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Brain aerobics give the mind a summer workout

University Park youth experiment with science projects at camp

Thursday, July 13, 2006

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by Dennis Carter
Staff Writer

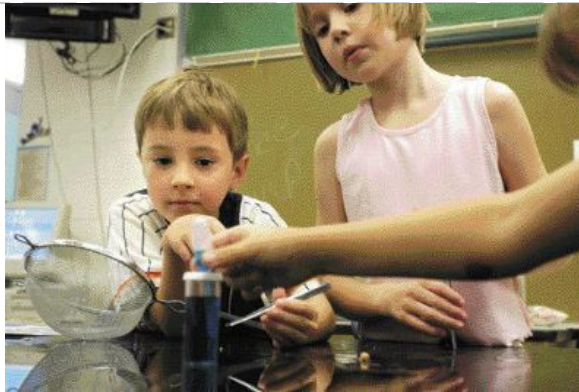
Mitchell Moore is always looking to mix things up — literally. Give him a few liquids, a couple containers and he'll experiment all afternoon, which is why he knew the Mad Science summer camp was perfect for him.

Mitchell, 8, is one of about 30 children gathered at the summer camp this week at University Park Elementary School, the only Mad Science location in Prince George's County.

"It's just a really creative place," said Mitchell of University Park, as he worked with fellow camp-goers to find out which kind of bird beak was perfect for snatching worms and insects. "And of course, it helps that I love science."

Mad Science, a science enrichment program with sites throughout the metropolitan area, is designed to capture children's attention while cultivating a better comprehension of the fundamentals of science.

"We know kids get bored easily," said Mad Science founder Greg Clark. "But we know science for kids."



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Ian Hurley/The Gazette

University Park residents Eli Klopp, 5, and Kayla Shannon, 8, watch as Molly Moore, 6, fills a pipette with colored water during their Mad Science Summer Camp class at University Park Elementary School on Tuesday. They were comparing how birds that gather nectar such as hummingbirds differ from those that gather seeds like robins and sparrows. The program offers kids a unique chance to get out from behind the television and into a classroom to learn more about science.



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While the group worked with tweezers, pliers and ladles — figuring out which bird beak was ideal for certain food — Ashley Vines and Cleo Hines said they were glad to be in a classroom, considering the alternatives.

“I would usually just be talking on the phone with friends or at the pool,” said Ashley, 10, a Fredericksburg, Va. resident, shrugging at the thought of an ordinary hot summer day.

Cleo smiled as she assembled her balsa wood birdhouse, recalling disastrous experiences at local summer camps.

“This isn’t boring like some classes in school,” said Cleo, 10, a resident of Washington, D.C. “I like this more than other camps. I usually cry at other camps because I dislike them so much.”

Mitchell, a third grader at University Park Elementary, said Monday’s activities — where the youngsters experimented with chemistry — was the perfect way to spend what would usually be a lazy summer afternoon.

“At home, I’ll just sit down and make concoctions. I’ll put things together, even if I don’t really know what they are,” he said before reciting his mother’s warning about playing with chemicals.

As the bird lesson winded down Tuesday morning — with most kids realizing nectar was never safe from the long beak of a hummingbird — instructor Danielle Miller said the camp provides a service for every teacher frustrated with children’s “summer cobwebs.”

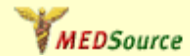
“The biggest thing I hear most teachers complain about is that the kids kind of go on brain meltdown in the summer,” said Miller, in her eighth year with Mad Science. “Having something like this to keep their minds constantly thinking and questioning things keeps them fresh. When they come back for the school year, they’re ready to jump right in, whereas usually it takes a couple weeks to get them jumpstarted.”

While some summer camps host outdoor activities under the baking sun, Mad Science aims to give campers a reprieve from the oppressive summer heat — all while keeping them engaged with material they might sneer at during the school year.

“They don’t always want to be outside,” Miller said. “They seem to want to learn too.”

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