

Welcome to Spiel und Spass: A guide for non-German speaking parents

If you're reading this, you may be considering joining Spiel und Spass, or the *German playgroup*, as it's known in my house. Perhaps you've already joined and are wondering what you've got yourself into!

Take heart. I took my toddler son to Spiel und Spass for one-and-a-half years and never spoke a word of German. That should give you an idea of how much we enjoyed it!

As a new mum at a new playgroup, I would have been nervous anyway, so my lack of German didn't seem that terrible at the time. During that first term, I was the only non-German speaking parent, but by our last term I'd been joined by two or three more.

Most parents join Spiel und Spass because they feel it's important their child learns German, or is immersed in the German language from an early age. No matter the reason, sometimes this means the attending parent doesn't speak German themselves. If this is you, don't hide in a corner! In fact, you may find many other parents will be curious about you and actually commend your determination.

You've taken the first steps, so I encourage you to make the most of your Spiel und Spass experience. Here are a few tips to make it an enjoyable one.

At Spiel und Spass:

- Don't feel you need to pretend you understand what the playgroup leader is saying. Ask them to repeat in English or double check what you think they mean. It's very easy to get the gist of something, but miss the finer, important details.
- Likewise, never pretend you understand what the other parents are saying. They'll find it difficult to show a genuine interest in you or include you in conversation, if you're just nodding and smiling. Some parents have English as their first language, or want to practise their English, and they will soon remember that you don't speak German.
- Be proactive and start conversations. Introduce yourself and ask what brings them to Spiel und Spass. One of my favourite things about Spiel und Spass was meeting people from all over the world. It's fascinating to hear how they ended up in Canberra, and to share aspects of different cultures and backgrounds.
- Be generous with help and ideas. As a local, I was often asked where, who and how questions by parents new to Canberra. Some parents had only very recently moved to Canberra from Europe or Asia, or other parts of Australia. They didn't know anyone and didn't have a support system of friends and colleagues. Just like you, they want to be welcomed into the new group.

- Ask about their children. I found after a few weeks at Spass, I was seeing the same parents at all sorts of Canberra-based kids' activities. I reminded myself that my son would eventually be attending the German Australian Playschool with some of these children, so it was important I get to know them. Remember, children easily communicate and make friends without sharing a common language!
- Ask other parents the German words for the toys your child is playing with – car, sandpit, doll, train etc, and continue to use those words at playgroup. My son loved to sweep the paths outside, so one of the first words we learned was broom! People will always appreciate the effort you make to speak their language.
- Help out. If an opportunity arises to volunteer with Spiel und Spass, take it. I was hesitant at first, but helped out as treasurer towards the end of my time with the playgroup. No German language was required, and as part of the job I had to introduce myself to new members and learn everyone's names. ("Hi, I'm Ann. I don't speak German!")
- Attend other Spielwelt events. Not only are they fun, but they are an opportunity to build relationships and gain a sense of community. The more time you spend with Spielwelt, the more you'll feel that you belong.

At home:

- My son started talking (English) during our time at Spiel und Spass, so it was inevitable he'd pick up German words as well. We only went two hours a week, but he learned some basics naturally and easily – bye, thank you, please, car, etc. I continued to use these German words at home and always in context.
- We also sang the playgroup songs at home. His favourite song today is still one we learned at Spass. Download the Songbook – http://www.spielwelt.org.au/download/GAP_Lieder_w_translations_2011.pdf – and see if you can practise the songs at home.
- Like singing, children's books will also reinforce their German and teach you basic words and phrases. Spiel und Spass has an extensive library, so take advantage of it. I tried to read at least one German book every day with my son, and we quickly learned the German words for digger and truck!
- I also downloaded Alphabet Garden's ebook, called Parenting auf Deutsch - http://www.spielwelt.org.au/download/parenting_auf_deutsch_v2.pdf - and left it out (where I would see it) at home. I learned a few German phrases and worked them into our daily routine, usually bedtime, so goodnight, sleep well, etc.
- I invested in some good German language DVDs - <http://www.littlepim.com/> - which my son loves. Each day he picks which one he wants to watch and for how long. I usually join him on the couch and we laugh together at the animations. We've both learned a lot from this exercise.

The final word – in English!

Don't beat yourself up if you can't get a handle on the language, if you don't have time or just can't manage it right now. Like I said, I didn't speak German or take a single German class while we attended Spiel und Spass!

Learning a second language is wonderful for a child's cognitive development. Any language learning is better than none, and if you're only able to practice yes, no, please and thank you right now, then so be it.

My son is learning in fits and starts, depending on *my* commitment, but I'm confident that I provided him with a solid start by joining Spiel und Spass.

If you'd like to know more, I'm very happy to discuss my English-speaking experience at the *German playgroup*, and can be contacted through Spielwelt.

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