

Bilingualism: Increase in Grey Matter Available to All Lamorinda Kids

By Sophie Braccini



Pre-F class at KISS

Photo Sophie Braccini

When they adopted their baby daughter from China, Lynley and David Sides didn't want the infant to lose all ties with her origins.

After looking for an existing immersion Chinese program in the area, they were inspired to start "Small World", a Chinese language program in Lafayette for children as young as one year old. "To speak another language is to possess a second soul", said Emperor Charlemagne some 1200 years ago. By being willing to give their daughter a Chinese soul, the Sides might very well have given her other important cognitive advantages over mono-lingual children.

"When I was pregnant," explains Darja Koehler mother of a seven-year-old tri-lingual girl, "I researched information about brain development in infants. A book I recommend is "Magic Tree of the Mind" (available at your public library), that demonstrates how the first years are crucial for developing knowledge of different languages, the art and music."

A native accent and fluency is not the only benefit of early language exposure. "Many studies that have been made of the brains of

bilingual individuals," explains UC Berkeley Professor Emeritus Lily Wong Fillmore, "Dr. Ellen Bialystok of York University showed that bilingualism confers cognitive benefits to preschooler learning to read, and her assertion was supported by Dartmouth's Laura-Ann Petitto's findings that bilingual children have higher cognitive skills. One of those skills is the plasticity of the brain, that is, the ability to figure out more solutions for a given problem and easier decision making." And benefits do not stop as people get older; a recent study by Bialystok shows that fluent bilingual individuals are able to word off the loss of memory in old age.

"Language learning needs to start in infancy if bilingualism is the objective," states Fillmore, "children can start at three years of age, but even earlier is better." "My daughter started French for Fun when she was eleven months old," explains Darja Koehler, "for her it was not learning, it was just playing."

As Catherine Jolivet, the Director of French for Fun explains, her program starts with very young children who come with their parents a few hours a week. "We learn

songs, the kids listen, they are exposed to the sounds of another language and they absorb it with an ease that will never again be the same." Isabelle Magidson, who teaches at the school says, "I teach the three-year olds. They come every day for two hours and after a few months they are already starting to manipulated the language, not only repeat, but really make their own sentences."

KISS, the Spanish immersion program now located at the border of Lafayette and Walnut Creek, also offers programs that start at two years of age (and at one year beginning August, 2008). "We didn't know what we were getting into when we registered our son at age two," says George Madrigal, father of now three-year-old Jacob Alexander, "we had heard good things about the school but didn't know if he would fit in." The boy loved the program and the teachers, and is now signing songs in Spanish with his father. George, who had lost his native Spanish long ago, couldn't be more emotionally fulfilled.

Sharlen Foox had a different motivation when she registered her children with KISS. "None of us spoke Spanish," says the mother of two young boys, "but we wanted the cultural experience for them as well as the definite advantages that learning a second language gives to very young children, even in math." Foox's preschooler is now in the three-year-old program, going four days a week, three hours each day. "We know he understands a lot," she says, "when we went to Las Vegas and a waitress addressed us in Spanish he responded in her language with an ease that flabbergasted us."

Koehler confirms that the parents do not need to speak the language in order for the kids to become bilingual. "I do not even

speak French," she says, "but since my daughter followed the French for Fun she became a fluent French speaker, with a native accent."

A similar experience was had by Jan Spauschus who adopted Laura from China when the infant was fifteen months old. She too, like the Sides, wanted her daughter to retain her native tongue, "Mandarin is a very tonal language," she explains, "often occidentals cannot even decipher the language." Jan and her husband went all over the Bay Area to maintain Laura's exposure to Mandarin and were thrilled when Small World started where they live, in Lafayette. "This is an invaluable experience," says Spauschus, "it changes your outlook on the world."

Other parents confirm that if bilingualism is the objective, a simple after-school program will not be enough. Dona Comar experienced both the immersion and the two-day-a-week program with her two sons. The older one went to French For Fun as an after school program, while the youngest was able to follow the everyday Kindergarten curriculum, "The difference is notable," she says, "The youngest is completely at ease with the French language. He comprehends and speaks effortlessly," says the mother, "he is not afraid to make mistakes and has a native accent. The oldest understands an enormous amount of French but is very hesitant to speak."

For more information go to: French For Fun: www.frenchforfun.com

KISS: www.kissprogram.com

Small World: www.smallworldlamorinda.com