

GRC Creates a Community of Learners

The welcoming paragraph in the “Parents Newsletter” for each two-week session of Gifted Resource Council’s Summer Academies states: “One of GRC’s major goals for our Summer Academies is to build community—a community of scholars and a community of friends.” So too do all GRC programs strive to build community—of students, parents and life-long learners.

A community of gifted learners begins with teachers setting the tone. GRC teachers model the welcoming, respectful attitude toward each student that they want students to show toward each other. This involves such basic—but often ignored—behaviors as maintaining eye contact, listening respectfully to what others say without interrupting, cooperating with one another and displaying good manners.

The GRC instructional philosophy builds on and deepens this emphasis on mutual respect. Teachers challenge students with a cooperative learning problem—such as analyzing the atmosphere of different planets and moons. Then they help the class break the overall challenge into smaller learning tasks, each centered on different learning questions. Working in smaller groups, students begin researching how much the atmosphere varies on the 53 moons of Saturn or how acidic is the rain on Venus if it destroyed a probe in 90 minutes. Periodically the working groups share what they have learned and how that leads to further questions. Every student in the class benefits from what his teammates have discovered. The cooperative learning process continues each day under the guidance of the GRC teacher, and each student continues to benefit intellectually from the contributions of fellow classmates.



Two Math, Marvels & More “scholars” are happily winning while playing a strategy game.

Short-term Benefits

One immediate benefit is that students working as teams learn much more than they ever could working individually. Bright, curious minds probing different aspects of a learning challenge uncover much more than one student working alone, and sharing the fruits of their investigation enriches everyone. Instead of studying in isolation, classmates become teammates dependent upon one another for success. Instead of preparing to master a body of facts for a test, energies are directed to accomplishing practical tasks which require students to quickly assimilate solid academic material and put it to use.

Sharing a sense of purposeful learning, a community of learners forms as GRC students work under the guidance of experienced teachers to achieve a shared goal: mastering a curriculum they are all excited about. In the process they learn to respect each other, including the different insights and problem-solving skills that each student brings. Soon students begin to form friendships based on the mutual respect they have developed. Although valuable for any student, this cooperative learning experience is especially important for bright students who often seek the approval of adults while isolating themselves from peers.

New Attitudes and Skills Reinforced

GRC teachers reinforce the development of positive social skills in a number of ways that combine fun and learning. For example:

- ★ Exploring common interests in Saturday Learning Labs: GRC students work with teammates to design and

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Dialogue with the Director

“Game” – Webster’s Dictionary defines the word “game” as “an amusement or pastime: children’s games” and much, much more. What do you think of when you consider the word “game”? Board games? Sports contests? Athletic endeavors? Chess? Scrabble?

There are myriad games of which we are all familiar. But what, you ask, do they have to do with Gifted Resource Council? Actually games and the playing of games have MUCH to do with learning – not only learning the skills involved in a particular game, but also learning about oneself and one’s interaction with others. These are inextricably intertwined with the goals of GRC.



Sue Flesch, GRC executive director

Academic Challenge Cup – one of GRC’s three major areas of programming – is based on the concept of children playing games – Equations and LinguSHTIK. (Indeed, this year more than 1,600!!! children from throughout the metropolitan area participated in GRC’s Academic Challenge Cup on the campuses of the University of Missouri-St. Louis and Washington University.) These children came as teams of five to play a game against other children from schools throughout the region. They came having learned about math and language skills, but also about strategy and logic, in order to do their best on a particular day competing in friendly games against peers who also love math and language. By the end of the experience, these students will have learned something about teamwork and good sportsmanship while doing one’s personal best at a game.

Games also play a significant role during GRC’s Summer Academies. Within the classroom – be it Space Academy or Ancient Academy or Jr. Science Searchers – games are one way of reinforcing academic concepts while encouraging cooperation and interaction among students from a variety of back-

grounds. During P.T. (Physical Training) GRC’s teachers modify games such as kickball or basketball by introducing alternative rules for the game. This extension of the traditional game stimulates the brains of our gifted youngsters while exercising their bodies and encouraging their spirit.

Before Care and After Care activities during the summer rely heavily on the interests of children through playing games. Dozens of choices of board games are available while physical games using balls and bodies are also a favorite pastime. UNO and Twenty Questions and Quizno and chess are perennial favorites among children who attend GRC’s Summer Academies. Playing these games

among children of varying ages encourages critical thinking and cooperative learning as well as helpful attributes of sharing and learning to lose (as well as win) gracefully.

How often do we have the opportunity to play a game? When was the last time that your family played Monopoly – or another board game – together? What about the games that families used to play while traveling on vacation in the car? So many memories. Such fun. Time to dust off the games in the attic! Or join us at GRC’s Summer Academies for the opportunity to learn while playing a game....

