

local spotlight

Spanish Workshop for Children

Opening up a world of language to young children

By Mary Ann Romans

Numerous studies support the importance of early foreign language instruction. But with so few public schools offering that education, where can parents turn? Fortunately, there is a place for kids to go, right here in our region. Spanish Workshop for Children, directed and founded by Marcela Summerville, is a haven for young language students.

It was during the fight to save our own local early foreign language program that I first got to know this remarkable woman, whose passion for teaching languages has touched many young children and their families.

Summerville formed Spanish Workshop for Children almost 10 years ago to support early foreign language learning, “especially since it is becoming more and more scarce in school. Programs are being cut every day,” she says.

The co-author of two Parents Choice Award winning books – “Play and Learn Spanish” and “Play and Learn French” (McGraw Hill) – Summerville is co-chair for the ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages), and has been appointed the Pennsylvania state representative of NNELL (National Network of Early Language Learning).

A special way to learn

Summerville has developed a unique methodology for teaching young children how to speak Spanish as though they were native speakers. She is also the mother of two bilingual children.

Called “immersion,” her technique is to fully embrace the new language, using it in every way they can. “I 100 percent feel this is the best way to understand a new language,” she says. “We do not use English in the classroom, unless it is an emergency. This is different from other programs, because we base our curriculum on standards of learning instead of teaching themes. We focus on whole language acquisition.”

When Summerville says she focuses on standards of learning, she means that her classes do not teach colors, numbers or days of the week separately. It’s not simply a matter of learning individual words. Instead, they how to communicate in all manners.

“Most importantly, the children do not learn just vocabulary – they learn how to actually communicate. That is the difference between the way that we teach and the way that themes go. Whatever

you learn, you can use it in any of the countries that speak Spanish,” she explains.

At Spanish Workshop for Children, young students absorb the language through storytelling, drama, music, movement, crafts and games. Each engages the children’s interest and captivates their imagination, creating emotional attachments and triggering memory in a hands-on climate.

The benefits of learning are many

Summerville believes that there are many benefits to beginning a study of a foreign language at an early age. “I speak four languages and I know how easy it came to me to learn. You can learn languages at any age, but when you are young, you are more flexible. As an adult you have better understanding of grammar, but for kids it is easier to learn a language, because they are not conscious of the fact that they are learning. They don’t care – the brain is so flexible; it is a real learning machine,” she says.

So what are the benefits of learning Spanish early? To Summerville, there are many. “They are

not a foreign language anymore; this is the second language in the country. Knowing another language would help people to be more tolerant to accents and different cultures. We will live in better harmony,” she says.

A big supporter

One person who agrees with Summerville is Deborah Heuckeroth, the mother of two of Summerville’s students, boys aged 7 and 9. “The experience is really more than just learning a language. Even if you don’t become fluent, it helps you understand the world better,” says Heuckeroth. “The kids see how hard it is to learn a new language, and then they have more empathy for other who speak very little English.”



Spanish Workshop for Children uses games, storytelling, crafts and much more to engage children in the process of learning.



This might even change another aspect of life in the U.S., says Heuckeroth. “In the American culture, we often have this attitude as though, ‘Why should *we* learn another language?’ I think there is a certain pompousness that goes with that. I want my children to be a little more globally thinking.”

Another good aspect of Spanish Workshop for Children is the fact that it begins so much earlier than traditional second-language education. “There are critical age points when you have to get your kids exposed to languages. High school is really too late, and I don’t know why the American school system hasn’t figured that out,” says Heuckeroth.

Having tried other programs, Heuckeroth is particularly impressed with Spanish Workshop for Children. “I am very pleased. I like the immersion method. The other day, my younger son and I were doing a puzzle and there was a dog in it. He said perro,” she says happily.

“It is very exciting to see that they can learn and still have fun. Their ears are tuning and their brains are tuning,” says Heuckeroth. “I see this as a way to pretty much be able to learn any language that they want. I think they could learn languages easier than someone who has never learned another language as a child.”

Summerville agrees, saying, “Parents should be advocates for language. It makes a difference.”

Spanish Workshop for Children has four different locations: Rosemont, Blue Bell, Princeton and Cherry Hill. Enrollment is now starting for the winter season. For more information, visit www.spanishworkshopforchildren.com.

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going to be able to speak without an accent. They will learn faster. They will be learning on their own terms. They will be spontaneous,” she says. “Another amazing benefit is that kids are just fearless with it, and they are not at all embarrassed to make mistakes and learn from them.”

Classes at Spanish Workshop for Children are taught in small groups with children from the ages of 15 months up to 10 years old. Older children are taught to both read and write in Spanish.

Summerville believes that most parents don’t realize how important it is for children to grow up bilingual. “We live in a global society. We have all of these social networks, and you can see all of these people from different countries interacting and sharing news. English is not the only language in the world, so we have to understand the cultures of others. If you know the language, you know the culture,” she says.

She adds that the “global” nature of the world is here in America. “Spanish in the United States is