

New Language a Natural for Kids

Program says younger is best

By Janet Trowbridge

For children enrolled in the Naperville branch of Language Stars, learning to speak French, Spanish or German is child's play — literally.

Language Stars is a foreign-language instruction company with schools in the Chicago area that offer an immersion program especially for children.

The school's philosophy is that children between ages 1 and 10 are especially receptive to learning languages. But they don't learn from books; they learn through fun and age-appropriate activities.

According to Founder and Chief Executive Officer Leslie Lancry, kids have the ability to learn language naturally during this time and to pick up authentic accents. In addition, Lancry said, there are a number of cognitive benefits gained from speaking a foreign language.

Studies done by the Washington-based Center for Applied Linguistics show that learning a second language increases children's problem-solving abilities, verbal skills and creativity.



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They also score significantly higher on college entrance exams.

Americans tend to be monolingual, said Lancry, who is fluent in six languages. "Americans could be better at language," she said, "except that our system traditionally starts us beyond that window of opportunity."

Language Stars uses a teaching method called FullImmersion, which engages pupils in a mix of activities, such as treasure hunts, games and singing, that are conducted entirely in a foreign language.

"I recommend [the program] all the time," said Kelly O'Connor of Warrenville.

O'Connor and her 2-year-old daughter, Hannah, have been taking the Parent and Tot French class at Language Stars since Hannah was 12 months old. "She loves it," O'Connor said. "It's a great alternative to the classes that are out there for toddlers, and, of course, there are intellectual and cognitive benefits too. But the most important thing is that she loves it."

The O'Connors started with Language Stars in Lincoln Park and, after moving to Warrenville, began taking classes in Naperville.

"All the teachers have been so good with the kids. I don't know if it's the training they put them through or how they pick them, but

all the teachers I've had are wonderful. They really draw the kids in," O'Connor said.

Bonita Deering of Bolingbrook said she was skeptical when her husband first broached the idea of enrolling their 2-year-old in a foreign-language class.

"She was barely speaking [English] when we started in January," Deering said. "I thought they were nuts. But soon she was saying bonjour and merci. She is blossoming outside of class, and she has a blast. The kids don't even know they're learning."

The school opened its first site in Lincoln Park five years ago and now has seven branches in Illinois.

The school is successful, Lancry said, because parents and educators are getting the message that children are able to absorb language when they're young.

"Learning a foreign language opens up the world, literally, to our next generation of Americans regardless of what kind of skills they have," she said.

