

School will teach foreign languages to kids as young as 1 year old

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Emily Hammond is turning the saying “you’re never too old to learn” upside down. She’s opening a school that will teach foreign languages to kids as young as 1 year old.

Hammond is the owner and director of Yak Academy, near Academy and Dublin boulevards, a for-profit business that will offer classes in Spanish, Mandarin and French to 1-year-old through 10-year-old kids. It’s set to open Sept. 13.

While at first it may seem overly ambitious to teach another language to a child just learning to talk, Hammond said research shows that there is a window of opportunity for the young to easily pick up languages.

“Your brain is wired to acquire language at that age,” she said

The languages won’t be taught with books and repetitive exercises, Hammond said. For younger kids, learning is 100 percent play-based, with words and concepts taught with games, songs, movement, arts and crafts, even snack time.

“Our program is designed for kids and how kids learn,” Hammond said.

There are six instructors — three for Spanish, two for Mandarin and one for French — at Yak Academy, including Hammond.

She said a lot of parents think Chinese is “cool,” as well as a useful skill, given the growing political and economic importance of Asia.

French is popular with those in the region with ties to Canada, including relatives who speak the language.

Hammond said there have been requests to add German and Italian classes, and that’s a possibility in the future.

Students at Yak Academy will be grouped according to age into weekly classes. Preschoolers will meet in three-hour blocks two to three times a week.

“You can get a lot of language skills in that time,” Hammond said. “The key is to learn it as young as possible.”

While some elementary schools in the region offer language classes — usually Spanish — finding classes for very young children can be tough. Many Colorado Springs School District 11 elementary schools offer Spanish and two offer French. Academy School District 20 offers Spanish, French and Mandarin at elementary schools.

“It’s still pretty sparse in schools,” Hammond said.

Older students at the academy will get the immersion into the language, but they will learn by focusing on longer projects, competitions, and presentation to parents. Classes are after-school and on Saturdays.

Hammond said she has always loved languages, and working with kids. Opening a business that combined those interests was a natural fit. She will occasionally be a Spanish instructor at the academy, but other languages are works in progress.

“I dabble in Chinese, but my French is awful,” she said.

When seeking instructors for Yak Academy, Hammond wanted fluent or native speakers of the languages being taught, and of course experience working with kids. Background checks were part of the process. She particularly wanted individuals passionate about sharing their culture as well as the language.

“The teachers love sharing their languages and the kids love learning,” she said.

DETAILS

Yak Academy, at 1865 Dominion Way in Colorado Springs, will have two open houses where interested families can meet instructors and watch class demonstrations. Call 694-0221 for more information.

- 4-6 p.m. Wednesday
- 3-5 p.m. Sunday

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