

Nurseries for expat children language and other considerations [TR]^[1]

Today's Zaman

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EXCERPTS

A child's first day at nursery is a major step toward independence. Throughout the world, parents have similar checklists for choosing a place suited to their children.

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In addition to the usual considerations, expatriates in Turkey also face issues such as language and cultural expectations. Few cities in Turkey are as cosmopolitan as Antalya, where we recently spoke with some parents and teachers.

English-speaking expats in Antalya can choose between a variety of Turkish nurseries or the International Children's Club of Antalya (ICCA), where a mixture of English and Turkish curricula is taught. Demand for placement in the ICCA is high and there is a waiting list. At YTL 690 a month per child -- which includes tuition, insurance, food, service bus, materials and books -- the ICCA is in the top half of the price range for preschool education.

One mother of bilingual children in Antalya, Sophia Yener -- an American married to a Turk -- will start one of her children at the ICCA in the fall. The main reasons for her choice were language considerations and the ICCA's reputation. "I know that my children will go to a Turkish primary school and probably secondary school," she explains: "the ICCA gives my children a chance to explore their mother tongue, English, in a natural environment. I feel I'm giving my kids the best chance at being fluent in English as well as in Turkish. The other important factor in sending my kids to the ICCA is their outstanding staff. It's a safe, nurturing place where I feel my children will become well-rounded students."

"Since we opened in 1994, the ICCA has doubled in size from 21 children to 46," explains ICCA Director Mary Robbins. "They come from a variety of backgrounds. Over half the children currently at the ICCA are from bilingual families, some 37 percent are Turkish speakers and 4 percent are native English speakers."

Some Turks choose the ICCA because they want their children to learn English from an early age. Selma Kiliç -- half-Finnish, half-Turkish and married to a Turk -- enrolled her daughter because she wants her to acquire a good basis in English before going to a Turkish school. "Children learn languages so much faster than adults; it's like a game to them," she says. "I like the fact that English isn't a separate subject there, but a way to communicate. It means children are motivated to learn very quickly. Other nurseries in Antalya offer from two to 10 hours of English a week as a separate activity," she adds, "Under those circumstances, children get a taste of the language but can't really learn it."

Although many parents want their children to learn English, it's also a potential source of concern when they start: Alongside the normal settling-in problems, parents are sometimes worried that their child will feel isolated at first. Mary regularly reassures them that even though the class teachers are English speakers, Turkish classroom assistants (as well as other Turkish staff) are there to make sure the children are happy. "The amount of English used with each child depends on their needs," she explains, "As we're international, the main language of communication is English, but students play in a variety of languages and quickly learn to translate for one another."

Each year Lem Kenny, the teacher of the ICCA's class for children between the ages of 3 and 4, sees children learn English from scratch. "It's really interesting. When a child starts here with little or no English, they generally go through three phases over the year: After a month they start understanding everyday instructions, then they start answering questions and, by the end of the year, they can also follow stories, sing songs and make one, two or three-word phrases, and some can even use simple sentences."

Children living in Turkey also need Turkish, so every child has Turkish lessons with a native language teacher in group sizes appropriate to the activity. Mary adds: "They are also offered activities in French and German."

Language isn't the only reason for the ICCA's popularity. Choosing a nursery is a subjective matter and what parents want from early education varies. Claudia Mert, a German married to a Turk, chose the ICCA for cultural reasons, amongst others. She's more comfortable with the British system than the Turkish one.

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At the last count, there were around 100 private nurseries in Antalya, reflecting different schools of thought on what young children need. Mary highlights her nursery's interest in child development: "We aim to help each child become confident and develop their independence and we encourage them to treat each other with care and consideration. We also aim to help them begin to develop self-discipline; encourage an understanding of the town, country and world in which we live; appreciate the differences and similarities between different children/peoples; and help children enjoy learning and develop good work habits as well."

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Live in Turkey, learn Turkish

Many expats are more interested in their children learning Turkish and so choose a Turkish nursery. One British family has been in Turkey for two years and two of their children are at a Turkish nursery in Antalya four mornings a week. "After having people come to the house when we were in İstanbul, we realized that a nursery environment and interaction with Turkish kids would be more conducive to them picking up the language and making friends," explains Chloe Dimbleby.

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"We want our children to be comfortable in the country where we assume they will spend much of their childhood. Language seems to be the key to feeling at home and confident enough to function normally in society. Out of our expat friends, it only appears to be those [children] who have attended [Turkish] kindergarten or school who have really come to grips with the language."

Given the seemingly overwhelming choice of nurseries -- some long-established, others open a matter of months -- it was a challenge to find one that fulfilled their criteria. Their search for the "right" one took a month. "We visited the ones recommended to us and also some we found close to home. After observing classes we realized that what we valued in early-years education was a bit different from what went on in six out of the seven places we visited," she explains. "It helped us become clearer about what we really wanted: teachers who meaningfully interacted and engaged with the children; lots of free play and outdoor play and creativity; and independence in learning encouraged, rather than the end product being the goal. We don't care if their craft looks messy, we just want to know that they did it rather than their teacher," she adds.

The nursery they finally decided on was Liz Tayze -- recommended by a friend. It allowed them to be in the classroom as long as they liked. The first day they visited, the children were going out for a fall walk to hunt for leaves. This inspired their confidence from the outset.

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Expats from non-English-speaking countries?

Learning English isn't at the top of everyone's checklist. Angelica Janitzky-Akyol, a German married to a Turk, is worried that as she works her son won't have enough exposure to German. She also raised the issue of cultural security and is extremely happy to have found a nursery -- Yeşil Balon -- whose owner is German-trained. It has a class for children from the ages of 3 to 6 with all activities in German.

To answer the demands of Antalya's sizable Russian population, there's a preschool class -- part of the Russian-owned Antalya College of Tourism -- for children who are either Russian or part-Russian.

For the Dutch, another major language group in Antalya, the honorary consul for the Netherlands organizes Dutch conversation groups for children with Dutch or Belgian passports for three hours a week after school.

Expats in Antalya are fortunate to have so many choices of methods to teach children new languages and integrate their children into different cultures without losing the culture and language of their parents.

- reprinted from Today's Zaman

Region: Europe ^[2]

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