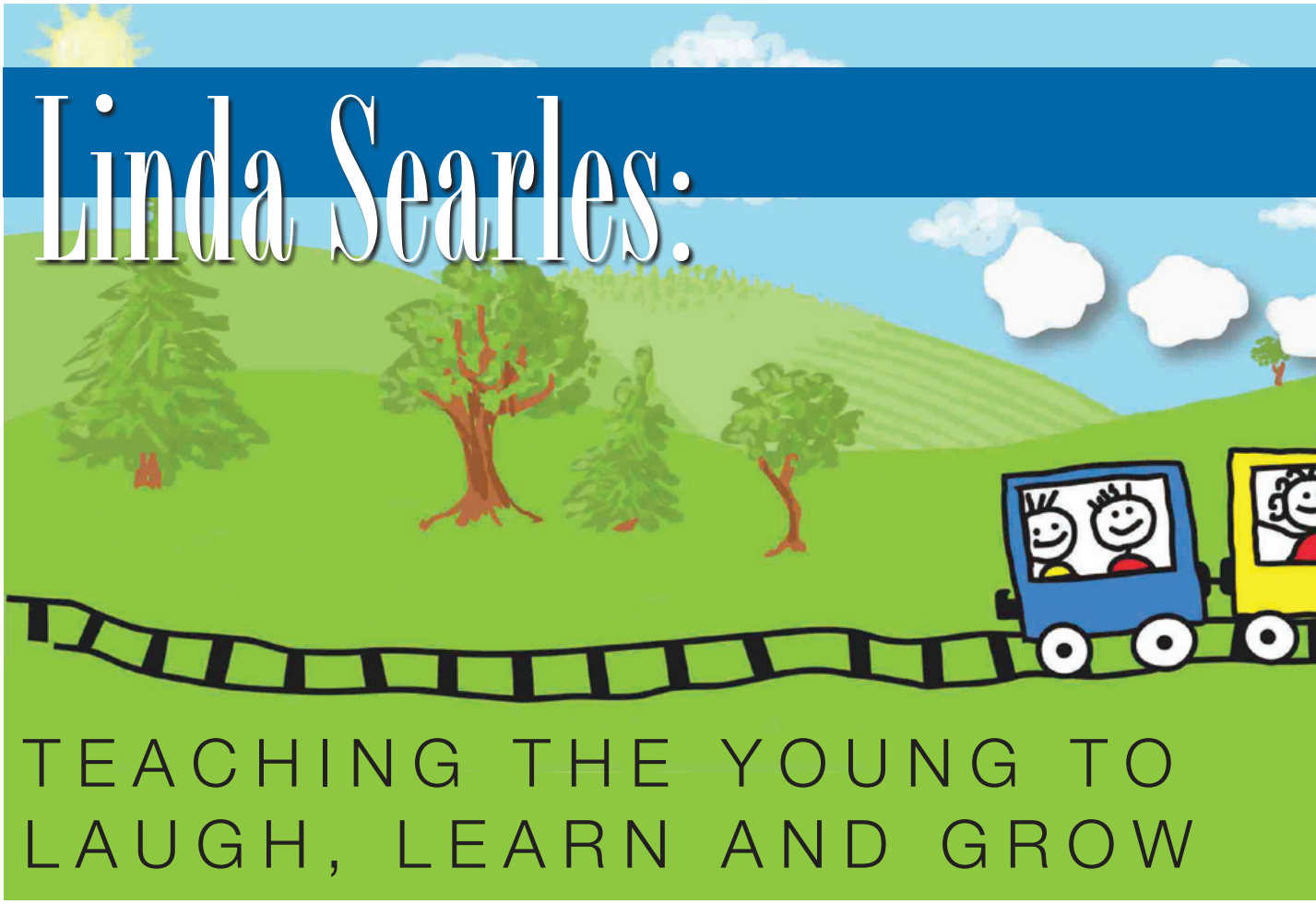
Linda Searles:



TEACHING THE YOUNG TO LAUGH, LEARN AND GROW



Linda Searles

Serving hundreds of families nationwide, Linda Searles' Baby Power Forever Kids has captured franchise interest from around the country and internationally.

