

Primary Advice

By Helene J. Uchida

Q:

I cannot keep the attention of a 3-year-old in her private lesson. The mom's presence does not help. Singing songs and playing games in groups is much more fun for children than one-on-one with a teacher. Your advice is welcome.

L.N., teacher

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A: More the merrier for younger children

A classroom is a social situation that has countless possibilities. The atmosphere of the environment, the aura of the teacher, the activities generated and, above all, the different members of the class all add lots of variety and spice. Because a preschool private lesson is like an incubator with the focus on one child, many of the essential ingredients necessary to hold a young child's interest are missing.

There are three aspects I would like to address.

The first is that at 3 years of age, children are ready to temporarily separate from their mother and take the necessary steps for social development. At this age they have interest in other children, often copy what their classmates do, and are ready to make friends. Although the mother's intentions are good, her child is being denied this precious opportunity of social growth because of the private lesson.

Second, a samurai cannot be loyal to two masters. By this I mean that it must be perplexing for the child to be in a room with two authority figures at the same time. Whom does she listen to and obey? From whom does she get her cues? Which authority figure does she want to please over the other? She may be confused by this dual-authority scenario, which may make it hard for her to focus.

Third, the acquisition of English is not limited to language. It links to communication, social skills, interaction, cooperation, compromise, give and take, trusting and taking directions from the teacher, trying and failing, recovering from failure to try again. How can a child learn to cooperate with others if he/she is always the center of attention?

I would like to suggest that you arrange a consultation with the mother. Thank her for her interest in your les-

sons and for sharing her daughter with you. Tell her what good points you have noticed in her daughter and give examples of each. Explain that you are both on the same team and you, as teacher, want to create enjoyable English experiences for her child. Mention some of the points that I have discussed, which the mother may not be aware of. Let her know clearly that you think her daughter could make better progress in a class together with other youngsters her age.

There are two ways to choreograph such a situation. Ask the mother and child to come observe one of your current preschool classes so they can see how young children behave and learn in a group setting. If the day of the class is inconvenient for the mother, then gently suggest that she introduce another child the same age from the girl's preschool. This is a case of two definitely being better than one.

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Readers are encouraged to send questions to Helene J. Uchida on any themes related to teaching English — particularly those at the elementary and junior high school level — to jn-edu@yomiuri.com with "Primary Advice" in the subject line. Questions to Uchida are also accepted via postcard at "Primary Advice," The Japan News, 1-7-1 Otemachi, Chiyoda Ward, Tokyo 100-8055. Questions should preferably be written in English, accompanied by your name, occupation and the area in which you live.



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The next installment will appear on July 27.