help them.

We invite parents to maintain continuous communication with kindergarten teachers and discuss how to encourage the children to take an interest in Lithuanian language and what to do to make learning Lithuanian language more successful and enjoyable.

We hope that the information provided here will be useful to parents whose children participate in pre-school and pre-primary education programmes.
I  Why communication between the parents and teachers is so important

- You are the most important partners of the teachers and coaches of the children. Only in cooperation we can expect that the children will be willing and motivated to learn Lithuanian language. You know your children best. You know what they love doing and what makes them happy. So, please tell the kindergarten’s teachers about the interests of your child, about the things he/she is most capable of doing, and about areas where further efforts may be needed. This will allow a better understanding the child’s behaviour and character and helping him/her accordingly. When talking with a teacher, inquire about how the child is doing in the kindergarten, discuss what you could do at home and what games could be played so that the child’s Lithuanian language skills improve.

- Teachers value your opinion and suggestions. Do not be shy to talk about any worries you may have. Do not hesitate to speak about anything that bothers you or about your concerns. Straight talking can not only help to resolve problems, but also prevent them. If you want to enjoy common success or receive positive observation and comments, share your opinions with the teachers – it is important for them to know that they are moving in the right direction in their work and that their efforts are not spent in vain.

- For children, it is important to feel that their parents and teachers communicate and agree. Then they feel safe, are sincere, open, and confident. In a safe psychological environment, children will succeed better in getting to learn new things.

II  How children learn languages?

Children learn differently than adults

- Language learning partly depends on the person’s age. Adults usually learn deliberately and they analyse grammatical structures, seeking to understand every word, and try to speak properly, worrying about mistakes and so on.

- Small children learn languages naturally. They accept both their native language and the other languages they hear around them as a part of their environment. Children are receptive and can learn a second language without much effort, especially if they live in a language learning environment.

- Unlike adults, children can imitate the pronunciation of another language exactly and easily remember words and grammatical structures. Children learn languages much faster than adults.

Language acquisition stages

- Children learn a second language just like they learn their native language. At the beginning, “quiet” perception dominates, when children listen to, hear and understand what adults say, but they still do not speak, while communicating mostly in motions, gestures, and facial expressions.

- Later, children begin to utter separate words and short phrases which they hear from adults and which they easily remember (for example, Labas, kaip gyveni? Ačiū, gerai.) Gradually, they begin to create coherent phrases themselves and freely express their thoughts in the second language.

The sooner, the better

- In mixed families, where parents speak different languages, children successfully master two languages from birth because they hear them at home. In single-language ethnic minority families, where parents speak the same language, children acquire one language at home, while learning the second one (Lithuanian as the official language) in kindergarten. It is recommended that children begin learning the second language as early as possible, and it is not necessary to wait until their first language skills form.
If mistakes happen
- When speaking in the native language or in another language, children often create new words or grammatical forms that have never existed in the language (for example, žmogai, atgesink šviesą). Mistakes are a natural part of the language learning process. Later, children learn regular word forms when they hear them.
- It is advisable for adults to respond to the child’s language mistakes naturally, by rephrasing the expression and saying it correctly (for example, if a child says Aš šiandien atsistojau 7 valandą, galime atsakyti – Oi, kaip anksti tu atsikėlei). When a child says a word or phrase incorrectly, you should not stress it – that would be frustrating for the child and discourage him/her from continuing to learn the language.

Possible difficulties
- Children from ethnic minority families where the parents speak one native language may experience certain difficulties when meeting a second language and beginning to learn it in the kindergarten. Children would like to express their ideas in the second language as fluently as in their native language, but fail. Therefore, they become embarrassed to speak the second language or speak less in both languages for some time. These problems disappear as the child grows and learns consistently.
- Children with language disorders are given speech therapy (logopedic) aid. Speech therapy exercises may be conducted in both languages as the child learns; however, logopedic aid in the child’s native language is more efficient. Correct pronunciation skills developed in the native language are then transferred to the second language.

Confusion of languages
- In mixed families where parents use different languages, the child either chooses the language to speak with each parent or speaks both languages with both parents. Parents should not worry when the child uses words of two languages in a single sentence. The confusion of languages in a bilingual family is a natural and inevitable thing.
- Children use words of two languages for various reasons, for example, when they do not know a specific word in one language, they use the equivalent from the other language. When interacting with people speaking in two different languages, they can use words of both languages intentionally; when they want to show that they can speak several languages, for example, to their friends.