Sharing her passion for communication and creativity to all those she meets, starting as young as six month olds, Searles story depicts years of experience in building fantastic fun and educational programs for children and their parents. Searles ingenuity and ability to create specific curriculums and music has taken her company into the world of franchising.

Here is her story.

Raised in a middle class family in the middle class town of Rahway, NJ, Searles grew up an artistic child. Her mother was a housewife from Czechoslovakia, and her father a well-known real estate broker, self-taught pianist and coordinator of the Kiwanis club. The eldest of two, Searles began writing her own music by the age of ten.

After graduating from college, getting married and teaching for two years as a Physical Education teacher, Searles became pregnant with the first of four children. "At that time if you were four months pregnant in the state of New Jersey you had to stop teaching," Searles explains. By the time Searles gave birth to her fourth child she had been out of the workforce for ten years. At this time she decided that she needed to work outside the home, but still be able to raise her family. Single handedly destroying the theory that women were not capable of working and parenting, Searles took a job at the local Adult School as an instructor for a women's exercise program called "Slimnastics." Pleased with her instructing, organizers asked if she knew anything about baby programs. Deciding

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to investigate what baby programs entailed, Searles took her 12-month-old child to a class. This experience opened her eyes to new opportunities and fueled her entrepreneurial spirit.

"I fell in love with the concept, but I didn't like the way they were doing it. So I decided I was going to create my own curriculum, my own music, my own way of doing and dealing with the parents and the children," Searles says.

Thus, Baby Power was born.

The Beginning of Baby Power

In 1978 Searles developed and launched her one-hour a week progressive, developmentally appropriate gymnastic and musical parent-child play program in a nearby high school gym. Targeting children between the ages of six months and five years, classes quickly grew, resulting in moving the classes into the basement of a local church. Putting her own spin on what other baby programs were offering, Searles incorporated a "huggy wuggy warm up" to get families lively and ready to go.

The biggest differentiator between Searles classes and the way others were running baby programs was the divided age groups. A maximum of ten children per age group allows each child to receive individualized attention and engage them in the activities appropriate for their age group. "Other programs were placing the different age groups into one gym, together," Searles explains, adding, "You can't have a six month old in with a 12 month old, they are 14 lifetimes away from each other in their development!"

Searles original songs and activities are specific for each age group, for example a baby's attention span requires shorter segments and different activities than older children who participate in craft times and show-and-tell sessions. Her original spotting technique called "the kitty cat hold" promotes safety, acts as an insurance policy for her franchisees, and also allows children to use their hands for holding onto the equipment rather than being lead around while in class.

With classes blossoming, Searles acquired enough funding and support to expand from one hour a week, to two hours a week, then four hours; this is when she incorporated the name "Baby Power," later adding "Forever Kids" for older children, to the brand name.

Hired outside the church to teach her classes, Searles found herself leaving the house so much that she decided to renovate the carriage house on the property of her 70 year old home in Watchung, NJ and hold classes there. Through advertising in the local paper and marking the mailbox at the end of her 500 ft driveway with a little pig, people became coming from all over the place to visit her barn. Running the classes from the property for the ten years to follow, Searles says, "I never thought I was going to go into the franchise business, I just loved to teach."

With a mission to build a system of communication between children and parents, Searles developed a routine to keep parents and children happy and educated. Every class begins with a warm up, followed by a gym segment and ends on a musical note; these activities help children achieve feelings of confidence, creativity and independence through play. Searles believes children need to interact with other children and adults in order to develop their ability to think, feel, reflect and conceptualize. Parents are asked not to use the word "no" or labels such as "shy," because "It's not necessary in my program since no one can do anything wrong," states Searles.

In 1988 Searles expanded into a retail shopping center in Berkeley Heights, NJ. The 2000 sq ft space housed a large gym, two music rooms and a craft room. Searles then came up with the idea of painting the characters from her songs on the walls. Today these characters are copy written and used in all the franchise locations. After a short time Searles decided to venture into Manhattan, NY and opened a small location that was the forerunner of her franchise for areas that require a smaller unit. The exposed painted yellow, red, orange and green pipes created the perfect atmosphere for the classes.

