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YOUR SAY

■ More parents are going all out to groom their infants into little musicians and athletes, paying hundreds of dollars per course. Overzealous parents, however, risk frustrating and confusing their young children, psychiatrists say. Share your comments online at www.straitstimes.com
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Baby steps to learning

Parents signing up infants as young as 2 months for enrichment classes

By LIEW HANQING

BEFORE they have learnt to walk, they might have learnt to swim. Play drums. Attempt a forward roll. Strike a tree pose. OK, maybe not the tree pose.

But in many other areas, parents eager for physical and mental stimulation for their infants have never had it so good.

Whether they are looking for swim, gym, music, or even yoga classes for their young ones, there is someone out there with an age-appropriate programme.

Two months old is how young some pupils are at Kindermusik Asia, which runs music-and-movement programmes for children up to the age of seven. More than 1,000 infants up to 18 months old attend its courses each year – and the number is growing, said Ms Goh Chiat Jin, the school's director.

It helps when research suggests that listening to classical music like Mozart is good for the growing baby's brain.

In each 45-minute lesson, babies with their parents or caregivers explore instruments such as drums and bells, listen to songs and take part in musical activities that tickle their senses. Parents are also

given materials like books and CDs to play at home.

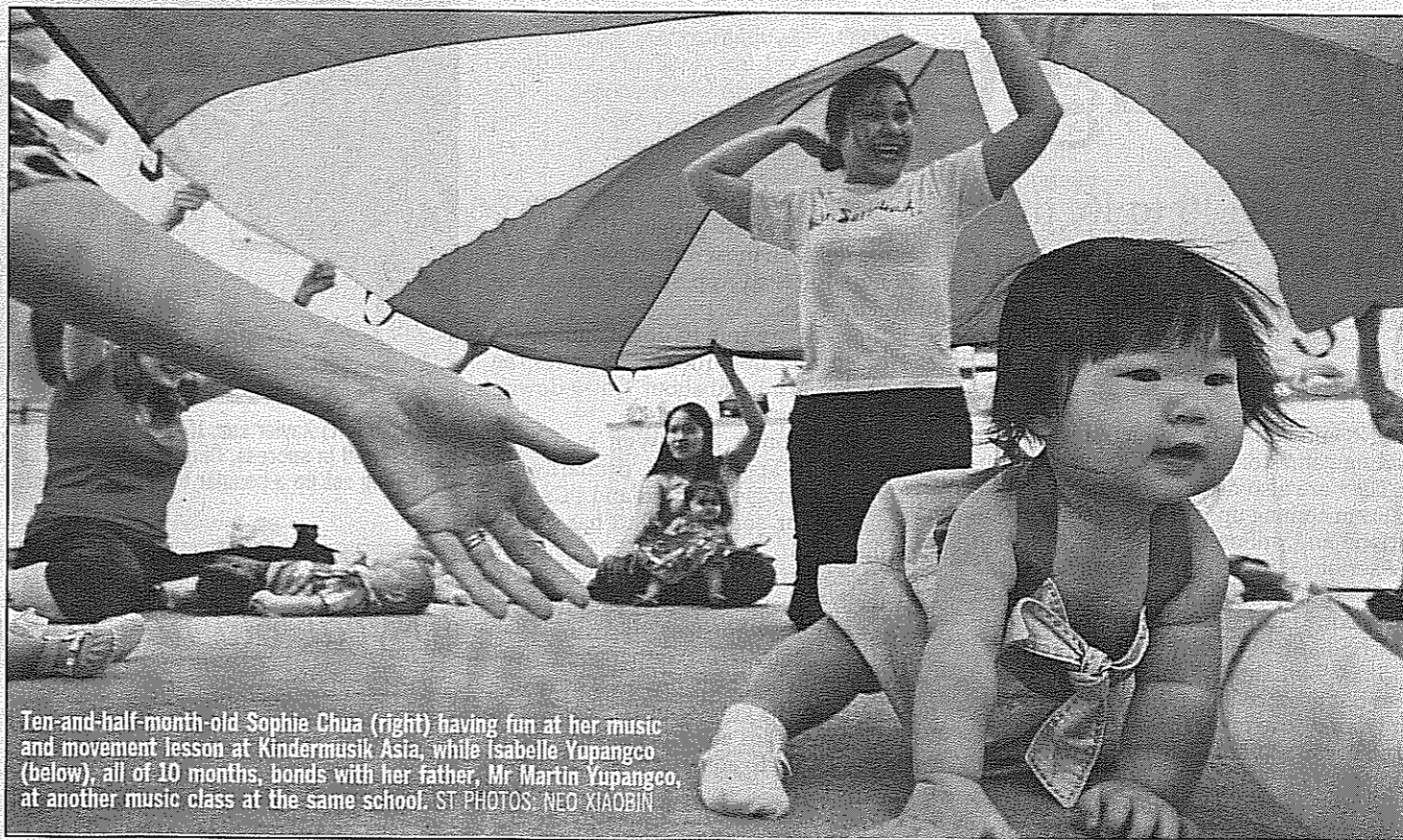
Ms Goh said classes are now evenly split between local and expatriate babies – a far cry from a decade ago when almost all of Kindermusik Asia's customers were foreign.

