

When children have to translate for their parents

By JENNIFER COLTON

Not all parents in Eastern Oregon speak English. Many may be trying to learn the language; English-learning programs at Blue Mountain Community College and with local organizations often fill quickly. But when parents don't speak English well, they may turn to their closest interpreters: their children. For children, the acculturation is easier as they attend schools with peers who already speak the native language and know the cultural nuances.

Loretta Fitterer, English Language Newcomers teacher for the Hermiston School District, says she has seen children become more confident because of their family role as interpreter. "I've seen kids who were very proud of how they were able to help their parents," Fitterer says. "Oftentimes, it can be an affirmation to the child learning English. It can also be an affirmation of their worth within the family. However, it can put them in situations they're not ready for, either developmentally or language-wise."

In behavior science, those children are "language brokers," and studies and surveys show the experience enhances confidence and gives children a sense of empowerment. That confidence can lead children to perform better on tests and to improve their self-esteem as they feel useful and proud of their abilities. The stress and obligation can, however, overburden children in complicated situations.

"It can put them in situations they aren't ready for," Fitterer adds. "Sometimes they can be asked to translate above their language ability. They do their best, but sometimes they just don't know the right words or they don't understand the

situation."

Often that can be when trying to translate for medical care or in legal situations. In many cases, the children are not only translating the linguistic words, they're translating cultural nuances.

Families who don't speak English gravitate toward each other, so they may not need English to socialize. They may be able to buy groceries or basic items without speaking the language. But when it comes to going to the doctor, dentist or even the DMV, the language barrier becomes an issue.

"We have always employed the assistance of children of various ages to help bridge the communication gap between DMV and their parents at the counter when necessary," says Robin Peterson, Field Services Training Coordinator. "Usually we are asking them to ask their parents questions like, 'Do you need plates and stickers or just stickers?' or 'When did you purchase this vehicle?' It can sometimes be difficult because a younger child may have difficulty translating a complex word or process to someone else if they don't understand what we are actually talking about."

DMV employees have used online programs to translate questions to and from English when the employee doesn't speak the language, although the Oregon DMV does have staff who speak a number of languages, from Arabic to Lithuanian, across its offices.

In Oregon, 62% of people with Limited English Proficiency (LEP) — those who speak another language at home and speak English less than "very well" — are Spanish speakers, but another 7% speak Chinese, 7%



speak Vietnamese, and 20% speak other languages.

Another impediment for families is when people attempt to speak to them in Spanish, but that isn't their native language. In Hermiston, for example, educators and elected officials say there is a Guatemalan population who speak either no or limited Spanish.

According to the U.S. Department of Justice, in 2015 almost 9% of the Umatilla County's population fell under LEP, including Chinese, French and Polish; in Morrow County, the percentage was just under 15%, primarily Spanish. In a rural area, it can be hard to find translators, especially if the language is not one of the two most common.

In schools, children often serve as language brokers for their parents. In the medical setting, such as local hospitals and healthcare systems, patient rights include the right to get information about care in a preferred language. The Or-

egon Health Authority offers "preferred language cards" that people with LEP can carry and show to health care providers. OHA prohibits the use of children as interpreters unless there is an emergency.

In a business setting, children can translate at the cash register or when looking for specific services. Staff at multiple area businesses say they may have staff that speaks Spanish, but when it is another language, they don't mind kids helping out.

Fitterer puts it simply: "Be aware of a patient's or client's needs and understand that they may not always have someone to translate. And when it is a child translating, remember to not use such large vocabulary that the child might not know."

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