At this same time a former client and teacher of Baby Power attempted to copy the classes, fortunately without Searles copyrighted music she couldn't host the program to the same effect. This is when Searles decided franchising was the way to go. Opening two locations in New Jersey, and another in New York, Searles called Mc Grow and Co., a franchise group out of Massachusetts, to help establish the franchise business model.

The Franchise Faction

Selling her Berkeley Heights, NJ location as the first franchise location to a student, today Baby Power has five franchise locations up and running in Colorado, Texas, Florida, New York and New Jersey. The newest franchise addition in the Bronx, NY has three birthday parties

booked and has yet to open its doors.

Baby Power Forever Kids franchisees must love children, have a great personality, and cannot be in any mood but a happy one. "Parents come for relaxation and to learn about their child, they need to be welcomed with great joy," Searles explains, adding they also need to be able to get down on their hands and knees to crawl around. "Overall, it's their [franchisees/instructors] personality that sells the program," Searles says. "The curriculum is wonderful but if parents cannot get past the person, they don't care about the curriculum."

The cost of owning a Baby Power Forever Kids franchise is 25,000, which includes training, site selection, and direct communication with Searles on a daily basis. Franchisees are responsible for purchasing equipment, the down payment on their site, and any necessary build outs as all Baby Power Forever Kids locations must feature two music rooms, a craft room, a gym, and wall-to-wall double padded carpeting. Potential franchisees also need to have enough residual money to support themselves while building their business.

Franchisees are provided with an operations manual, a training manual, training CDs, and all the music Searles has written for the classes. They will speak with Searles about various marketing techniques in their local areas, as Searles believes it's the local advertising that really makes a difference. Franchisees are only required to pay a royalty of $300 each month for the first year, $350 for the second year, $400 for the third year and so on, capping at $500.

In 1999 Searles was awarded CNN Entrepreneur of the Year, reflecting the success and growth of Baby Power over the years. Today Searles holds monthly Baby Power Forever Kids franchise seminars for entrepreneurs interested in pursuing a career in the children's industry. Typically, professionals who are new mothers or who want to start a family in the future are interested in opening a Baby Power Forever Kids franchise.



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Currently, all Baby Power Forever Kids franchisees are women.

Women In Franchising

"Women in business have another way of looking at life. A lot of women are raising families and multi tasking. They're able to do it all," Searles says.

A believer that women are more peace loving, yet protective, Searles believes women are capable of running a fair business. "Ninety percent of women have empathy, they can be tough, but it's their nature to be empathetic," she explains. "I think this type of nature has them thinking more about their employees and providing them with as much as possible."

"Being equal to men is an important goal for women, as a lot of women still aren't paid as much as men," Searles says, noting that in the franchising industry, they are equal. When asked what advice she would like to give other women looking to become involved in the franchising world, Searles says, "Know your concept inside and out and then hold your nose and jump in." Explaining how there is no such thing as "doing it half way," she says, "there is no insurance policy, you have to risk it all, or don't do it."

Searles says the most important thing in order to sell a franchise is you have to really believe in your own product and that no matter what happens, you have to keep moving on. "When you're doing something that's from your heart, you either go over the wall, under the wall, through the wall, around the wall, or knock the wall down to make it happen."

Looking to the Future

Today Searles spends much of her time running the franchise business, exercising, and travelling. Her latest personal achievement is her non-fictional book composed of short stories titled "Full Esteem Ahead." With three children's CDs titled *Baby Power Listen and Do*, *Baby Power Friendship*, and *Baby Power Night Night* available online and in classes, Searles plans to continue focusing on her music and writing. Planning to expand Baby Power throughout the United States, Searles is ready to take on whatever new territories may come her way; after all, "If you can dream it, you can do it."

For more information:

Web: www.babypower.com
Email: lsearles@babypower.com
Phone: 908-713-6547