

Swiss nursery lets robot do the talking

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Nao, nao... Swiss children in a Lausanne creche have some fun with their new robot friend, Nao.

Sat in a circle on the nursery floor, a group of Swiss three-year-olds ask a robot called Nao questions about giraffes and broccoli.

By the time these children become adults, interacting with robots may

well be as commonplace as using a smartphone, experts believe.

So one Lausanne creche has decided to give them a head start.

Nao has been a regular visitor at the Nanosphere nursery on the campus of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology university since the New Year. He is what is called an "interactive learning companion" rather than a substitute teacher.

As the children were dropped off, Nao—who is only 58 centimeters (less than two feet) tall—stood on a bench to greet them at eye level.

"Hello, my name is Nao. I'm happy to be at the Nanosphere today," he said, in a child-like high-pitched voice.

"I left my planet some time ago to come and meet you. I look forward to getting to know you and being able to talk with you in the weeks ahead."

Some children walked straight past, some waved, pointed, touched his hand or simply gazed at him transfixed.

'No squabbling!'

"What will the children's future be like? Will they have to work with robots? Very probably yes," Olivier Delamadeleine, director-general of the Educalis group of nurseries and primary schools in Lausanne, told AFP.

"So as we are in a place of learning it is important to get them familiarized early so that they're used to working with robots," he added.

Back in the class, teacher Eve L'Eplattenier and the 14 children sat in a circle on the floor with Nao in the middle.

"He's going to come and explain things to you," she said.

"Do you like broccoli? It's very good for your health," the robot said.

L'Eplattenier picked him up and put him on a table. She said Nao would not grow any taller as children do.

The children gathered excitedly around, some jockeying for space.



A father introduces his daughter to a robot called Nao in a Swiss creche.

"No squabbling!" Nao told them.

Prompted by their teacher, the children tried to catch him out with questions such as, "I am an animal with a trunk. What am I?" When he got it right, they giggled.

'Little know-it-all'

Gabriel Paffi, a masters student in robotics, sat in the corner feeding Nao his answers.

He programmed the robot and is working on how to adapt it for a nursery's needs.

"The goal is to make it automated so that he no longer needs me to move around and respond to the children," Paffi said.

The first Nao robots hit the market in 2008. Now on generation six, the brand is owned by the Germany-based United Robotics Group and more than 15,000 units have been sold.

The plan is for this Nao to spend several years in the Educalis nurseries as his capacities expand.

L'Eplattenier said the children are thrilled when Nao turns up, and have bonded with their diminutive friend.

"They are curious to see what he will say, what he will do," she said.

"He's a companion with little tips and bits of advice.

"I think he will quickly position himself as the little know-it-all of the group."

As for the parents, they too are keen to see how Nao will settle in.

"I think it's a good way to help the children progress with new technologies," said Guillaume Quentin.

When it was time for Nao to "fly back into space", each child in turn shuffled towards him to say goodbye and give him a wave. He replied to each by name.

"I love you. I will come back soon," he told them.

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