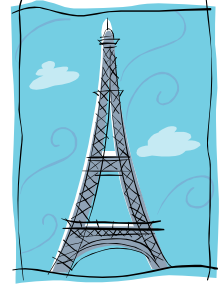


## A Note from Jeff - French at the VPC



Since its inception nearly thirty years ago, the Village Preschool Center has taught French to our little students. We have always believed that it is very important to familiarize your children with a second language at an early age, to help them understand that there are many ways to communicate, and to start them communicating in French themselves.

Since Spanish is such a presence in New York City, some people have asked us how we decided on French as our second language. The answer is simple: I taught French language and literature at the University of Chicago and Dartmouth before I started working with preschoolers. I learned French as an undergraduate, so

between learning and teaching, I have a very clear idea of what it means and what it takes to master a second language. Mlle Karima, a sparkling and creative Green Parakeet teacher with a great gift for French children's songs, and a native French speaker, is my partner.

By far the best way to learn a language is to be totally immersed. (An unforgettable instance is the twins who didn't speak a word of English, but within two months had

achieved enough mastery to call me "Poopie Head.") A visit to family in France or Quebec provides an immersion experience: cousins who speak only French are the best language professors for little children.

At the VPC we cannot immerse the children in French, which presents us with an interesting situation. Young children master a language concretely, through prolonged exposure, absorption, and trial and error. Adults can learn abstractly, by memorizing paradigms and applying them generally (rule: *almost all -er verbs are conjugated like parler*).

We have to set realistic goals for the children: we cannot transport them to France, and they cannot learn grammar. We work with what's possible and what's fun.

1. Children pick up **pronunciation** effortlessly. Teaching the French *u* to adults is remedial, almost like rehab. Many are incapable of mastering that sound. Almost all children, whose articulation is much more fluid, will mispronounce it once, and then pronounce it properly when their mistake is pointed out. So we can work successfully on pronunciation.
2. Children, even twos and threes, can soak up French **vocabulary** like sponges. The hard part of learning is mastering concepts. When they have learned their colors in English, saying either *rouge* or red is pretty much the same to them. When they learn the five senses with their classroom teachers, I have the same lesson, with



French vocabulary, waiting in the wings. Shapes, counting, the alphabet, parts of the body including skin, heart, calves, lungs, etc. are just a few examples of children's capacity to say in French what they know in English. (Occasionally I teach them the French word before they know the English equivalent, e.g., *les mollets*: I've yet to meet a preschooler who knew what her/his calves were.)

3. It is easy for children to pick up **common, complete sentences** that have meaning for them. Everyone gets hungry or thirsty or hot or cold. So it is easy to learn "*J'ai faim, j'ai soif, j'ai chaud, j'ai froid.*" Add the intensifier adverb *tres*, and soon they're saying "*J'ai tres, tres, tres faim.*" They also pick up weather expressions readily, including some that are difficult to pronounce for English-speaking adults: "*Il fait du brouillard.*" (It's foggy.)

### **French with Twos and Young Threes**

We read simple stories, preferably using pop-up books, which captivate children, in French, and then translate them, sentence by sentence, into English. Within a few months exposure many twos-threes will answer spontaneously such questions as, "Il est grand ou petit, Spot?"

"Il est petit!"

Twos and young threes also learn quickly through songs with movements, and through finger games.

### **French with Older Threes, Fours, and Fives**

The older children are happy to sit for a 15 - 20 minute French lesson that is supported by appropriate visual materials, games, and humor. Motivation levels vary from year to year, and class to class. One class may insist on counting in French to 100 every day, while another is perfectly content with a mere 20 when they're in the mood to count in French at all.

All these children work on the alphabet, (how many of you former French students ever learned the letters of the alphabet in French class?) counting, colors, shapes, simple sentences, weather expressions, and much more.

### **French with French-Speaking Children**

With the parents' consent, the French speaking staff speaks exclusively in that language to children who have French at home. Occasionally parents worry that their child may be lagging in English because he or she is hearing so much French in school. English is never the problem. Sustaining interest in French is a major challenge. A former science teacher asked one four-year-old boy who had just returned from France whether there were dinosaur museums in France. He replied, "Hello! Duh!" I was pleased to tell his parents that they need no longer be concerned about his English.

