

Giving children the gift of languages [RU] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Teaching English in kindergartens has been standard for some time in Russia, but now a trilingual preschool has opened in the city.

The first preschool in St. Petersburg specializing in teaching in three languages opened last year to provide a new option both for ex-pat parents anxious for their children to learn Russian while developing their native language and for Russian parents who wish their children to begin learning foreign languages as early as possible.

P'tit Cref is the local branch of a Moscow school that opened there five years ago, and is attended by children from the ages of two to six. The children are cared for by native speakers of three languages — English, French and Russian. The preschool currently has up to ten pupils, although the children attend at different times of the day and the week according to their parents' timetables.

The "trilingual" aspect of the school is what makes it different from other preschools in the city, according to the school's French director, Benoît Becar.

"P'tit Cref is not just about learning languages, but also about how the mind can be opened through learning languages and trained to learn more things," says Becar.

Most of the children currently attending the preschool are Russian, though there are also children from Norway, Poland and other countries. Becar said that the Moscow branch of P'tit Cref, which is located on the Arbat in the vicinity of a number of foreign embassies, now has equal ratios of native speakers of Russian, English and French among its attendees, and expressed the hope that the local school will follow the same trend in order for the children to help each other both with language learning, and with learning about each other's cultures.

The school has two teachers of each language, all of whom are native speakers. According to Becar, language learning is based on games rather than formal lessons. "The idea is to surround the children in a language bubble, to immerse them in language and culture," he explained.

The idea sounds simple, but some parents may feel that preschool aged children could be overloaded by trying to absorb three languages when most children at that age are dealing with just one.

Alexander Zheltov, linguistic expert and head of the African Studies department at St. Petersburg State University, said it was difficult to predict the results of the program.

"Up to the age of four, children have a special ability for language learning, after which it becomes very difficult for them to learn new languages. However, even after the age of four, it is of course always better to start as early as possible — the earlier children start learning, the easier it will be for them."

He said that confusion can result if children are spoken to in different languages by the same person at an early age, and can even lead to the child having impaired language development rather than becoming bilingual, let alone trilingual.

Becar said that to avoid such problems, the children are only spoken to in one language by each teacher — the teacher's native language. No teachers teach more than one language.

Zheltov said that similar methods of helping children to become bilingual have demonstrably proved successful, citing the example of noble children in Imperial Russia who frequently had French governesses and consequently grew up bilingual in French and Russian.

However, he said that there were far fewer examples of trilingual programs, and so the only way to really know the outcome would be to see how the children's languages had developed by the time they are of school age.

At P'tit Cref, the children spend around half the time doing English language activities, just under half doing Russian language activities and one session is conducted in French, which was recently introduced. Becar plans to eventually spread the activities equally between the three languages. There are also plans to divide the children into two groups according to age in the near future. For now, they can play

together in a large playroom filled with toys, games and puzzles when they are not doing group activities with the teachers.

Jacob has a rest from language practice. The activities at P'tit Cref are centered around games and typical kindergarten forms of entertainment rather than formal language teaching.

P'tit Cref is flexible to accommodate parent's various needs and schedules, and children can be left at the school from 8 a.m. At nine the first lesson begins, which is usually painting, modeling, or other activities suitable for small children. Mid-morning the children have a "second breakfast." They also go outside to play — not for long in minus temperatures, but in spring Becar hopes to take the children to the nearby Tavrichesky Sad (Tauride Gardens). After lunch, the younger children take a nap while the older children are free to play.

The afternoon activities, which are conducted in a different language to that used in the morning, last until 5p.m. Becar explained that some children attend the preschool only in the morning and others in the afternoon. The school also offers after-school activities every day, including sport, music and arts and crafts. In addition, once every two months, a special theme week is held, during which the children are taken on trips to the theater, oceanarium or other attractions.

Becar says it was no more difficult to set up a preschool in Russia than in any other country. The school has been at its current premises since December last year, but before that it was located on the main premises of Cref, a language school run by the same company for teenagers and adults that offers German in addition to the languages taught at P'tit Cref. The current premises on Prospekt Chernyshevskogo include a large playroom, two smaller classrooms and a room where the children do sport and take their nap.

Becar readily admits his service is aimed primarily at wealthy Russians and ex-pat professionals — the cost of sending a child to P'tit Cref full-time for one month is around \$1,200. According to Becar, it has also proved popular with bi-national couples, who are keen for their children to become familiar with the language and culture of both parents.

Along with language learning, there is considerable emphasis at P'tit Cref on the teaching of different cultures. The school arranges parties every month or two to celebrate holidays around the world, such as Halloween, Christmas, Epiphany and carnivals.

As parents look toward the globalized world in which their children will live, services like that offered by P'tit Cref offer one way to provide the next generation with the tools they will need.

"I believe a multicultural atmosphere is important, especially in Russia," says Becar. "I was shocked by the prejudice I witnessed when I first came to Russia, and I think multicultural projects such as ours are one way of overcoming prejudice."

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- reprinted from the St. Petersburg Times

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