

# Parlez-vous Français?

*A new generation of multi-linguists answers oui (and si and ja).*

By David King

When Tricia Nagel of Palatine started teaching French to her daughter, Sarah, a few years ago, the two-and-half-year-old seemed confused. “She didn’t understand why I was using unfamiliar words to describe familiar things,” says Tricia, who teaches French and Spanish at George Washington Elementary School in Park Ridge.

Opting for a different approach, Tricia took a chance and enrolled her daughter in both French and Spanish classes at Language Stars in Arlington Heights, an outpost of a local chain that specializes in foreign language instruction for kids as young as one year old. In small, group classes where the teachers spoke no English, Sarah eventually grew more comfortable with communicating in other languages. Now, at age five, she likes to practice at home with her mom and looks forward to class.

Nagel hopes fluency in several languages will open up doors for Sarah later on. “Knowing other languages gives you so many more opportunities in life,” she says, adding that she would introduce German and Italian classes to Sarah’s instruction if time and money allowed.

Lincoln Park mom Susan McDermott’s two daughters, ages five and six, also study French at the Language Stars location on Clybourn Avenue. This summer, they’ll add Mandarin Chinese, a language Susan believes will become more important for Americans



**Small kids in particular have an easier time than adults when it comes to learning a new language.**

to know as China’s role in our marketplace continues to grow.

In an increasingly interconnected world, parents are putting more emphasis on their kids learning foreign languages at a young age. Many are clamoring for more language instruction in elementary schools, and an increasing number are seeking out caretakers who speak specific languages, according to Mary Abbott, director of education for the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, a trade organization in Alexandria, Virginia.

“As parents begin to see the use of [foreign] languages more in their own work, they think about [speaking these languages fluently] as a critical skill

for their own children,” Abbott says. Mandarin Chinese, in the past a more popular choice for kids on the West Coast, is “exploding” in Chicago, she adds, noting that a survey due out next year from the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, D.C., should show evidence of this trend on a national level.

Small kids in particular have an easier time than adults when it comes to learning a new language. “Young children can do it more naturally, because they are still forming cognitively,” explains Mary Lynn Redmond, executive secretary of the National Network for Early Language Learning, in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

