

Do you Kumon?

Some parents are turning to the after-school enrichment program to boost their kids' academics.

Ingrid Nadell remembers exactly what sparked her interest in Kumon.

"I saw some kid, age 7, doing multiplication like there was no tomorrow. She was doing it at an extremely fast pace," she says. "So I asked, 'What's the secret here?'"

Nadell learned that the girl attended the popular after-school enrichment program Kumon (kumon.com), which was founded by a Japanese math teacher, Toru Kumon, in the 1950s. Two years ago, Nadell enrolled her two daughters, Ava and Ally, in the Kumon Math and Reading Center of Aliso Viejo.

Today, it is her 7-year-old daughter, Ally, who is working on double-digit division, under the tutelage of Angel Ko, the center's owner.

"Putting them in there was one of the best things I've done. I really have seen the progress," says Nadell, a former tennis pro who grew up in Eastern Europe. "It has given them confidence. They enter the classroom, and they know this stuff."

Nadell is just one of many parents who have turned to Kumon since it opened its first American center in New York in 1974. Today, there are about 1,500 centers in the United States, and some 4.3 million children in 48 countries enrolled worldwide, making it the largest program of its kind in the world.

So what is the Kumon Method? Kumon does not advertise itself as a tutoring service; rather, it's a self-learning program based on worksheets. After a placement test to start children at their assigned skill level, they complete worksheets daily – twice a week supervised by a Kumon instructor, and other days at home. The workload is about 20 to 30 minutes daily per subject.

The curriculum is individualized, so it can be used with students from pre-school through high school. Students move up to the next level only after they can pass a timed test with 100 percent accuracy.

Orange County students pay about \$125 per subject per month for Kumon; the national average for tuition is \$100 per month.

Kumon has grown rapidly in the United States in the past decade, attracting families who believe that U.S. public schools have not done a good job of teaching students basic skills in math and reading. Kumon works, its fans say, because students learn by teaching themselves and practicing daily.

But the program is not without its critics, who point out that it is expensive and suggest that parents could create a similar math routine with free worksheets from websites like Math-Drills.com. Other critics also note that, because Kumon is a franchise, quality can vary widely, depending on which center you attend.

Some also say that because the Kumon Method requires children to repeat the same worksheet up to six times, it becomes repetitive and boring. For the youngest kids, play is much more beneficial to learning than a continued focus on rote memorization, some child development experts maintain.

Some teenagers who were Kumon students have taken to social media sites to complain about the program, from anti-Kumon blogs to an "I Hate Kumon" group on Facebook. Others joke that the Kumon logo – which depicts a serious "Thinking Face" – is actually a sad child who is forced to do more work, rather than play outside like a normal kid.

Parents should also keep in mind that Kumon is definitely not a tutoring program, says Robin Leduc, a parent from Foothill Ranch.

Leduc says she enrolled her fourth-grade daughter, Michelle, in a Kumon center three years ago, because she felt she didn't have a good foundation in her earlier years of math.

Her daughter attended Kumon for 18 months and eventually advanced to a level where she felt stuck, Leduc says.

Meanwhile, the daily worksheets caused a lot of tears and anxiety.

"She hated them. She just despised them," Leduc says. "She was simply not progressing."

On the suggestion of a friend, Leduc hired a tutor to work with her one-on-one.

"In just two sessions, Michelle had every multiplication problem down," Leduc says. "We accomplished in two sessions with a private tutor what we couldn't after 18 months with Kumon."

Based on her experience, Leduc says parents should take into account what kind of learner their child is. For younger children, Kumon offers a good foundation.

"But when you get an older kid who has a specific deficit, tutoring is the way to go," she adds.

Milind Naik, whose 12-year-old son, Ronak, has attended Kumon of Aliso Viejo for eight years, says his family chose Kumon after seeing the success an older cousin had enjoyed with the program. He says parents are looking for a challenge for their kids. Kumon provides this.

"The elementary schooling system here is way too easy for the capability that many of these kids have," Naik says. "Why not challenge them at a young age when they can handle more?"

A seventh grader, Ronak has already completed Kumon's reading program through 12th grade literature and is doing trigonometry-level work in Kumon math. At Aliso Viejo Middle School, he is one of the youngest students enrolled in geometry – typically a ninth-grade class.

"Because of Kumon, he has become an independent learner," says Naik, an engineer at Western Digital Technologies, in Irvine.

So what does Ronak think of his daily Kumon routine?

"What I like about it, is it makes me study above my grade level. Then in school you get A-pluses all day long," Ronak says. 

