

Ready, listo, ga!

New playgroups are turning tots bilingual



There was a time when toddlers soaked up a second language mostly by default, if at all: a little Yiddish overheard at *Zayde Sol*'s, or Spanish from *Abuelita*. But actual, on-purpose lessons? Not even in multiculti New York. "There were all these

myths that it was detrimental," says MIT linguist Suzanne Flynn. "People basically thought kids would confuse the languages."

Fast-forward to now: More than a dozen language-immersion playgroups for the under-three set have cropped up across the city in the past three years. This fall, offerings include several dual-language preschools, ballet *en español*, Chinese day camps and music in Korean—and the trend keeps growing. So what's behind this sudden boom?

For one, science. Myriad studies show that bilingual kids tend to be better abstract thinkers, better focused and better organized. Even children exposed to a second tongue just a few hours a week have an easier time learning languages later, linguists say. When kids start before age two, "it's really like they're learning two first languages," says Flynn, who studies bilingualism.

Language classes appeal to parents who want to give their children a leg up in the global job market (the booming Hispanic population and recent media reports that Chinese-speaking I-bankers are raking in eight-figure earnings thanks in part to their language skills have surely helped the trend). But not only alphaparents are enrolling their kids. Some are frustrated by their own monolingualism; others want to put an international adoptee in touch with her mother culture, or hope that a child will adopt his parents' native language.

Most linguists now agree that whether or not a toddler hears a second language at home, he'll pick it up rapidly if he's suddenly immersed in it, provided that the class replicates what Flynn calls a "natural learning environment." "You see how children learn a first language at home, with lots of play and interaction. That's what you want to simulate," she says. At most of the playgroups we visited, near-total immersion was de rigueur, and teachers used enough gestures, visual aids and games that my two-year-old daughter was able to jump in quickly. By the end of each session, Mikaela had picked up at least three new words and was babbling the language's key syllables.

¡HOLA! PLAYGROUPS AND BALLET EN ESPAÑOL

A blitz-paced array of engaging activities led wriggly Mikaela to claim this Spanish-immersion playgroup as her favorite. In just under an hour, we danced, sang, drew, played games, and watched both a slide show and a puppet show. Apparently it worked: A week later, she was still shouting out "*¡mariposa!*" and "*¡hormiga!*" at butterflies and ants in the park. Overscheduled kids can multitask here with the two-classes-in-one Ballet en Español, held twice a week for children ages two to four. Locations in the Flatiron district and on the Upper East and Upper West Sides (917-648-5006; www.holaplaygroup.com). Ages 13 months to 5 years.

DEUTSCHE KINDERGRUPPE AND LERNGRUPPE

Tucked away in one of Yorkville's last surviving German outposts, Stella Kaufman leads both Kindergruppe—a free-form drop-in playgroup



HE TALK PRETTY At Italian for Toddlers, kids say *ciao* to the Big Bad Wolf.

where she and parent helpers speak to babies and toddlers exclusively in German—and Lerngruppe, a more structured class for two- to five-year-olds. Although my daughter had little previous exposure to German, Stella's warmth quickly won her over, and by the end of class, she was giggling "*danke!*" Classes held at Zion St. Mark's Evangelical Lutheran Church, 339 E 84th St (212-479-7808, 212-288-0600; www.zionmarks.com/html/children.html). Ages newborn to 5 years.

CHINESE FOR CHILDREN AT THE CHINA INSTITUTE

The class I visited didn't exactly fit the immersion tag—the teacher spoke English more than half the time, and the songs were Western childhood standards ("Frère Jacques," "London Bridge") translated into Mandarin. Still, even children who do not hear Chinese at home seemed to be following along, and seeing a group of three-year-olds meticulously write out the characters for Chinese numbers was impressive. Teacher Jenny Zhang estimates that 30 percent of pupils here are adoptees; kids who speak Chinese at home and children of international business heavies whose firms are moving them to China round out the class. 125 E 65th St (212-744-8181; www.chinainstitute.org/kids). Ages 3 and up.

INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL OF BROOKLYN

After a recent survey showed that 16 different languages are spoken among Park Slope parents, many of whom are eager for their children to be bi- or even trilingual, mom founders Rebecca Skinner and Habiba Boumlik started a series of French and Spanish playgroups last fall and have since expanded to include a full pre-K program slated to grow a grade per year through high school. The fact that playgroup teachers hail from Argentina, Morocco, France and Switzerland means kids will get to celebrate more holidays than the post office, all with attendant songs, dances, crafts and food. Cobble Hill, Park Slope and Brooklyn Heights locations (646-245-8801; www.isbrooklyn.org). Ages 18 months and up.

ITALIAN FOR TODDLERS

The Bentley of the language-immersion scene, this school offers group classes, private tutoring and the "Summer in Sicily" program (the idea is, kids attend an Italian-language camp while parents shop). The lesson room, where children engage in both structured learning with cute flashcards and playful activities, is done up in outrageously tasteful 1930s Italian-nursery décor—plus, if the program is good enough for Seinfeld's kids, it should be fine for yours, right?

385 West End Ave, second floor (212-501-8524; www.italianfortoddlers.com). Ages 6 months and up.

MUSICAL KIDS INTERNATIONAL

This UES music school uses play (think along the lines of dancing games and children's drums) to develop kids' rhythm and pitch, and international songs to hone their language skills. Fun is the focus as kids merengue around the room, but, says ebullient Dominican-born director Yolanda Bricard, "by the end of the term, they are actually singing and counting, and know vocabulary in the [second] language." This fall, she adds Korean and Japanese classes to Spanish and French ones—"and I'm not talking one or two songs in Korean; this is immersion," Bricard adds. Financial aid is available, and babies under four months are free.

1296 Lexington Ave (212-996-5898; www.musicalkids.net). Ages newborn to 4 years.

LA ESCUELITA

Shocking as it may be in a city that's one-third Latino, La Escuelita was apparently New York's first Spanish-English private preschool when it opened two years ago. Parents I talked to raved about the school's diversity and well-designed curriculum, and were pleased with the amount of Spanish their kids learned even in toddler playgroups. A bonus: Babies can listen to *español* here practically from birth, at bilingual mothers' meetings. 302 W 91st St (212-877-1100; www.laescuelita.nyc.org). Ages newborn to 8 years. FRANZISKA CASTILLO