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Illustration by Rudi Steppeman

## Bringing Up (Bilingual) Baby

### Marketers Rush to Meet Demand For Toys, Tapes and Classes; Achieving 'Total Immersion'

By MONICA LANGLEY  
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**A**T MY DAUGHTER'S first Spanish class, she just sat there staring blankly at the instructor, not saying a word. Of course, she was only six months old. "At this age, she's supposed to sit there like a potted plant," says Francois Thibaut, founder and director of the Language Workshop for Children in New York City. He assured me my daughter wasn't too young to learn another language. "Don't worry—she's taking it all in."

Indeed, now that Langley Grace Wallace is approaching her first birthday, I'm proud to say she speaks as much Spanish as she does English, which is... nothing, *nada*, not a word. Unless we count "bye-bye," and once I think I heard her say "agua."

It isn't clear whether my baby will ever speak Spanish, but it is clear that plenty of parents would like their babies to learn a second language before they even know a first. There's a gold rush of marketers hoping to cash in on the trend.

My first encounter with this phenomenon was the stroller jam on the first day of the semester at the Language Workshop for Children, on Manhattan's Upper East Side. When Langley Grace and I arrived at the school, we literally couldn't get in: Dozens of strollers were stacked, piled and hung in the lobby and out the front door.

Mothers and nannies were jostling for stroller space, while other parents crowded the front desk to get their child onto a class roster.

What's going on here? Did some edict go out among these hard-charging parents—almost all of them older and affluent—about the latest brain research?

A growing number of brain studies indicate infants can learn a second language more easily if they are exposed to it

before they learn to talk, in the period in which their brains are being wired. Infants are "citizens of the world, ready to learn any language," says neuroscientist Patricia Kuhl, co-author of a book

### iHola, Mama!

In Manhattan's Upper East Side, well-to-do parents line up around the block to enroll their infants and toddlers in Francois Thibaut's language classes. Here are some of his tips:

- **Start teaching the second language** before the child starts to speak. Before they start to speak words, children listen and store almost everything they hear. This is the prime of their 'critical period' for absorbing language.
  - Have the child **listen to songs** in another language. Songs are powerful teaching tools, conveying 'grammatical templates' and delivering both emotion and entertainment.
  - After audiotapes, **educational videos and CD-ROMs** may be introduced. But don't show them a foreign-language video until they are already interested in videos in their native tongue.
  - If a parent or caregiver **speaks a second language**, have him or her speak *only* that language to the child, starting in infancy. Won't the child get confused? No, not unless the caregiver switches from the second language to English and then back.
- **Don't hire a private tutor** for the child before the age of eight or 10. Young children need the company of other children. Private tutors put too much stress on the younger ones.
- Remember, for your child to **sound like a native speaker**, a native speaker must teach him or her. Pay attention to the accent your child is acquiring. Is it the standard business accent of that country?



on infant development, "The Scientist in the Crib." Up until the age of about six to 10 months, young babies can hear and respond to phonetic variations in any language, Dr. Kuhl says. Later in life, they will be able to speak the languages heard and learned in this early period spontaneously, as native speakers do.

Early exposure to a second language actually grows more connections in the baby's brain, researchers believe. "We can't say at what month you should start teaching a baby, but there's plenty of research to say the earlier the exposure to a foreign language the more beneficial," says Nancy Rhodes, spokeswoman for the National Network for Early Language Learning, a Washington, D.C., advocacy group.

All this research has set off an explosion of new products, and parents like me are scurrying to buy them. One big player is the electronics manufacturer VTech Holdings, of Hong Kong, whose talking educational toys are in playrooms everywhere these days. I set out to find a VTech

product that would help Langley Grace learn Spanish. VTech referred me to Century Merchandising Corp., its Spanish-language distributor in the U.S. Bingo: It plans to have Spanish-speaking toys in stores by Christmas.

To check them out now, I strolled my daughter to their downtown Manhattan office (people can't resist helping someone with a baby!) and snagged early copies of two items. A counting bug (or *mami mi mascota*, literally "my pet") plays numbers in Spanish when the bright-colored buttons are pushed, for \$22.99. The "peek-a-boo park" (*cucu park*) for \$32.99, has animals, shapes and songs in Spanish.

Alfred Thieberger, Century's chief executive, said the products were originally aimed at the growing U.S. Hispanic population. But with more parents like me around, he is putting English and Spanish instructions on the packages. "Parents wanting to give their babies a head start on a foreign lan-

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# Parents Raising Bilingual Tots Snap Up Talking Toys

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guage will become a growing part of our market," he says. They might account for one-third of sales one day, he figures.

At Mr. Thibaut's suggestion, I found Muzzy, the BBC Language Course for Children, through its distributor, Early Advantage LLC. Available in Spanish, French, Italian and German, this learning program features a cartoon character named Muzzy and comes with a CD-ROM, five videotapes, two cassettes and a parent's guide for \$169. The package suggests instruction begin at age one: "Your child's window of opportunity is right now," it urges.

With Langley Grace just nine months old when I got this program, I called David Ward, president of Early Advantage. He said he is planning to change the packaging so that it suggests parents begin instructing their babies even earlier.

