

Play right

Noted for "Kideowatch", a way for parents to securely view their offspring in class via the Web, Tutor Time's real success is preparing pre-schoolers for a lifetime.

PROBABLY the only pre-school learning centre to offer Hong Kong parents a Web cam view of their kids is Tutor Time International Nursery & Kindergarten — many parents are looking to enroll their children because of that feature alone, says Steve Bauer, operations director of Tutor Time. However, it is the quality of courses offered that should convince them, "the curriculum itself and the level of my teachers," he says.

Regarding the latter, the teachers are young and many have a four year bachelor degree in Early Childhood Education. It is not uncommon for Tutor Time teachers to have graduated with honours, says Bauer, adding that they are young and fresh — not



your traditional teachers.

The high accolades of the staff are perfectly paired with the curriculum. The focus is on pre-reading, pre-writing and pre-math, but additional work is done in the areas such as developing motor skills, co-ordination and self help skills. The latter consists of basics like combing the hair, brushing teeth and self-dressing depending on the age of the child.

Tutor Time is a franchise operation that originated in the United States, where there are now more than 225 operations. The parent company has an entire department of early childhood education specialists that are devoted to developing the curriculum package that is sent out to franchise schools every month.

This modular package, divided into age groups is constantly being refined and updated based on advancements in teaching techniques, learning or any other related new knowledge that comes to light. It defies the convention of traditional curriculums annually rehashed and only periodically updated.

In spite of Tutor Time's progressive approach, the question that springs to

mind for many local parents is how can Tutor Time's programme prepare their child for a local school. British, Canadian or other international educational institution?

"I don't think a three-to-four year old kid understands what system they are going into," says Bauer. Indeed, the skill sets that Tutor Time helps develop are universal to all children. Additionally, the curriculum's fundamentals are equally universal and each module is carefully adapted to the local environment.

For example, the classes are all taught in Mandarin and English. Both the Mandarin and English teachers get together to discuss each module and how it will be most appropriately adjusted to fit the scope of Hong Kong. If the focus of a module is to familiarise the kids with colours, the curriculum may suggest to use the colours of the fall harvest.

The local Tutor Time teachers can easily adapt this lesson to incorporate the mid-Autumn Festival. Depending on their age, the tykes could even make paper lanterns out of the colours they are learning. Anything that fits locally can be incorporated, says Bauer, such as mooncakes.

If the word of the week is "hand", then the Mandarin Teachers will write the Chinese character out to accelerate recognition and comprehension just as the English word is written out — a part of the kids' pre-reading exercises. The focus is on creating a great educational package for kids, says Bauer.

"Mandarin is a key factor," says Bauer, because the SAR's future is inexorably linked to Mainland China. Only a handful of similar schools are offering Mandarin, so Tutor Time is focusing on this niche rather than Cantonese.

Currently, Tutor Time is offering activity

and play group sessions and has been doing so in Hong Kong for more than a year now. It is awaiting its Kindergarten and nursery licences, which it should receive shortly after this article's publication.

"It's kind of a chicken and egg thing, from a business perspective," says Bauer. After finding a location and signing the lease, the space must be filled with the requisite children's tables, chairs and toys. Since Tutor Time is a franchise each Location shares the same interior decorating unique to Tutor Time, a flourish of bright primary and secondary colours.

Once the construction is complete the staff are hired and government inspection can commence. If all goes well, Tutor Time will receive prompt approval. The structure for play and activity groups differs from the kindergarten and nursery programmes, explains Bauer. The former are at maximum an hour-and-a-half in duration while the latter can extend to half a day.

Long term plans call for five-to-six locations, including the current Kowloon and Tai Tam schools, to meet demand. The new Tai Tam location in Red Hill Plaza caters to Repulse Bay, Stanley, Tai Tam of course, Shousan Hill and even as far away as the Mid-levels, according to Bauer.

"There's nothing I like better than when a child walks in the door and can't wait to come in," says Bauer. If they are having a good time, enjoying themselves, they're learning, he opines. He suggests to the teachers to simply "get the children started, move back and watch what happens." Kids learn through their own experimentation, and receive help when problems arise. They learn more by doing things for themselves, gaining self esteem and a sense of accomplishment, he adds. "We truly believe children learn through play."