

New preschool offers Spanish immersion to young charges

Response has been good to the opening of the new facility, say operators

BY KIRSTIN LESOSKY
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Their day begins with "hola" and ends with "adiós" for children at the Mi Escuelita Preschool in Lakeview Heights.

Operated by the husband and wife team of Ileana Reyes and Georges Guillemot, the fully licensed Spanish Immersion Preschool is unique in its offering of a Spanish-speaking environment.

"If you give a child a language, it's a gift for life," said Reyes, the school's teacher, who is fluent in both English and Spanish.

Having taught preschool for many years in her home town of Mexico City, it was always a dream of Reyes to one day have her own childcare centre. Upon arriving in Canada four years ago, she studied to obtain her Early Childhood Education certificate and worked in several preschool programs on the Westside.

Developing a successful Spanish immersion program within an existing preschool last year prompted her to consider taking the calculated risk to open her own preschool.

Suitably named Mi Escuelita, which translates to My Little Schoolhouse, the preschool is operated out of a stand-alone building next to the couple's home. The schoolhouse was fully renovated before opening in September to create a child friendly learning environment that meets Interior Health's Child Care Facility standards. A large fenced outside play area also caters to Reyes' young clientele. "I think we must have the biggest sandbox in all of Kelowna."

While the schoolhouse is filled with everything one would see in a preschool, with child sized tables and toy filled shelves, there is one noticeable difference when it comes to the learning



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Mi Escuelita Preschool teacher Ileana Reyes with her students Hannah Gazso (front) Maya Collie, and Nolan Gauthier, all four years old.

materials. Everything is in Spanish.

Incorporating fun into learning, Reyes uses games, art, puppets, music, books and educational centres to engage the children.

"It's important to make a friendly environment for the children so it's a gradual tradition to Spanish," said Reyes. "First you understand, then you start to speak."

Hand gestures and pointing also serve to help communicate the new vocabulary words and phrases.

"Children are learning all the time so it's a normal process for them. They pick up the language really fast."

Reyes also shares her Mexican culture with her students, celebrating the holidays such as Halloween and Christmas with Spanish traditions. Even the parents learn through their child's preschool experience with the Spanish/English newsletter outlining the top-

ics covered for the month and some Spanish chit chat when they pick up their children.

Reyes said that she has experienced positive responses from the children and their parents.

"We wanted to expose her to another language," said Kirsten Gazso, who is the mother of Hannah, 4. "She also has a grandfather that speaks Spanish."

Mi Escuelita Preschool, located at 2702 Boucherie Rd., offers a preschool program once or twice a week for children (ages 2-4) as well as a kindergarten program (ages 5-6) and after school program (ages 6-7 or 8-9). There is a maximum of 10 children in each class.

For a listing of programs and schedules, visit the website www.miescuelita.ca. For more information on the program or to arrange a meeting and a visit of the facility call Ileana Reyes at 769-3145.