What language to speak with the child
- Parents should speak with children in the language they understand best and prefer most. The home language strengthens the family spirit, and it is very important to children to grow up in a safe family environment. When children are fluent in their native language, they will learn the second one better.
- In mixed families, parents should speak with the child in their native language, even if the child responds in another language.
- When the child begins to learn the second language, it is important to preserve the native one. If the relatives equally value both native language and Lithuanian, the official language, then the child will form positive attitudes and will learn both languages willingly and use them properly, according to the need and situation.
What we learn

- Children first come into contact with the spoken language in their environment. They hear spoken Lithuanian language in various situations – on television, radio, in the courtyard, in the supermarkets, and so on. In the kindergarten, children also learn the spoken language – to listen, understand and speak.

- In a kindergarten for ethnic minorities, children are encouraged to take an interest in Lithuanian language by the letters of the alphabet, to recognise them and try to read short words significant to them, such as their names or the name of the city, and to rewrite them in capital letters.

- Children learn to understand Lithuanian speech and speak in Lithuanian about things that they are already aware of and understand in their native language, for example, the toys they have, things they do every day and what they love eating. These concepts are already known to them, and they only learn to name familiar things in the words of another language.

How we learn

- Teachers working in kindergartens are guided by THE DESCRIPTION OF PRE-SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN’S ACHIEVEMENTS (IKIMOKYKLINIO AMŽIAUS VAIKŲ PASIEKIMŲ APRĀŠAS), which provides a reference for children’s achievement in various areas of education by age periods. You can find the Description on the internet: www.smm.lt/uploads/documents/Pedagogams/ikimok_pasiekimu_aprasas.pdf

- The education of children during the last kindergarten year is organised in accordance with THE GENERAL PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION PROGRAMME (PRIEŠMOKYKLINIO UGDYMO BENDRAJŲ PROGRAMA), where an important role is assigned to preparing a child for school learning. You can find the Programme on the internet at the following address: www.smm.lt/uploads/documents/Prie%C5%A1mokyklinio%20ugdymo%20bendroji%20programa(3).pdf

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- Teachers seek to make the children understand their questions and explanations in Lithuanian. For this purpose, they use many pictures and objects, involving motions, gestures, and imitating things. This helps to create realistic situations and facilitates understanding of Lithuanian language.

- Children are glad and proud when they learn something new. Teachers encourage children’s independence and willingness to learn new things in every possible way, gradually assigning increasingly more complex tasks and activities developing higher abilities. Children are constantly praised, and all their friends in the group rejoice with them at their achievements. A favourable atmosphere, positive mood and psychologically safe environment create appropriate conditions for a child’s well-being and successful learning.

- Examples of best practices and helpful tips can be found in the online publication THE SECOND LANGUAGE IN THE EARLY YEARS (ANTROJI KALBA ANKSTYVAJAME AMŽIUJE): http://www.upc.smm.lt/ugdymas/mazumos/failai/leidiniai/Antroji-kalba-ankstyvajame-amzjuje-tm.pdf
Learn at home – all together

• If your Lithuanian language knowledge and skills are not excellent, learn together with the child. After coming back from the kindergarten, discuss with the child what and how well he/she did, what he/she liked, and what he/she learned to say in Lithuanian. If the child learned a song or a piece of verse, ask him/her to sing or recite it. Children will eagerly teach their family members what they liked and what they learned.

• If you have a computer, play some Lithuanian educational online games. When playing, you not only will hear the correct Lithuanian language, but will also learn new things and experience positive emotions. Inquire about what games are suitable for your child’s age, and the kindergarten teachers will advise what games are suitable for your child. After playing, ask him/her to sing or recite it. Children will eagerly teach their family members what they liked and what they learned.

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- Use every opportunity

• The YouTube portal provides plenty of video and audio clips in Lithuanian – cartoons, illustrated fairy tales, stories, verses and songs. Consult the teachers to know which cartoons, stories, and songs are suitable for your child’s age. Use picture books, which the child could look through and name what he/she sees in the figures – either in the native language or in Lithuanian. Looking through picture books develops a child’s imagination and accustoms the child to the written word and the world of books.

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- Use every opportunity

• If you like to go shopping together, encourage your child to name the products you buy in Lithuanian – especially those which the child chooses, for example, their favourite food or toys.

• If you have a chance, go to the theatre or the cinema. When watching a performance or films for children, you will not only hear Lithuanian language, but also experience lots of emotions and have a good time.

• Most important – praise your child’s efforts to speak Lithuanian, and enjoy his/her success and progress. Children are proud of understanding not only their native language, but also Lithuanian, of being able to communicate with people speaking different languages. This encourages children to take an interest in languages and helps them to understand that languages are valuable.