

What Makes GRC Programs So Unique?

The chance to explore a subject that interests them is often the first thing that attracts students to GRC programs. But parents should be aware of three other interrelated factors that make the GRC experience so valuable to gifted children: its stimulating hands-on learning style, the opportunity to pursue an interest in depth, and its emphasis on promoting healthy social interactions and skills.

Hands-on learning stimulates interest and helps students explore areas of interest in more depth than they ever would in school. GRC students don't simply study Ancient Greece or Medieval Times. First they research it. Then they recreate it, complete with costumes, foods, pageantry, philosophical debate, poetry and social caste systems. Young astronauts in Space Academy do more than study the physics of spaceflight and learn its history. They research carefully and then create their own home on Mars, experiment with LEGO

robotics, build and launch their own rockets, and debate what the new rules of territorial rights in space should be. By engaging in stimulating, hands-on enrichment activities like these, GRC students dig deeper, learn more and create an enjoyable experience that is much more likely to stick with them than simple textbook learning.

Why is this approach so important? Because it engages bright, easily bored students in learning activities that sustain their interest and deepen their understanding in areas of personal interest. This is an opportunity they do not have in school, where responses are limited to either a paper on the subject or a test. Not only is this traditional approach inherently less interesting to these curious minds, but it puts the focus on earning a grade, not learning itself.

This GRC process of guided inquiry also helps students learn how to learn. They ask questions, explore for answers, analyze what they have discovered and integrate their learning into a newly created experience. For

example, these learning skills are used in ECO Academy where young entrepreneurs create a business plan, sell stock in their company, manufacture and market a product while remaining ecologically friendly. These are invaluable life-long skills that prepare gifted kids with the confidence and skills to master new challenges they will face in life.

GRC activities promote positive emotional and social growth. Quite often,

perhaps most of the time, gifted kids isolate themselves from their age-mates and do not have opportunities to interact constructively with their intellectual peers until they go to college. Discovering that they learn things more easily and quickly than their peers, gifted kids tend to focus on out-performing classmates rather than cooperating with them. Their intellectual prowess often leads to social isolation, and they fail to develop either meaningful relationships with peers or appropriate social skills that would enable

them to form satisfying relationships throughout their lives.

This stunts their emotional growth and jeopardizes their chances of career success in a world that is becoming increasingly interactive. To compensate for the lack of satisfying social relationships, gifted kids crave attention from adults. Not only is this excessive desire for adult approval unhealthy, it often leads to some difficult, competitive behaviors that further isolate them from peers.

GRC provides opportunities to learn how to interact with other bright kids before they eventually meet up with others who are equally talented in college. The friendships they forge through repeated participation in GRC courses often last well beyond school. GRC insists that gifted kids interact cooperatively with peers. In each class, students are grouped in teams that support each other by tackling different aspects of the learning challenge. Kids learn from each other. While discovering he may not be the brightest 8-year-old on



Students in GRC's Summer Academies enjoy interacting with their peers as they grow and learn.

Dialogue with the Director

It is almost impossible to turn on the news or open a newspaper these days without hearing more distressing information about America's education system. The U.S. test scores lag behind China, Korea and Finland among others. Scores in Math and Science seem to be especially low. And then there are the cutbacks that will certainly make things worse – Parents as Teachers, Head Start, gifted programs both locally and nationally, teachers losing their jobs because of a lack of funding, either from the state or local tax revenues. What is next?

Midst all this negative news, I had the good fortune to talk with a Mom of two former GRC students last week. She immediately told me about how her children were doing exceptionally well – one now in college and the other doing graduate work at Harvard. Then she said, "It's all because of you!" To which, I demurred. But she continued: "No. I really mean it! It's all because of GRC, and the opportunities that it offered my kids. You know, they went to a small parochial school, which simply didn't have the resources or programs to challenge them beyond the 'usual'. But when they attended GRC's Summer Academies, they discovered that it was okay – even good – to be smart! They were no longer embarrassed to show their abilities."