"The brain science and customers are telling us to start these at birth as the educational window of opportunity," Mr. Ward says. "This is a real and sizable commercial opportunity as well."

My daughter also loves a video called "Baby Einstein." It features bright primary-colored toys and high-contrast objects and narrators reciting nursery rhymes and counting in seven languages. (Langley Grace smiles, babbles and lurches forward when she hears the Hebrew and Japanese phrases.)

Julie Aigner-Clark, Baby Einstein's creator, shot the video in 1997 in her basement after having a baby. "I read about the research on babies and foreign languages, but found nothing on the market," she said. This year, her company will gross \$5 million from sales of Baby Einstein and two other videos.

Another mom in Langley Grace's Spanish class told me about a Professor Parrot tape and video that her 15-month-old son has. I ordered a set through the Ecobaby catalog. The teaching parrot is a little hokey and the children actors too cute, but my baby pays close attention to "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" in Spanish on the video.

Then there's the Little Linguist, a \$70 toy from Neurosmith LLC, of Long Beach, Calif. Fitting one of 15 figures—a tree, a lion, a boat—into a portable base prompts a computer-generated voice to identify the object and make its sound. The company plans to have it in stores in time for the holiday season. Langley Grace enjoys playing

with the demonstration model the company lent to me. She likes to hear the monkey and the lion, and she actually tried to say *gato* when she put in the cat.

At the center of the marketing frenzy is Mr. Thibaut, whose Language Workshop has been teaching children French since 1973. He added Spanish in 1982. Mr. Thibaut figures he has taught at least 50,000 tots and says he is gratified that science is confirming his experience.

"I kept finding that I could teach the children at younger and younger ages," he says. He has added weekend classes and expanded to the suburbs and has an agent for the book he is writing.

An exuberant first-time mother at 40, I had read up on all this brain research. After running across an ad for the Language Workshop in a parenting magazine, I promptly signed Langley Grace for classes at the earliest possible age.

Mr. Thibaut is drawing a rather upscale crowd these days. Some of the notable parents include the radio personality Don Imus and Woody Allen. Tots of corporate executives and investment bankers attend, too, some with their own security guards and drivers.

The classes, of course, say as much about the parents as the children. One mother, Melissa Meyers, a 34-year-old former Bear Stearns manager whose two-year-old daughter has been studying French since she was six months old, says, "I see a lot of older mothers who've been focused intently on their careers and now are just as driven with their babies." She confesses to doing the same.

Mr. Thibaut lays down the rules at the first class: Absolutely no English can be uttered, in order to achieve "total immersion" for the baby. Children can't walk—or crawl—around the room at will. Also, the school asks (after consulting with its lawyer) that mothers refrain from feeding or nursing their babies during class. "This is a play group with a purpose," Mr. Thibaut says. "Follow our program and your child will speak Spanish without an accent—I guarantee it."

I can't vouch for that yet, but once Langley Grace emerged from her "potted plant" phase, she quickly warmed up to Spanish lessons. Her happy disposition and increasing concentration during class, as well as the outstanding theatrics of her instructor, Veronica Noguera, led me to sign up for more classes after the first month. They aren't cheap: Tuition is nearly \$500 for 14 weekly classes.

In class, we sing the "Buenas Dias" song. When we review *las frutas*, each child takes one and the instructor says its name and color in Spanish. The child returns the fruit to the container to a loud chorus of "Bravo!" In general, however, parents aren't encouraged to join in speaking the Spanish words, to avoid interfering with correct pronunciation. When Langley Grace takes a *manzana roja*, or red apple, she won't give it back.

On to the *luna* song, when we walk

around in *grande* circles and then rush in to make *pequeno* circles. We count with shakers "uno, dos, tres . . ." A child sneezes—"Salud!" We throw the children in the air (*Arriba!*) and then sit down (*abejo*). Langley Grace throws up. In one minute, Mr. Thibaut has fetched a mop and Lysol to disinfect the floor.

The goal, according to Mr. Thibaut, is to "create an atmosphere of play and laughter, to spur spontaneous speech that builds natural fluency." Sometimes the "no English" directive is disobeyed: When 15-month-old Roland is handed a drawing of a pig and told it is *el cerdo*, he proudly announces, "Pig!"

The fast-paced class is specifically geared to children under two, who make up 70% of the 1,200 students attending the school in any semester. The trademarked "Thibaut technique" takes into account "lookers, listeners and movers," the 51-year-old founder explains. "Children learn in different styles, so we have specially-designed

action games, visual aids and songs."

For homework, Langley Grace gets a booklet filled with drawings of her vocabulary words and a tape of words and songs. She won't sit still long enough to look at her workbook, but whenever the Spanish tape is on, she actually chirps with delight and rocks to the songs.

I'm told I will soon see little flashes of comprehension. Ms. Meyers tells me her two-year-old recently took Mr. Potato Head apart when instructed to do so, in French, by her teacher. (French, by the way, is the class of choice for three-fourths of the parents at Language Workshop.)

Mr. Thibaut is encouraging. A baby "hears, understands, then speaks," he notes, reminding me that babies can't verbalize what they know. "You may get the impression Langley Grace isn't learning anything," he says. "But just because she doesn't have a printer working yet, don't conclude there's nothing in the computer."