

Español for toddlers: Parents start early language learning

NATION: Educators say kids who start at a young age strengthen literacy in foreign and native tongues

BY VIVI HOANG
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For the past five years, Ana Pasarella has been teaching Spanish to as many as 600 kids a week, many of them preschoolers, through her "Ana's Amigos" program in Nashville, Tenn.

The demand for Spanish education targeting that age level is only growing, she says.

Parents, schools and day-care centers are trying to expose children at an increasingly younger

age to another language — most typically, Spanish. They're trying to take advantage of that age's almost effortless ability to absorb new tongues in hopes of giving children a leg up on later language education and preparing them for an increasingly diverse world.

Last year, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages recommended students be provided the opportunity to learn another language as early as possible in school. To do



Lavondia Majors / The Tennessean

Spanish teacher Ana Pasarella of "Ana's Amigos" teaches preschool kids in her weekly class at the Gordon Jewish Community Center in Nashville, Tenn. Parents, schools and day-care centers are trying to expose children at an increasingly younger age to another language — most typically, Spanish.

so not only aids pronunciation, but also proficiency, the council stated.

"Research corroborates additional benefits, including strengthening of literacy in students' first language, raising standardized test scores in other sub-

ject areas and developing comfort with cultural differences," the council statement said.

"Compared to an older student, a child's language learning advantage is greatest in the area

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of pronunciation, somewhat weaker in the area of grammar usage and slight when considering the size of their vocabulary," the report says. "Still, the apparent benefit overall of early learning is leading many to implement foreign language programs in elementary school or even earlier."

"Not only is it brightening their horizons just to become bilingual, but they're going to need it," says Ginger Wood-Oguno, executive director of Tomorrow's Leaders, a Nashville preschool where students learn Spanish through the "Elena y Los Pequenitos" program.

The early education pays off, too. Pasarella, who's taught up to eighth grade, says she's noticed that students in that grade who received language lessons in the past have a much wider vocabulary and tend to pick up the language quicker. Eighth-graders exposed to the language for the first time, on the other hand, have a much harder time.

Jose Acevedo and his wife, Elena, the namesake of "Elena y Los Pequenitos," which translates to "Elena and the Little Ones," came to Nashville in 1988. The Venezuelan couple soon became involved in Spanish-language education at several preschools in the area. They even have a class at Smyrna Christian School in Smyrna, Tenn., that caters to babies as young as 12 months.

"The attention is there," Elena Acevedo says. "They grasp anything you teach them."

One school of thought puts great stock in children absorbing a language from peers who already speak it, says Eric Henager, immediate past president of the Tennessee Foreign Language Teaching Association and an associate professor of modern languages and literature at Rhodes College in Memphis.

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