

# NURSERY

Care and education in the early years

WORLD

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## Education in action

**Why some under fives think it's good to smoke**

## More on NVQs

**Basic questions answered**



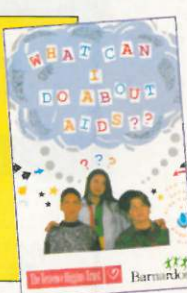
## French without tears

**It comes naturally in a 'French-only' playgroup**



## Special needs

**Parents with Aids plan their children's future**

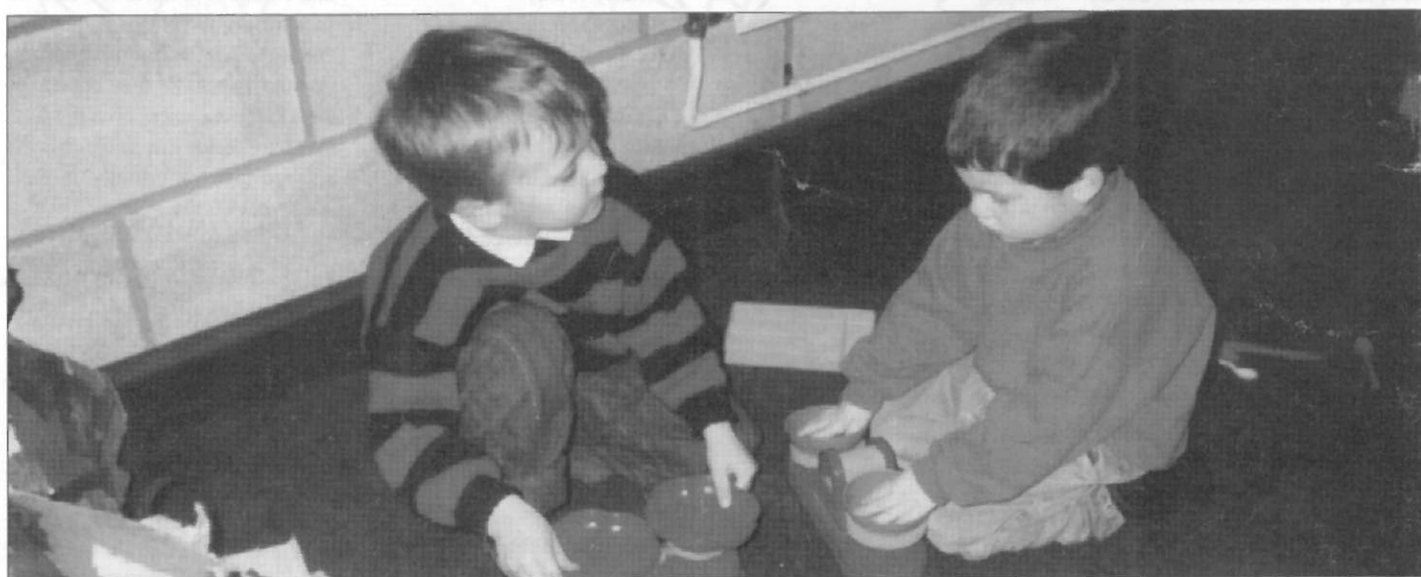


**100's of jobs with children**



# L'ecole maternelle

*We're told that working in Europe will become ever easier after 1993 and that the UK population, especially its youth, will become more integrated as Europeans than any generation before them – provided they have a firm grasp of at least one other European language. It's not surprising, then, that many parents feel that giving their children opportunities to learn French from an early age will give them a head start when it comes to more formal language learning. So, over the next three issues, we'll be taking a look at some under fives who are learning French without tears...*



**D**OWN in Basingstoke, a moderately-sized town in Hampshire, is a very unusual playgroup.

L'Ecole Maternelle, as you can guess from the name, is French! The term comes from France and is the equivalent to our nursery schools and German kindergartens.

L'Ecole was set up in 1985, long before teaching foreign languages at a young age was fashionable in Britain. The founder is still the group leader. Chansopha Biermann began her life in Cambodia and went to a French nursery school there. She also learnt English and practised as a midwife in Basingstoke before her own children were born. Chansopha's husband, Martin, is also an accomplished linguist and both were determined that their daughters, Fiona and Emma, would get a grounding in foreign languages. Chansopha decided that she would like to offer other children the same opportunity and L'Ecole Maternelle was born.

The first venue was a meeting room at the back of the modern local library. The group then moved to premises in a comprehensive school, with the aim of integrating some of the language facilities. The building proved unsuitable and the group packed up and returned to the library.