Susan C. Flesch



Concentration shows on the faces of these students playing the game of ‘Equations’ at GRC’s Academic Challenge Cup.

GRC Workshops Aid Parents and Teachers of Gifted Students

Fifteen times a year Gifted Resource Council offers free workshops to help parents and teachers improve their skills at developing the academic skills, emotional maturity and social skills of gifted children. GRC has been sponsoring these workshops for 30 years because we know how challenging it is to nurture the potential of a child who may be exceptionally bright—and exceptionally sensitive, perfectionistic, emotionally intense and often concerned about world issues. GRC knows it isn't easy and that adults need all the information and training they can get.

Not only is it challenging—it's extremely important to get it right. Gifted children are an at-risk population: at-risk of failing to develop their intellectual capabilities; at-risk for dropping out of school; at-risk for not developing the emotional and social skills that will enable them to form satisfying relationships in life. Because the stakes are so high, Gifted Resource Council consistently invests in helping parents and teachers acquire the skills they need to help these children succeed.

GRC recruits experienced counselors, therapists and teachers to hold these 90-minute workshops while students are engaged in Learning Labs or Academic Challenge Cup. Participants provide anonymous feedback via questionnaires after each session, and invariably they let us know how much they valued the session. Comments such as these are frequent: "I gained some great insights into ways I can help my daughter manage her 'highs' and 'lows' in a constructive fashion." Or: "I'll be better able to motivate my child to cope with stress and get along in the world. Thanks."

"It's important for parents of children with all types of abilities to educate themselves," said John Yunker, MS, a licensed psychologist who has been conducting these workshops for more than two decades. "Children do not come with an owner's

manual. Seeing problems through the perspective of a child, any child, will help build rapport and show that you really care about what they think and feel. That's one reason it's so important that parents of bright children participate in these workshops."

What makes parenting a gifted child different than parenting other children? "Gifted children have keen minds, are extremely observant of human behavior and, while they might not always act as respectfully toward adults as we might like, they want to be treated with respect," Yunker said. "When we treat them respectfully, we help train them to be respectful of both their abilities and their importance in making a better world for themselves and others."

Yunker talks about some of the other challenges of parenting a gifted child. "Gifted children often march to a different drummer," he said. They tend to learn quickly, are highly curious, display a fierce intensity toward what they are studying and what they want to study, and can be highly self-critical. Parents who are empathetic and sensitive to the unique needs of gifted children need to recognize that gifted children want parents to appreciate their talents and their creativity. When they show you something they have done and are proud to display, they want more than a nod of the head. They want you to really appreciate and comment on their work. Furthermore, they have an aversion to false praise or superficial involvement from adults."

Insights like these, combined with practical suggestions about how to put them into action, make parents and teachers much more effective mentors of gifted children. In addition to these workshops, GRC offers valuable advice for a variety of challenges parents of gifted children face in articles on its website (www.giftedresourcecouncil.org) under the 'Resources' tab.



John Yunker is a favorite presenter for GRC's Parenting Classes - both during Learning Labs and Academic Challenge Cup.

Thanks to...

...the following individuals who made financial contributions to Gifted Resource Council from May 2012 through April 2013. We apologize for any names which may have been inadvertently omitted or misspelled.

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GRC's Saturday Learning Lab classes engage girls in STEM activities.



Can a totem pole demonstrate facial expressions and feelings? Creative Convention teams work together to find out.

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Parents Ask: How can we help our child improve her social skills using GRC programs?

By Dennis O'Brien

Parents play a crucial role in helping their children develop appropriate social skills that will help them succeed in school and work and build satisfying social relationships throughout their lives. Doing so requires honesty about what their child needs, the courage to make some changes themselves if they need to, and the commitment to persist with their action plan when things don't turn around immediately. Here's how:

- ★ Explain how GRC intentionally fosters problem-solving, communications and teamwork which are unusual in classrooms. This community of learners approach benefits him, both academically and socially. If he has never experienced this before, it may be a new concept for your child. Being aware of the new approach to learning will help your child embrace it.

- ★ Examine your own social skills. A disproportionate number of parents, much like their gifted children, lack social skills and fail to model healthy social development. Parents like these value the intellectual development of their child above all else, are highly critical of teachers and programs, belittle other children, and insist on getting special advantages for their children. Often they micromanage their child's academic progress.

Does this describe you? How often have you complained that your child was being held back by others, not challenged enough or not recognized by teachers for his academic prowess? How often do you thank teachers for the good job they are doing?

- ★ Make your values explicit. Make sure that you say how much you value being able to get along with others, working as a teammate and being well-rounded. Your child, like so many very bright children, may think that what you value above all else is how quickly she learns. You may have unwittingly contributed to this misperception by praising her for doing so. That's only natural. However, if you don't find other qualities of hers to praise, she will begin to believe that is the most

important thing to you. It shouldn't be, and you need to make sure that she understands intellectual prowess is just one of a number of qualities and traits you value.