Music lessons help babies in their cognitive development, she said. They learn to anticipate certain musical patterns, and this helps "fire up" certain parts of their brain.

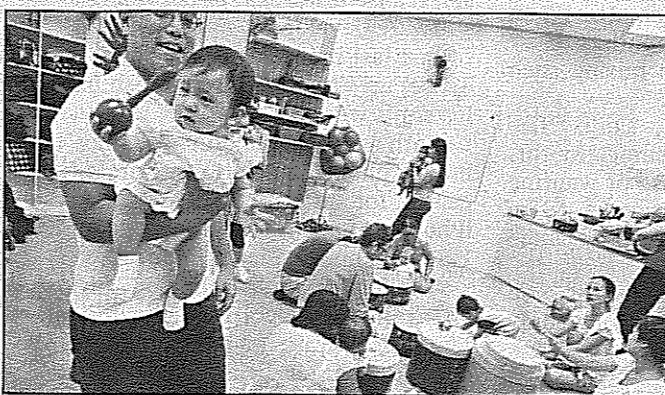
Another activity that infants take to like, er, fish to water, is swimming. Parents are signing up their infants as young as six months old, said Mr Jay Tan, director of Happy Fish Swim School. There are 60 babies enrolled in its Infant Aquatics programme, and numbers have increased by nearly 50 per cent since it was started last February.

"We teach babies how to hold their breath in water and how to float without any assistance. Some may also learn to propel themselves a short distance through the water," Mr Tan said.

The benefits? Clients have reported improvements in their babies' appetites and sleep patterns after swimming lessons,



Ten-and-half-month-old Sophie Chua (right) having fun at her music and movement lesson at Kindermusik Asia, while Isabelle Yupangco (below), all of 10 months, bonds with her father, Mr Martin Yupangco, at another music class at the same school. ST PHOTOS: NEO XIAOBIN



Mr Tan said.

Then there are classes that combine all the sensory stimulation of music, exercise and "yoga play". Call it Positive Focus®.

That is the company that offers an array of enrichment programmes for children.

Enrolment has nearly doubled since last year, said founder and master trainer Hasnah A. R., who said that 80 infants – all under six months – have been through the Positive Infants® course this year.

"Yoga play" exercises help parents bond with their babies and become more skilful at parenting, she said.

"The babies become calmer; the exercises help them stretch and be more comfortable, because they are usually lying down all the time."

It is not known how many parents are stumping up for the enrichment but it does not come cheap – an eight-session programme at Kindermusik Asia costs \$307, group lessons at Happy Fish cost \$320 for 16 sessions, while Positive Focus®' eight-session infant programme costs \$240.

But parents say they are well worth the money.

Mrs Carolyn Yong, a mother of two, started both her children on music lessons at just three months. "My older child is now confident and loves performing," said the homemaker, whose two-year-old daughter attended infant music classes for six months in the US.

Mrs Yong added that she believed the

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Internet abuzz over techno prodigies

From aged 10 to 16, they impress – with creations for smartphones, PCs

By TAN WEIZHEN

TEENS and youngsters are not just downloading games or mobile applications.

They are also developing them.

From coming up with hot iPhone applications and online games right down to the serious stuff – server management, a small group of very young Singaporeans are making headway in this potentially lucrative market.

Since Lim Ding Wen, 10, made headlines last year for being the world's youngest iPhone developer, three others have also emerged as young but promising technophiles.

Take 13-year-old Ryan Lee who, after spending a year self-learning a game programming language, has created 33 online games.

Teens Xavier Lur, 16, and Zhou Tong, 15, have taken their skills to the next level – server management and open source software.

All these techno prodigies have something in common – they started using computers at a young age.

Since Ding Wen was two, he knew how to boot a PC, use a mouse and run software, said his father, Mr Lim Thye Chean, 41. He had learnt an impressive nine programming languages since he was seven.

It is the same story for Ryan, whose father, Mr Nicholas Lee, 41, said that his son started playing simple computer games when he was just two, dabbled with basic animation software in Primary 1, and then graduated to Adobe Flash animation software by Primary 3.

Although these efforts may have not translated to monetary rewards as yet, it has garnered much attention from the Internet community.

Ding Wen's first iPhone application, Doodle Kids, has hit more than 680,000

downloads. Recently converted to run on Apple's hottest new gadget, the iPad, it became the 28th most-downloaded application on the iPad App Store's entertainment chart.

Both titles are free to download.

His second game, Invader War, for the iPhone, has attracted about 3,000 downloads.