Of course, this mother's sincere accolades and thanks made me feel very good about what Gifted Resource Council offers to the children of the St. Louis metropolitan area. Her comments caused me to consider again the value of what GRC does – and how we might make our programs available to even more students. Look how GRC's programs were reaping dividends – not only for the individual children – but

for the broader community through the future contributions that this talented young woman and man will surely make.

Yes, midst negative educational reports, GRC stands ready to continue the important work that we do – offering opportunities for young people to learn more, not only through facts about space science or ancient cultures or ecological issues, but by learning more about themselves and their potential. Gifted Resource Council provides a unique learning environment for children who need to discover the depth and breadth of their abilities. Children who want to feel good about being smart. Children who will be our future leaders.



Sue Flesch, GRC executive director

"You need to publicize this more!" the mother continued. "GRC makes a difference! It helps kids succeed!"

While we can't promise that every child will do graduate work at Harvard or attend the elite college of their choice, we can assure parents that GRC programs offer opportunities for growth – both academic and interpersonal. We continue to offer scholarships for deserving children who might not otherwise be able to attend our programs. GRC's teachers are uniquely qualified to inspire and nurture children through their personal knowledge, enthusiasm and dedication to excellent educational experiences. Gifted Resource Council is ready and eager to nurture the next generation of gifted children – so that they too might realize their dreams...

Susan C. Flesch



Two GRC students carefully consider their scientific measurements while participating in the "Sparkling Science" class.



Teammates are hard at work during Creative Convention - one portion of GRC's Academic Challenge Cup.

47 Years of Dedicated, Creative Teaching Enrich GRC Students

Gifted Resource Council recruits the best teachers of gifted students in the metropolitan area. It also retains many of them for years through a combination of its supportive work environment, opportunities to challenge gifted students with hands-on guided learning projects, and the rewards of seeing them flourish in ways they never could in regular school classes. For example, Mike Moore and Barb Wnek have taught physical education at GRC's Summer Academies for a combined 47 years; Moore primarily with the older students, Wnek with younger ones.

Moore and Wnek have developed some very creative ways to engage GRC students in physical activities by linking them to the curriculum of specific Summer Academies. This not only helps children enjoy being physically active, but also intensifies their involvement in the curriculum of their Academy.



Barb Wnek celebrates her 25th year as one of GRC's Summer Academies physical training teachers.

"I try to design activities that seem fun and exciting, and create new activities each summer," Wnek said. "The challenge - and fun for me - is being able to create activities based on the themes of the different camps. I keep students moving to develop their bodies and minds. Dinosaurs, the Rainforest, ocean life, math, space, Medieval Times and Colonial Times will be the themes for Summer Academies 2011, and I will keep students having fun, learning and being physically active." Wnek also incorporates theme-related equipment (such as monkeys, insects, dinosaurs, fish and castle wall pieces) as well as math facts cards and dice into her fun-filled classes.

Moore identified some of the special challenges of teaching GRC students. "You have students with different levels of age-appropriate movement skills at each grade level," he said. "Each class is a mix of students who really enjoy being physically active all the time and students who would rather just sit and read a book or play on a computer. Activities have to be geared to meet the students so that activities are not too challenging or not too simple."

"GRC students are bright and put a lot of thought into trying to figure out the angles of the activities and to be one step in front of their opponents," he said. To meet these challenges, Moore designs activities that are "fun, but also mentally challenging, stimulating and thought-provoking. You also want students to develop the lifetime skills of teamwork, cooperation, problem-solving and sportsmanship."

"If students are learning about a particular subject, I can sometimes modify or develop an activity to reinforce what the students are studying. Sometime it is as simple as changing something about a familiar game. For example, the game of Capture the Flag becomes Astronauts and Aliens. The cardiovascular game of Run the Gauntlet becomes Meteor Shower. With the themes of teamwork and cooperation, students might play Partner 4-Square."