- ★ Give examples from your own life. When did you participate in team activities? School? Work? Scouting? How well did you take advantage of these opportunities? How did you benefit? Were there times you wish you had taken more advantage of opportunities? How could you have done so? Sharing information about yourself like this will normalize the learning experience and, most likely, help motivate your child to take more advantage of opportunities that come her way.

- ★ Model good social and communications skills. Gifted children are observant, and if they see you trying to do the right thing, they will come to value it also. And if you make a mistake, say so. Let your child know that you know you interrupted and will try to listen better.

- ★ Explicitly teach your child social skills. Talk about the importance of eye contact, smiling, listening without interrupting, praising someone for having good ideas, taking turns and playing fair, using other children's names, praising them, making intentional efforts to be pleasant, and asking, "How was your weekend?" Roleplay these skills with your child.

- ★ Make it clear you expect your child to learn to get along with all her classmates and to form friendships with some of them. Suggest that she look for opportunities to praise the skills, insights and behaviors of others that show positive character traits such as honesty, kindness, perseverance and cooperation.

- ★ Ask her about opportunities she had to show respect, cooperation and good sportsmanship after every class. This will communicate the importance you place on these values. Praise and encourage her for doing so. Ask how she thinks her good behavior affected others.

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★ Ask her to identify specific things she learned from other students. This will help her identify what she learned from others and gradually see the value in the increased academic learning that came to her through the collaborative team approach.

Parents who use these strategies can help their child take advantage of the special educational approach that GRC fosters and, in the process, help their child develop valuable, life-long skills.

Dennis O'Brien is a licensed clinical social worker, experienced educator and therapist. In addition to writing educational materials used by the Washington University School of Medicine Dept. of Psychiatry and weekly columns on parenting for the Suburban Journals, he writes monthly columns for St. Louis Moms and Dads, and regular columns for CHARACTERplus, Family Connection (Mo. Dept of Mental Health) and Gifted Association of Missouri. O'Brien's April 6 column, "Prevent teen suicide by addressing it," won the 2010 Missouri Institute of Mental Health award for outstanding reporting on suicide.

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build NXT generation robots, develop media literacy or explore human anatomy by studying and recreating key parts of it.

★ Using board games: Yes, GRC teachers use board games—such as chess, Scrabble, Jeopardy and many others—to help students learn to take turns, be good sports and enjoy friendly competitions.

★ Using creative physical activity: Summer Academies include daily physical activities, and these are typically team—rather than individual—activities. Mike Moore, who teaches older students, creates new games from old favorites by changing rules and activities. Barb Wnek, who teaches younger students, has written two books about physical activity games. Where else but GRC would students enjoy scooterboard math games and cooperative math aerobics? Through these active games, students practice transferable skills like encouraging one another, resolving conflicts, showing respect for one another and being good losers and gracious winners.

★ Recreating bygone eras and events: GRC students don't just study the past in their Summer Academies; they recreate Ancient Egypt, fly with Amelia Earhart and Charles Lindbergh, build their own space station, or create their own ecologically friendly business. GRC teachers challenge students with a hands-on learning situation, help them organize into small groups to tackle various aspects of the challenge, guide their research and periodically facilitate sharing what they learn with each other. This is a learning community at its best—an interactive experience that most GRC students may never have experienced before.

In summary, learning does not occur in isolation at GRC, is not abstract, and is not at all involved with acquiring knowledge to be tested on. It is hands-on, creative, practical and done through positive interactions with teammates. GRC is a community of learners at its finest.

Long-term Gains

In addition to its many short-term benefits, creating a community of learners has valuable long-term benefits that are even more important. Working in a learning environment that develops and nurtures positive social interactions based on shared learning goals helps students acquire social skills. Later, in college and as adults, these skills will help them get along with others, develop more meaningful relationships, and thrive in working environments that are increasingly becoming cooperative and team-oriented.

“We put the stress on how students learn because that's even more important than what they learn,” said Executive Director Susan Flesch. “GRC programs help students develop important social skills that will help them succeed throughout life, while also developing their intellectual curiosity and problem-solving abilities. The whole child grows. That's what GRC is all about.”

mindwonders

informs the public about activities of Gifted Resource Council and about issues relevant to the development of bright and talented children and youth.

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Spring 2013

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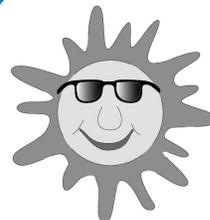
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June 17 – July 26
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Its purpose is to bring together the resources of the community, the schools and parents
to help bright and talented children achieve their potential.