To date, young Ding Wen has made more than 20 applications, primarily for the iPhone, Google Android and PCs.

Not bad for someone who has yet to take his PSLE.

"After writing a game, and I see it run very well, I feel very happy," said the Primary 4 pupil, who likes to swim, play games, and "talk to (his) father about programming", when he is not busy developing games at the computer.

He says it takes anything from one day to nearly a year to complete each application.

Xavier and Zhou Tong already have a strong following after setting up the TechXav blog network, which attracts an average of 100,000 hits a month.

So what is the secret to raising such gifted kids?

Ryan's father, Mr Lee, said: "Too many kids today just consume. In this case, we instil in him a sense of wanting to be part of the creative process, to be more involved in production and creation," he said.

He added that he dissuaded his son from just spending his time playing computer games.

"I even made his brother return a PlayStation Portable he received as a gift," joked Mr Lee, referring to Sony's hand-held game console.

Schools can also be credited for instilling in teens a sense of IT savviness. The FutureSchools initiative, for example, integrates the latest in infocomm technology with school curriculums.

The Media Development Authority has also been giving out a series of grants to support gaming, the latest being a \$20 million boost over three years to develop next-generation games here.



For (from left) Xavier Lur, 16, Lim Ding Wen, 10, Zhou Tong, 15, and Ryan Lee, 13, starting young has resulted in success. Ding Wen became the world's youngest iPhone developer, Xavier and Zhou Tong set up a popular blog and Ryan has created 33 online games. ST PHOTO: TERENCE TAN

10-year-old has dad firmly behind him

HE WAS the world's youngest iPhone application developer, at nine years old.

Just a year on, Lim Ding Wen has shown so much promise that his father has decided to quit his job to help his son realise his dream of becoming a software developer.

Just last month, Mr Lim Thye Chean, 41, set up Virtual GS, to publish his and his son's works.

Both are focusing on developing mobile phone applications, primarily games, for smart phones such as Apple's iPhone, Google Android, Lenovo's new LePhone, and the Java platform.

The former chief technology officer at an Internet Protocol TV company, Mr Lim is now getting a fraction of what he used to earn, but believes in his son, who has learnt nine programming languages since he was seven.

Right now, Mr Lim said, proceeds

from the efforts of Virtual GS – more than US\$1,000 (S\$1,400) a month, up from US\$100 last year – cover the family's basic expenses.

"I have quit my job to work on this, as it can now cover our basic expenses, but it is growing fast...so this should be able to grow into a viable business one day," he enthused.

Mr Lim, who also has two daughters, aged six and four, said he has no particular secret to producing gifted kids.

"The key is not to force them to do anything. You don't have to teach kids about computers, they just know."

"I always tell Ding Wen he's not a genius. Just give them the right environment...Meanwhile, he can enjoy being the world's youngest iPhone app developer – until his younger sisters come along, of course."

TAN WEIZHEN

Ding Wen's father, Mr Lim, said he has seen a sea change in gaming over the past decade: "When I was younger, playing games was something for bad kids. Now it's a useful skill. Just like the books

you read, it depends on what games you play – you are what you play.

"I would say kids should spend half their time studying, and the other half playing games," he added.

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Enrichment classes a hit with parents

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classes have helped her children develop better focus, and that the \$200 a month she spends on these enrichment programmes is money well-spent.

Mr Wang Han Guang spends up to \$200 every month on baby gym sessions for his two-year-old daughter, who started lessons when she was just 10 months old. "We believe we should allow our kids to enjoy different experiences," he said.

Mr Nah Yong Hwee, a senior psychologist from the University Children's Medical Institute at the National University Hospital, said educational programmes are beneficial to the development of infants, though progress may not easily be observed if they are under a year old.

He said such early stimulation programmes could be more beneficial to young children with slow development than those who are developing normally.

"We may not see marked progress because some infants may just not be developmentally ready yet," he said.

He stressed that regardless of what programmes infants are put through, care must be taken not to overwhelm them.

"It is imperative that the child enjoys the process, and that there are ample opportunities to bond with the caregivers," Mr Nah said.

Just like children who are pushed too hard in school, babies can be overwhelmed, too. Some parents of babies between 7 and 15 months old sign their children up for different trial lessons every week, said Ms Hasnah.

"There's always the danger of overstimulation, which could result in a baby becoming confused and unhappy."

But lest parents feel their babies may be losing out if they do not attend such classes, one expert says not to worry.

Consultant psychiatrist Brian Yeo said enrichment courses are not a must.

"(These courses) can be beneficial if they encourage mother-child bonding, but such interaction can be achieved during playgroups as well," he said.

He said it was not known if such programmes would give an infant any head-start in learning.

One thing, however, is clear, Dr Yeo said. "Parents who sign their infants up for these courses are good parents who are willing to spend time and money on their children – so these infants already have an advantage."

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