In addition to learning something new every year and enjoying the people he works with, Moore finds teaching GRC students to be very rewarding. "There is nothing better than helping students that don't get it in the beginning develop their skills and strategies to meet the challenges the activity presents, and to see students use the gifts they are given!"

Including Moore at 22 years and Wnek at 25, GRC's Summer Academies lead teachers served an average of 10 years. Seven have taught GRC students for 10 or more years. Like Moore and Wnek, all GRC teachers are committed to finding fresh ways to reach students each year. In addition to the lead teachers, each of the 11 Summer Academies is also staffed by an assistant teacher. This further reduces the student-teacher ratio and assures new approaches. Overall, the GRC faculty is characterized by an invigorating mixture of experience, fresh ideas and enthusiasm for the challenges of stimulating the academic growth of gifted kids while helping them develop important social skills, teamwork and healthy self-esteem.

Mike Moore being "roasted" by a grateful P.T. student.

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Wash U Volunteer Provides Leadership, Service

Christina Mosher, a senior biology major and premed, has volunteered as a teaching assistant at GRC's Saturday Learning Labs for the past two years. During the 2010-2011 year she also served as student coordinator of the 15 Wash U students she recruited to serve with her as teacher aides assigned to a particular GRC class. "Christina was incredibly thorough and conscientious as the Washington University Campus Y student volunteer coordinator for GRC's Learning Labs this year," said GRC Executive Director Susan Flesch. "She was always thinking ahead and dedicated to making the students' experience with GRC a useful and positive one for all!"

Washington University students like Christina have been volunteering at GRC for the past 24 years. They enrich the experience GRC students have by helping teachers provide more personal attention and by serving as positive role models.

"Gifted Resource Council - particularly our Learning Lab program - has benefited tremendously by the hundreds of hours that Washington University students have spent assisting GRC's teachers and students for more than 20 years!" said Flesch. To make sure this tradition continues at a high level, Mosher is busy selecting just the right person to serve as next year's coordinator.

Mosher has nothing but praise for the educational advantages GRC offers students. Gifted classes were reduced in the relatively affluent suburb of Dallas, Texas, where Mosher grew up. As a result, her parents enrolled her in weekend and summer enrichment classes somewhat similar to, but "not nearly as good as," those GRC offers. "The GRC curriculum, variety and high-quality teachers' backgrounds are nothing like I have heard of anywhere!" she said. "From what I understand about St Louis schools, it is obvious that GRC is an exemplar for creative teaching of the gifted. It is so exciting to see gifted children get engaged with the material, assert themselves in class, and grow socially and intellectually within a six-week session."



Christina Mosher, a Senior at Washington University, coordinated volunteers for GRC's Learning Labs.

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GiftedResourceCouncil ☘ Spring 2011 ☘ Enhancing the potential of talented young learners

Parents Ask: How can I meet the challenges of parenting a gifted child in a family that does not include the two biological parents?

By Dennis O'Brien

★ Begin by taking stock of the situation. Determine if you, your child or your new spouse carry some emotional baggage because of a divorce, or a divorce and a remarriage. Admit it and make sure you deal with it—and help your child deal with her issues. There's no shame in feeling wounded, and no justification for not dealing with it.

★ Assess the emotional stress on your child due to a divorce, or a remarriage or both. Is she feeling loss, sadness, anger or confusion? How does it show itself in her behaviors? Identify these behaviors, express your concern, and ask her to talk about her feelings. Refrain from offering reassurances at this stage. Instead, paraphrase what she says, focusing especially on her feelings. Repeat this regularly. Your child needs to express her feelings frequently in order to relieve the pressure on her. Should your concerns about her persist, consult a therapist who could coach you on additional parenting tactics you could do or assess whether your child would benefit from some personal therapy or conjoint family counseling with you.

