

## **Primer Paso**

**By Ellen Tveit**

**November 14, 2012**

Tonight we cooked one of Son's precious boxes of American macaroni and cheese in celebration of his first few hours of preschool in Bariloche.

Son has seemed tickled to hear Spanish all around him, and over the weekend I listened to him playing school in Spanish. Husband and I were confident that Son would respond well to Argentine kids once he got over the initial discomfort of being in a new situation.

Since there was very little information online, we had asked around—the pizza server, our landlord, the director of my language school, women on the street—until we identified several *guarderías/kinders/jardines* in our neighborhood. However, in most cases they were full and the one that wasn't seemed kind of sad. Then we found *Primeros Pasos* ("first steps") and crossed our fingers. Thankfully, the director said that while there was no way to catch Son up academically (he's four! and has been going to preschool!), they would work on integrating him socially over the next few weeks until their version of summer camp began.

### **First Step, Indeed**

The school day begins with all of the kids in a big room loudly singing the Argentine national anthem, complete with prideful fist thrusting, as the flag is raised. Then the kids disperse to their classrooms. There are about 20 kids in Son's class—more in the afternoon—and one teacher with an aide. We're used to a lower teacher-student ratio, so I tell myself it's like American kindergarten, which is only a year away.

The morning snack consists of cookies and *mate* (tea), sugared to taste, or warm milk with sugar. Son already knows that "cup down" means he'd like *mate* and "cup up" means milk. Kids bring their own cup and a small towel to use as a placemat. Those who stay beyond one o'clock eat a lunch they bring from home.

During his hour and a half at school, Son learned the names of a handful of other kids. Husband stayed with him and will stay again tomorrow as part of the transition to a five-hour day. Son has a new Spiderman cup, two towels, and a notebook to take in his backpack. We will also buy him a *Primeros Pasos* t-shirt to wear during *colonia*, when the kids switch from wearing smocks embroidered with their names.

The cost will be \$130/month for five hours a day, Monday through Friday. This is the first example of something costing less than we would pay at home, and it's a dramatic one.

## Preocupaciones Escolares

By Ellen Tveit

November 19, 2012

Today I went to preschool with Son. There was so much noise and commotion for the first half hour, when all of the kids are together in one big room with many hard surfaces, that I experienced physical and psychic discomfort.

*Madagascar 3* was playing on the flatscreen when we arrived, and Son sat perfectly still trying to watch the movie as kids all around him talked and yelled over each other, stood, danced, and wiggled. The *seño* (teacher) with the remote control, seeing kids dancing, decided to fast forward to some point in the movie where the characters were also dancing. She stopped and started several times, shouting "You want the part with dancing, right?! Dancing?!" The look on Son's face said "Are you kidding me? Please can't we just watch the movie?"

Then it was time for the flag raising followed by a group singalong. Son's class, the Hippos, stood up to sing a song led by a couple of *seños* who modeled expressive movements enthusiastically copied by most of the kids.

Finally, the Hippos went to their room and took out their towels and cups for snack time. The next forty-five minutes went smoothly: Son served himself cookies while seated at a table of girls, and then he sat with rapt attention right in front of *Seño Andre* as she told the story of Snow White.

Afterward, everyone lined up to go to the playground. It was another magnificent day, and Son enjoyed running around. With some encouragement, he went on the seesaw with another boy, and then I asked him if he wouldn't like to go down the slide. But the aggressive boys owned that corner, and Son wasn't interested.

We left at the end of recess, and *Seño Andre* went hunting for a piece of candy to give Son for his excellent behavior. She was truly impressed with his ability to sit still and focus! But even if I knew the words in Spanish, how could I tell her that he has always behaved well at school, and in addition he is totally freaked out?

Given that the other kids seemed to be functioning okay, I think Husband, Son and I experienced our first real culture shock. Our tolerance for noise, need for personal space, need for order, our level of physicality, even the amount of words we use to express ourselves, are all calibrated on a different system. To push Son out of his comfort zone on all of those metrics, in a place where he doesn't know anyone and can't communicate? It's not easy for him or for us.