

Supporting Nippers with English as a Second Language

Helping all children feel included, understood, and safe—no matter their language background

For some Nippers, English may not be the first language spoken at home. This can make instructions, group dynamics, and safety messages feel confusing or overwhelming. As an Age Manager, you don't need to be fluent in other languages—you just need a few strategies to support clear communication and connection.

1. Why This Matters

- Ensures all kids understand key safety messages
- Helps children feel welcomed and valued
- Reduces anxiety for both Nippers and their families
- Encourages participation and connection in the group

2. What You Might Notice

- A child who doesn't respond to group instructions
- Hesitation or confusion during new activities
- Avoids speaking, or only speaks with siblings or family
- Reluctant to join in verbal games or answer questions

3. Strategies to Support ESL Nippers

- **Use simple, clear language**
 - Keep instructions short and direct: "Run to the cone, then back."
 - Avoid idioms or slang (e.g. instead of "give it a crack," say "give it a try")
 - Repeat important words, and give them time to process
- **Show rather than tell**
 - Demonstrate activities and use gestures wherever possible
 - Point to equipment or use body language to reinforce meaning
 - Use visual cues (e.g. flags, cones, simple signs)
- **Pair them with a buddy**
 - Choose a friendly and patient Nipper who can help them follow along
 - If possible, match them with someone who speaks the same language or has a calmer communication style
- **Use positive body language**
 - Smile, nod, and show warmth
 - Even if verbal understanding is limited, tone and facial expressions go a long way

4. Working with Families

- **Connect with parents or guardians**
- At drop-off, check if they'd like to share any helpful words or background
- Reassure them that you're happy to support their child's participation
- You could say: "It's okay if they're quiet. Watching and listening is a great way to learn."
- **Share session details clearly**
- If your club uses email or handouts, keep language plain and visual
- Ask your Junior Activities Coordinator if multilingual resources are available

5. Key Safety Reminders

- Use visual demonstrations for any safety-related instructions (flags, wave zones, buddy systems)
- Do regular head counts and buddy checks—language barriers can cause delays in responding to verbal calls
- Reinforce water boundaries and signals often, and check understanding with simple gestures

Final Thought: Inclusion Builds Belonging

Language differences are just one part of a child's learning journey. With patience, consistency, and a welcoming attitude, you can make a lasting impact—not just on that child's confidence, but on how their whole family sees surf lifesaving.