★ Then take an honest look at yourself. Assess the pain you felt, how you dealt with it initially, and how you are dealing with it now. Are things better, or are they still festering? Do feelings of loss, bitterness, anger or fear about your responsibilities dog you? Hobble your parenting? How effective is the way you are dealing with it? Would therapy help? What prevents you from getting it? Taking care of your own emotional health is essential if you are to parent as effectively as you would like and your child needs.

★ Next, assess how these feelings—which are certainly very normal—affect your behavior as a single parent. Do you, for example, too often look to your child for advice, companionship or emotional support? This occurs frequently—but not only because single parents are often searching for support—but because gifted children are so verbally precocious. Sometimes they seem more like little adults than the children they are.

If this has occurred, if your child has become your emotional partner, you need to pull back and find other ways to meet your needs. Are you doing enough things with your friends? Who could you spend more time with, socializing or doing things with? What barriers prevent you from doing so? How can you overcome these barriers to better emotional health, especially those that negatively impact your parenting? You owe it to your child—as well as to yourself and your new spouse—to do so.

★ Another issue that single parents face is allowing a precocious child too much power to make decisions that a parent should be making. Although many parents of intact families make this mistake with a gifted child, it's easier to slip up and do so when there is no other parent there to help you identify and set appropriate boundaries. Ask yourself some tough questions and be honest with yourself. Is your child the one who decides what he wants to do,

when he wants to do it, and with whom? Does he call the shots? Make decisions affecting family life? Does family life orbit around his preferences? Would you let any other 10-year-old have this much power? Talk to you this way? Give you orders? Did you have such power as a child?

Having too much power increases a child's anxiety level. Much as a child might relish the power, having to make adult decisions is a stressor that causes psychological damage. Children handle this stress in different ways. Some stop trying because fear of making mistakes shuts them down. Others conceal their anxiety by becoming pushy. Some seek refuge in self-destructive rituals to give them a feeling of control, such as anorexia or cutting behaviors.

If you have allowed your child to assume inappropriate decision-making power, resume the parenting power you have ceded to your child. Begin making the adult decisions yourself. Sure, consult your child if a decision affects him. But if it's an adult decision to make, you must be the one to make it. Not your child. For more suggestions about how to do this, see the "Parents Ask" column in the fall, 2010 issue of *mindwonders* at www.giftedresourcecouncil.org.

★ Some challenges of single parenting are more practical. Are the rules alarmingly different at your ex-spouse's house than yours? Some differences in scheduling and activities are inevitable and harmless. Some, though, may be creating emotional conflict for your child. For example, Dad may be overly impressed by his brilliant little girl who instinctively manipulates him to get privileges at his house that are simply inappropriate, such as staying up later than is healthy or having unlimited access to the Internet.

If you identify a parenting decision you believe to be unhealthy or causing serious confusion for your child, schedule a private meeting with your ex so you can confront the issue and try to resolve it. Despite the tensions or conflict stirred up by the divorce, it is best to assume that your ex is well intentioned and wants what's best for your child. If you are unable to resolve the issue by yourself, consider meeting with an experienced counselor who can mediate your discussion and provide some objectivity.

★ Parenting a gifted child in a blended family presents more challenges, especially if there are other children of a comparable age. A gifted child may expect to have more privileges because he is accustomed to using his verbal skills to manipulate and push the limits. In this case it is important for the mental health and self-esteem of all the children in the family to make sure that the rules and responsibilities are the same for everyone. Caucus about this with your new spouse and agree on the family norms and how to enforce them.

Another challenge in a blended family may be trying

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Parents Ask, continued from page 6

to help a gifted child socialize appropriately with new siblings. Gifted children often ignore peers and strive to gain adult approval. They crave approval from adults and often focus so intently on gaining it that they fail to develop the ability to socialize with their peers, and parents who are overly impressed by their child's intellectual ability may be the last to notice. This, of course, can be especially damaging for children in a blended family.

