

Saying It With Feeling

By Mary Grace Gorman, Recreation Leader II

Just blocks away from Columbus Square Playground in South Philadelphia, “Speak English” signs became a nationwide debate a few years ago. The sentiment that people moving to this country should speak English easily causes disagreements amongst parties in certain situations.

But here at the Columbus Square Playground After School Program, this “melting pot” of new Americans is being embraced. At just five and six years old, three of the 20 participants are brand new to our country. Marco, a Mexican child, is a little shy and quiet. He is the only Spanish-speaking person in the program. He knows how to whistle, so he does it a lot. There are eight Asian children in the program--7 of whom are Chinese. Erica is only five years old and moved to the United States this summer. She has cousins in the program and was able to assimilate pretty much right away, using them as her translators. Lin Hao is six years old and just moved to the United States in August. And while Marco whistles and observes, Lin Hao is a bit more extroverted and is always in the mix of things. Lin Hao’s energy sometimes leads him to be reprimanded and much of what he was hearing was about what he was doing wrong. That bothered me immensely.

A few weeks into the program, while we were waiting for everyone to sign-in, I asked Marco how to say “red” in Spanish by pointing to the color red. “Rojo!” he responded. He was thrilled that I asked him how HE said it. Then I asked the Chinese children. They shouted the answer back, ecstatic that we were showing an interest in their language. Simply asking them how they said something opened up doors to how we could communicate with these little children. Asking each other how to say certain things in ALL of our languages quickly became a game, and we had all the children on board, including the English-speaking children.

It has been almost two full months for both Lin Hao and Marco here at Columbus Square After School Program. The other day, I sat and played Operation with Lin Hao and Marco for over an hour, just the three of us. They sat and did typical six-year-old things—bantering over whose turn it was, trying to keep each other’s hands away from the operating table and questioning each other’s compliance with the game’s rules. But as good-natured wrangling went on, I smiled at them and encouraged them to play fair, be nice and give each other high fives when they won. But it soon became clear I was watching them bond in a way that I don’t think any of us that are not six years old and new to this country could possibly understand.

Since then, these two have been playing together, giving high fives and laughing a lot. This is a picture of Marco, Lin Hao and Viviane, one of our high school helpers here at Columbus Square. Viviane is the daughter of Russian immigrants and speaks Russian fluently. While playing Clue, Lin Hao could count to five in English, Chinese AND Spanish! Marco could count in English, Spanish AND Chinese! With Viviane’s guidance, I am sure these two will be counting in Russian as well in just a few short games.

It is easy for those of us who have lived in this country our entire lives and speak English as our native tongue to be innocently unaware of the difficulties new Americans face when coming to our country. Columbus Square Playground After School Program has embraced this diversity. In an effort to further advance this positive blending of cultures, we invited students from a Diversity Class at Temple University to observe our program. They have given us a few pointers already, such as use more visual aids in the room. We are looking forward to possibly working with more students this upcoming semester.

All children want to feel encouraged, guided and included. When the predominate words a five year old and six year old hear are “no”, “stop” or “Speak English”, the disappointment shows in their eyes. It has been one of the biggest thrills of my fourteen years in this department to learn how to communicate with these children in a positive way. My hope for these children is that over simple little games, like Operation, they may learn that patience, a smile and high fives are a positive way to communicate that may ultimately lead to respect and friendship, no matter what language you speak. Everyone wants to be understood.

Columbus Square Playground also offers English as a Second Language classes for adults. This group meets Mondays and Thursdays. If anyone is interested in finding out more about this program, please contact us at 215-685-1890.



