

GRC Expands Opportunities For Middle School Students

Over the past several years GRC has been quietly expanding the opportunities available for gifted middle school students. These additional opportunities for seventh and eighth graders come in response to increasing requests to serve older students by parents and students themselves.

Ancient Academy Open to 7th, 8th Graders

Gifted Resource Council has expanded its Ancient Academy to include seventh and eighth graders for the first time this summer. Middle school students who, as younger history buffs, have enjoyed the richness of cultures like ancient Egypt and Greece will have an opportunity this July to investigate the feudal system from peasantry to royalty and learn how Marco Polo introduced the East to the West.

As is true with all the Ancient Academies, students studying the Middle Ages will divide tasks, research different areas, share what they learn with one another, construct artifacts and hold a culminating ceremony. Teamwork, exploratory learning and total immersion will characterize their learning adventure.

ECO Academy – Three Years of Success

Three years ago GRC piloted ECO Academy to give middle school students an opportunity to explore the relationship between ecological responsibility and economic entrepreneurship. The pilot project was so successful that ECO Academy is becoming one of the most popular Summer Academies.

Students actually form a “company,” make a product and a profit, while striving to be ecologically friendly. Visiting experts from the sciences and business enrich their discussions and bring a touch of real world authenticity to the mix.

Space Academy – A Perennial Favorite

For years middle school students have been well served by GRC’s Advanced Space Academy. This perennial favorite allows students to delve deeper into the study of space

while making and launching their own model rockets! Students in the final session of Advanced Space Academy travel to Kansas City to spend an exciting day in Mission Control at NASA’s regional Challenger Center.

ACC and Learning Labs

For eighteen years GRC has served gifted sixth, seventh and eighth graders with a rich variety of Saturday Learning Labs during the school year.

For example, middle school girls worked with Washington University engineering faculty in their campus labs last fall. The curriculum of this introduction to engineering course ranged from cardiovascular tissues to earthquake simulation and satellite design. The course was so popular that GRC opened a second section serving middle school boys as well as girls!

Perennially popular Learning Lab classes are offered for middle school students in topics as diverse as robotics, chess and Shakespeare.

Seventh and eighth graders have also participated in Academic Challenge Cup held on the campuses of Washington and Fontbonne universities each spring. Working in teams of five, gifted middle schoolers compete in math and language games they have often spent months preparing for.

As demand grew, GRC expanded ACC from four days to five this year, thereby giving more middle school students opportunities to enjoy the challenge.

Opportunities for Growth

Summer is no time for adolescents to just hang out at home.

Summer should be an opportunity to participate in exciting enrichment programs which challenge a child to problem-solve while engaging in a wonderful variety of high-interest, hands-on experiences with other gifted peers.

Summer is the perfect time for a gifted child to

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Dialogue with the Director

“You remember me!” said the thirteen year old girl, a smile creeping slowly across her face. “Of course I remember you!” I replied.

This brief exchange took place at the registration table for GRC’s Fall Learning Lab, and while the conversation lasted less than a minute or two, I have remembered it many times since. How surprised and delighted this young woman was to know that an adult “remembered” her!

What does this say about our children, particularly our middle school aged children, as they traverse the educational and social systems of our 21st century? What does it say about the human need to belong? Or the need to be valued?

More importantly, what does this say about Gifted Resource Council? What is *our* role in shaping young people’s lives?

GRC has long recognized that children in their early adolescent years, especially gifted children, are particularly sensitive to issues of justice and fairness, world concerns and interpersonal relationships. As they individually struggle to identify their purpose in life, young adolescents reach out to significant adults and peers for approval and recognition. It is in this context that Gifted Resource Council provides the opportunity for affirmation of these talented middle school students – not only for *what* they know, but for *who* they are.

It is important for me personally, as Executive Director of Gifted Resource Council, to know and remember as many children as I possibly can, though they pass through our classes with great rapidity. Even more significantly, GRC’s teachers get to know their students through hours spent interacting and learning over robots or rockets or “real life” business ventures. Teachers get to know their students’ personal qualities as well as their academic interests. GRC staff members are prepared to affirm the young people with whom they work, to help them recognize what it means to be “gifted” and to discover how to use their talents.

Best of all, Gifted Resource Council staff members “remember” the students...



Sue Flesch, GRC executive director

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participate in one or more of Gifted Resource Council’s Summer Academies.

Both the enriched curriculum and the involvement with gifted peers in a GRC class are important developmental opportunities for gifted children.

Many students do not have opportunities to work with gifted peers or participate in enriched curricula at their regular schools, and for them the unique opportunities GRC provides are even more valuable.

Because of the anti-intellectual bias of middle and high school, many gifted children tend to pull back and hide their gifts. In fact, reacting to negative peer pressure is one of the reasons many gifted children seriously underachieve.

Working with other gifted students at a Summer Academy—where no one has to hide his or her intelligence, just subordinate it to the efforts of a class functioning as a learning team—is a wonderful way to rekindle a child’s flagging desire to learn and excel.

For all these reasons as well as the many requests from parents and students, GRC has steadily expanded its opportunities for middle school students.