One way to head this off is to structure opportunities that promote healthy interactions among these new siblings in your blended family. For example, you might assign chores that need to be done together and schedule family outings that promote interaction. Another useful strategy is to make the family dinner a focal point of the day and use it to spend time talking about what went on in everyone's day.

★ Conjoint parenting is key to managing a gifted child in a blended family. Parents who confer together and work together can effectively create an environment where all the children thrive. It's important to do this intentionally, because often it doesn't automatically happen. Scheduling a regular time to talk privately about it is a very useful way to ensure that it happens.

Dennis O'Brien is a licensed clinical social worker, experienced educator and therapist. In addition to writing educational materials for the Washington University School of Medicine Dept. of Psychiatry, he writes weekly columns on parenting for the Suburban Journals, monthly columns for St. Louis Moms and Dads, and occasional columns for Family Connections and other publications.

Unique, continued from page 1

the planet, or even in St. Louis, a child learns through GRC programs that he may not have to be and can still be OK.

Because GRC uses multi-age grouping, kids learn to relate across grade levels. Older students mentor younger children, and younger students learn from those who are older. This dynamic fosters healthy self-esteem as well as the development of social skills that will help them succeed in life.

How does all this work? To begin with, students select themselves into a particular class because of their inherent interest in the topic. Teachers build on this interest by first ascertaining the baseline of what the students know about the subject and then adjusting their pre-planned curriculum to advance the class from there. This ensures that students are never bored by rehashing what they already know and allows the teacher to design tasks appropriately challenging for each learning team in the class. Every team member contributes to the collaborative learning project. Finally, the teams share what they have learned, often by re-creating an experience, whether that be historical (Medieval Times), scientific (living on Mars) or business-related (ECO Academy).

Nurturing the development of social skills by structuring collaborative learning is intentional. Every year GRC holds in-service workshops for its teachers to discuss these techniques and exchange ideas about effective ways to help children interact constructively with their peers. This commitment to developing appropriate social skills has characterized all GRC programs for decades. GRC recognizes that the emotional and social needs of gifted children are often more critical than their academic needs. It's very much part of our mission to address these special needs.

All these are some of the reasons that GRC programs are both unique in the St. Louis area and invaluable for the students fortunate enough to participate in them.

Barriers—Real or Imagined—to Enrolling in GRC Programs

Why don't more parents who know about GRC enroll their child? For some, of course, it's scheduling conflicts that can't seem to be resolved. For some, it appears to be cost. But \$210/week for a two-week intensive, academic day-camp would seem like a great value for a family wanting to involve a child in academic enrichment that is simply not available in the regular classroom—especially with scholarships available for those having financial need.

Other parents may not understand the importance of assuring that their child receives the chance to *learn how to learn and build social skills and friendships* by interacting with other gifted children. These parents mistakenly believe that being smart is enough.

Fear blocks some parents from taking advantage of what GRC offers their child. Parents who are overly invested in their child's intellectual prowess may fail to enroll their child in GRC programs because they unconsciously fear that the class will actually reveal that, although their child is bright, he is not the brightest of the bright. Of course, this is actually an important realization their child needs to accept if his self-esteem is not to be based on the fragile, unrealistic notion of always being the brightest and the best.

Bottom line? Caring parents should assess their values as well as their resources. It may not be possible to empower their child's future with the advantages that GRC can offer her. But it may be. Parents who care about what's best for the child in the long run should carefully evaluate their options—and opt for the GRC advantage for their child whenever possible.

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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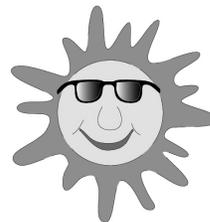
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Gifted Resource Council is a not-for-profit education agency serving the greater St. Louis Metropolitan area.
Its purpose is to bring together the resources of the community, the schools and parents
to help bright and talented children achieve their potential.