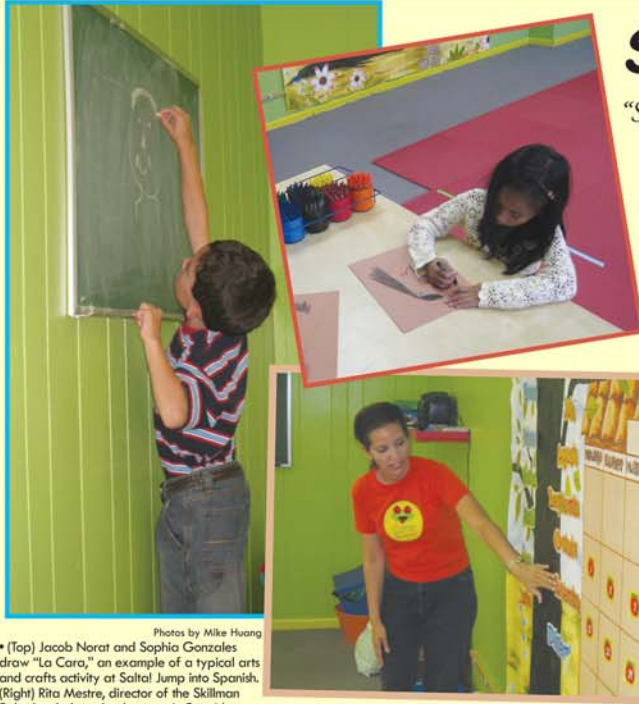




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Photos by Mike Huang
 • (Top) Jacob Norat and Sophia Gonzales draw "La Cara," an example of a typical arts and crafts activity at Salta! Jump into Spanish. (Right) Rita Mestre, director of the Skillman Salta! leads the calendar song in Spanish.

Salta! for Joy

"Salta!" gives children a jump on Spanish

By John Dunphy

It has been said that children are the most able to grasp the complexities of learning a second language. At Salta! Jump into Spanish, Director and Owner Rita Mestre is combining the Spanish language with fun activities and a warm, all-inclusive environment.

"It's very different than in school," said Ms. Mestre, who grew up speaking both Spanish and English at home. "It's like stepping into the country."

"Salta," which means "jump" in Spanish, began in Edison Township in 2003.

The inspiration to start Salta! came to Jacqueline Sanin, the founder and CEO, and her husband Jorge, when their daughter insisted on only speaking English at home. Her daughter was growing up without an appreciation for her parents' native language, and she wanted to find a way to show her daughter the beauty of the language

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and culture.

As a parent-child enrichment program, Salta! Jump into Spanish teaches children Spanish "through music, movement and instruments, songs and rhymes, playful games and storytelling... children will embark on a wonderful journey through Latin America," according to its Web site, saltajump.com.

For older children, at Salta! Jump into Spanish, "Our goal is to teach children how to decode the language by speaking," according to the Web site. "We encourage the children to not only hear the language but also to try to form their own sentences and phrases."

The Skillman location is now the third Salta! franchise. Another is located in Peapack, NJ.

Ms. Mestre, who previously worked in human resources at an insurance company, "realized I wanted to pursue education," she said. "That was my passion."

After working with Salta! in Edison for several years "I finally decided to get one of my own," she said.

Like at the Edison and Peapack locations, Salta! in Skillman is enrolling children from as young as 18 months. Currently, there are children as old as nine.

"It is 100 percent Spanish immersion," Ms. Mestre said. "When you're learning in school you're sitting at a desk, you're not really grasping it."

But with full immersion, the children are not just learning Spanish, they are living it — a key difference, Ms. Mestre notes. There is music, songs and games — ways for children to not just learn words and phrases, but to actually connect with them on the same level they do when learning English for the first time.

"In our pre-school program, we mimic what kids are learning in a regular pre-school, but incorporating it all in Spanish," she said. "We have our own Salta! curriculum."

Besides traditional class structures, Salta! is providing both private and semi-private tutoring sessions "for children who want to learn Spanish to supplement what they're learning in school," Ms. Mestre said. "We want to try and get them to really think in Spanish."

Also available are Spanish-themed birthday parties, she said.

All this is part of Salta! Jump into Spanish's ultimate goal: to learn a second language.

"Studies have shown children who learn at a younger age tend to do better later on," Ms. Mestre said. "Language helps children in all areas as they grow, in business, in communication. It opened doors for me."

Salta! Jump into Spanish is located at 416 Route 518 in Montgomery Township. For more information, call 609-333-0013, e-mail skillman@saltajump.com or visit saltajump.com.