Working in someone else's building has its limitations. L'Ecole has use of the room for just two mornings a week. There is only one cupboard for storage and the kitchen is small – large enough to make a mid-morning snack, but too small for the children to use for activities. The leaders are very aware that only a wooden, folding 'wall' separates the children from the library, but, fortunately, there is a grassy area outside for a run around if energy levels look like bubbling over.

The children are greeted with a cheery 'Bonjour' as they come through the door, and a French-style handshake and 'bisous' – a brief kiss on each cheek. The first half-hour is for free play. The children who want to can sit at

a table and begin with drawing and colouring. Of course similar activities can be found in groups across the country, but at L'Ecole the instructions are in French. Others play with Duplo, jigsaws, play people, trains and cars.

At 10 am, it's time to sit together and learn some key words in French. Topics change each week, and are usually related to the season or a forthcoming festival. The children celebrate Noel (Christmas), Paques (Easter) and La Fête Des Mères (Mother's Day) just like anyone else, but how about Mardi Gras! Talking time always includes some practical demonstrations – nature specimens, simple science, food or craft. Complicated explanations are always in English, but the children are encouraged to repeat the key words and form simple phrases with their increasing vocabulary.

After talking time, the children move to the main activity of the morning. This is usually craft based, though sometimes there is basic cookery and small experiments. The

craft will be based on the key words of the morning. On the 'lourd et léger' (heavy and light) day, for example, so delegated when I visited, Chansopha taught the words and showed the children the effect of balancing different objects on simple scales. The main activity was a collage of heavy objects (little stones etc) stuck on one side of the paper and light articles (cotton wool and feathers) on the other. The children played with the balances and a helper brought a seesaw to compare the 'lourd' and 'léger' children.

At snack time, the children begin with fruit. They play games naming the fruit and take it in turns to be the 'garçon' or waiter. Drinks and biscuits follow, requested by 's'il te plaît' and are received with 'merci'. Next follows a session of songs and rhymes, and a simple story containing the key words again. The older children have built up quite a repertoire of traditional French songs and nursery rhymes and a few French translations of English favourites – have you ever heard 'Mouton, mouton, as tu de la laine' or 'Vieux Macdonald'?

Throughout the session, children are introduced to the same concepts as they would learn in any other playgroup. There are many opportunities for counting, colours, shapes and learning animals. There is an emphasis on encouraging mature pencil control and there is also always gentle but firm discipline on fairness, sharing and taking turns. The children are encouraged to recycle and not to waste, and to respect nature and other people.

Instructions are issued in French. The older children understand and comply. When the instruction is repeated, most of the others connect the phrase to the action of the older children and follow suit. Anyone who has not grasped the meaning is helped, but, in general, the children learn quite easily. Very few fail to master counting and colours and they pick up the words connected with snacktime almost as soon as they arrive! It is far more difficult to get the children to talk in

French, but plenty of practise with songs and single words helps them overcome any diffidence they may have. The most noticeable thing about the children when they do speak is their impeccable accent. Having learnt so early from native French speakers, they roll their 'r's' naturally and effortlessly.

At the end of the session, the children go home with their art and a book from L'Ecole's library. These books are topped up each time a helper goes to France! There's also a small collection of cassettes for parents who are not too sure of their own pronunciation.

There are 12 to 14 children at each session and the staff to child ratio is kept high to cover the added complication of the foreign language. The regular helpers are Trish, a qualified French teacher, Valeries, a native French lady, Julie, who describes herself as 'a bit above 'O' level French' and Sue. All have had or still have children at the group and are convinced that the pre-school age is the best time to introduce a second language.

The waiting list for L'Ecole can be up to 50 children and some names are even being put down at birth! Chansopha would love to do more sessions and offer the group to many more children but the restraints of accommodation and finance hold her back. Fees are currently £3 per session,



(opposite page) Tom and Christopher practising 'lourd et léger' (above) Ceramics teacher Ros Dixon and group helper Sue Taylor organising the pottery session

which is compatible with other local groups but does not cover the extra costs of French language books, which are usually donated; neither do they cover the cost of having material prepared in French.

Chansopha also runs two after school groups for children aged five to eight and eight to 11, so that children who have made a start can continue with some French until they reach secondary school age. One or two children who have had the full two years at the playgroup are ready to begin reading and writing French with no obvious detriment to their skills in English.

Foreign language teaching is slowly creeping into primary schools, but, for a small group of very fortunate children in Basingstoke, the process is beginning even earlier, at a stage when their mental 'language centres' are primed to learn, when they can pick up an authentic accent and learn French without self-consciousness.

Julie Greenslade

*'At snack time the children begin with fruit. They play games naming the fruit and take it in turns to be the 'garçon' or waiter'*



(left) Playgroup leader Chansopha Biermann teaching light and heavy, 'léger et lourd'