

# Parlez-vous...Cheerios?

By Geneva White

## Foreign language education meets an even younger student

It's snack time at an Arlington Heights learning center, and little hands are scooping up Goldfish crackers and Cheerios as instructors speak in Italian and Spanish.

"Tengo mucha hambre. Tengo mucha hambre," Carolina Estay, 28, sings with a small group of toddlers before their snack is served. The children, some as young as 2, have no problem keeping up with the Spanish lyrics, which describe being very hungry.

But while they're enrolled in foreign language classes, these tots aren't necessarily child prodigies and their parents aren't eccentrics. The youngsters are among 4,000 Chicago area children enrolled at Language Stars, a program promoting the concept that tackling foreign languages is easier if you start early.

Studies have shown that knowing a foreign language carries lifelong benefits for children in all areas from their socialization to their use of critical thinking skills. President George Bush announced in January an initiative to put an increased emphasis on teaching foreign languages in early childhood, saying it would help both national security and prosperity.

"When you think about a child acquiring English, they can do the exact same thing with a second language," says Jackie Nees, director of Language Stars' Wilmette location. "But when we get older, we're set in our primary language. It's much more difficult for adults. Adults actually store language in a different part of the brain."

With songs, colorful pictures, interactive games and stickers for positive reinforcement, Language Stars uses a method called "Fun Immersion." Instructors actually play with the children in a foreign language, using expressive voices and physical movement. You won't find blackboards, workbooks or constant repetition at Language Stars.

Arlington Heights dad Tom Doherty chuckles a little and says that is what some people think when he announces he's taking 2-year-old Ava to Spanish class.

"It's not really a class," says Doherty, 38, who attends Parent and Tot Spanish with Ava. "It's just an environment where you can learn Spanish. This is more conducive to learning at her age."

Doherty spent several months traveling with his wife through Central and South America, but didn't learn to speak Spanish until he was 30 and volunteering in Oaxaca, Mexico. It was the full year of immersion in Spanish, he says, that helped him finally grasp the language.

"I look at how long it took me to learn," Doherty says. "I think if I had the opportunity to grow up where I was learning it at an early age, it would be much easier."



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Language Stars has eight centers in Chicago and surrounding suburbs where children ages 12 months through 10 years old can learn Spanish, Italian, French, German, and Mandarin Chinese. Founder and president Leslie Lancry started the program in 1998, leaving a consulting job that had her working in Moscow, Paris, and London.

Previous generations didn't see as much of a need for being bilingual and trilingual, Lancry says. But that's all changing with the Internet, travel and a rapidly expanding global marketplace.

"Foreign language is more important than ever," Lancry says. "It gives today's children a leg up in tomorrow's marketplace. Every field, from politics to academics, can benefit from the ability to understand people from around the world."

Lancry, who speaks five languages and majored in international economics, says she first picked up French at age 12 during visits with a pen pal in France.

"I came back dreaming and thinking in French," she says. "It was my dream to bring foreign language to all American children. That's been our mission from day one. We don't feel we've achieved our mission until we've reached all American children."

While many European countries provide foreign language instruction as part of elementary school curriculum, students in the United States often don't begin studying other languages until junior high or high school.

Andrea Quintanar, a Spanish teacher at Lockport Township High School, says foreign language should be mandatory in America's public schools, starting as early as kindergarten. Although she insists languages can be mastered at the high school level, she says part of what makes it difficult is not having the native accent. Because high school students tend to be self-conscious, they may be embarrassed to pronounce words and phrases in front of their peers.

"If you don't learn a language as a child, it's not too late, but you just have to accept the fact you're not going to have a native accent," Quintanar says. "You can't care what people think when you're speaking and learning."

Some parents with children enrolled at Language Stars or other foreign language programs are not only thinking of their youngster's future, but also recapturing their heritage. Eva Michalski, president of Discovery Language Programs in Schaumburg says past generations of immigrants sometimes forgot their native language and focused only on English.

"Years back when people were coming to the states, they wanted to forget where they came from maybe because they came from the cold region and they wanted to become American," Michalski says. "They made the huge mistake of never using the language. It doesn't happen to much anymore."

Like Language Stars, Discovery believes in starting young for foreign language instruction, but Michalski says her center only works with children 5 years of age and older.

"The children should not even know they're in a class," Michalski says. "It has to be a fun class and a class that moves very quickly so they're changing activities basically every five minutes. It's playtime in Spanish, Italian or French. We cover six different languages."

Back at Language Stars, Italian instructor Joanna LaCourte is praising Nicole Krass, 3, of Northbrook, for retrieving a box of Cheerios from the cupboard. Nicole already speaks Russian, taught to her by her mother who is of Russian descent.

"Gratze, Nicole," LaCourte, 23, tells the toddler.

LaCourte's parents moved her from Northbrook to Italy at age 9 to give her a better understanding of her Italian heritage. She lived in Sicily until college.

"When I moved, I was upset because all my friends were here," she says. "Now I understand. That's why I'm teaching Italian to children."