“We’ve never had more to offer older students, and we are very excited because we expect that more seventh and eighth graders will take advantage of these special opportunities to grow — intellectually and socially — while having fun,” said Sue Flesch, GRC’s Executive Director.



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How can I help my child cope with all the meanness and bullying in middle-school?

By Dennis O'Brien

Middle school tends to be a brutal experience for children, and the heightened sensitivity of gifted children to their own feelings and those of others, makes them especially vulnerable to being tormented by abusive peers.

Bullying is most damaging during the middle school years, partly because their insecurities make adolescents especially vulnerable to putdowns, and partly because adolescents react to their own insecurities about being accepted by attacking others.

As they move from the safety of a self-contained classroom managed by a surrogate parent into a new venue where respect must be earned anew from many more teachers and students, children often mask their own insecurities by targeting others. These young bullies quickly learn that victimizing someone else reduces the likelihood that they will be targets themselves.

Fortunately, there are things parents can do that help a child survive this foreboding ordeal.

★ Explain the three roles students play: bully, victim or witness. Whenever bullying occurs, every student present plays one of these roles.

The witness role is pivotal. Even though witnesses may not actively participate in the bullying or laugh at the putdowns, simply keeping quiet contributes to the abuse. Witnesses who remain silent form an approving audience which empowers a bully, just as witnesses who stand up as advocates empower the victim and challenge a bully's power to intimidate and hurt. This, of course, requires personal courage and preparation, but it is also character-building.

★ Discuss ways that your child can stand up when someone else is being bullied, identify other concerned children, and encourage your child to talk to them about what they can unite to do.

★ Make sure your child is armed with some lines to say to the bully—*Hey, knock it off. It's not true and it's not funny*—and to the victim—*Don't listen to what she said. We all know she's just being mean.*

★ Prepare your child for situations when he or she may be victimized. Identify situations where bullying is likely to occur, brainstorm about possible situations and identify an appropriate sequence of responses, including direct flight to safety if all else fails. Role play various scenarios until your child is confident about handling them.

★ Help your child identify an adult at school he or she can trust to respond responsibly. Encourage your child to confide in this adult if patterns of repeated bullying by specific students or bullying in specific unsupervised locations emerge.

★ Make sure your child is not doing anything to invite hurtful putdowns or bullying. Gifted students tend to use their verbal wit to ward off others and in the process may contribute to the climate of trash-talking and negative jokes that give rise to the more brutal aspects of bullying. In addition, they often display a know-it-all attitude that comes across as arrogant, and this makes an utterly inviting target.

★ Help your child develop appropriate social skills. Because they tend to turn to adults for approval rather than to peers, gifted students sometimes fail to develop the social skills which would help them fit in. The importance of having healthy peer relationships may need to be spelled out for them. Parents should give their children every opportunity to develop these skills when their children are younger. Take advantage of opportunities which present themselves to coach for improvement or reinforce appropriate behaviors.

Unfortunately, some parents of gifted children lack important social skills themselves and do not recognize the deficits in their own children. Consider asking teachers and other adults who know your child well to give you honest feedback and advice about your child's level of social maturity.

★ Encourage your child to make healthy friends. Even without bullying, the transition to middle school requires each student to prove his or her competence and worth to dozens of other critical and often

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self-centered teens. Implicit in each social encounter are the questions: What's special about you? Why should I bother to get to know or respect you?

Any teenager under this type of scrutiny needs regular parental support to make friends while developing self-confidence—gifted children perhaps more so. Discuss how specific children behave and help your child identify those who might share his or her values and interests. Then encourage your child to cultivate friendships with these students by seeking them out for conversations or after-school activities.

For example, if your daughter seems to be in and out of relationships with dizzying speed, she may be associating with girls who brutalize each other through gossip and ostracizing behaviors. If your son's friends use humorous putdowns with each other, they are dangerously close to hurting someone through jokes that just aren't funny. Friends like these your child doesn't need.

★ Affirm your child by expressing your love, showing affection, and stressing your confidence that

your child can handle difficult situations with dignity and will ultimately prevail.

★ Intervene yourself if your child has exhausted all the options you have identified, the situation appears to be growing dangerous, or adults have not responded responsibly. If you prefer anonymity, call the confidential Safe Schools Hotline, 314-889-SAFE.

★ Take advantage of GRC's rich middle school curriculum and its emphasis on developing interpersonal skills. GRC has long recognized that gifted children need so much more than enriched curriculum. For example, the topic of this summer's inservice for teachers was "How to help gifted children deal with being gifted" -- a direct focus on their psychosocial development, not their academic prowess. GRC makes helping gifted children acquire social skills - especially cooperation with others - and develop healthy self esteem based on their character, not their talents, its top priority.

Dennis O'Brien is a licensed clinical social worker, experienced educator and therapist, and executive director of KidzLink, an organization serving medically fragile children.

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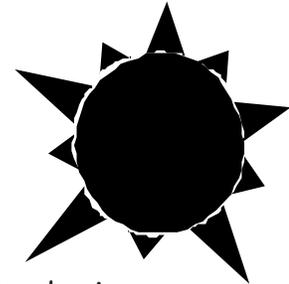
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