

ROBOTIC PETS provide camping fun and learning



Meghan's Certificate of Adoption

“It’s always something.” Exasperated parents have been known to utter these words when they realize how hard it is to keep up with the unanticipated kid problems and difficulties that crop up every day.

So I smiled when a little girl named Meghan expressed the same sentiment. “Every single day, there’s a new problem.” She is talking about her robotic dog that she named Daisy, according to the Certificate of Adoption that she holds up to show me. I am visiting Dormont Elementary School and this is the Robotic Pet Vet module, part of the National Inventors Hall of Fame popular summer program called Camp Invention.

Teacher Denise Tunney shows me a sample of the generic, black, plastic dog, about the size of a hamster, that each of the 3rd and 4th graders in this group received on the first day. I quickly understand what Meghan is talking about when I learn that on Day 1, the kids had to perform “surgery” on their pet by taking it apart and comparing the robotic innards to real dog anatomy.

Day 2 was when the problems started. The children discovered that some of the dogs were sick and had to do “urinalysis” testing to find out what was wrong. Although some 3rd and 4th graders might not have been familiar with that medical term, they certainly understood the procedure and are very matter of fact about it when they discuss it with me.

“We checked their pee to see what they had,” one boy explains. “So what was wrong with your dogs?” I ask a group of girls at a table.

“My dog had diabetes,” says Ava. “Fifi was always hungry, but she kept losing weight and drank a lot.”

“Mine was dehydrated,” Sadie says. “Dehydrated dogs don’t drink or pee much.”



Boys selecting fur for their dogs

Evie was fortunate. “My dog was pretty much normal,” she shrugs.

Today, there’s a lot of noise and activity in the Robotic Pet Vet module as the kids are selecting different colors and patterns of “fur” to cut and paste on their pets.

“My dog is a pug,” says a boy named Zekiel, who is eager for me to see the cute, little, black tongue hanging out of his dog’s mouth.

With string and fabric, the kids are constructing collars and leashes for their pets, which are able to move and bark.

The room fills with electronic yipping sounds when the kids walk their pets across the classroom floor. Some kids giggle as they play a game that looks like “pin the bandage on the puppy’s boo boo” while two boys work quietly cutting pieces of cardboard to build doghouses for their pets.

The most interesting activity is happening in a corner where I notice several children sticking their hands in a plastic container filled with squishy, marble-sized, red balls in liquid.

“Those are the red blood cells,” Ms. Tunney tells me. “They’re looking for



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infections."

I quickly figure out that the ping pong balls represent white blood cells, but I don't know what the red strings are until Camp Director, Jenny Martin, holds one up.

"Is this supposed to be part of the blood?" she asks.

"Those are platelets."

The kids let me put my hands in the slimy, irresistible goop. It feels like giant, red, tapioca balls squishing through my fingers.

Tomorrow the kids will design dog parks and on Friday, they are looking forward to a puppy parade.

The chirping critters are cute, but what impresses me most is that these kids are also learning valuable lessons about

health, medicine and science that go far beyond the fun of making a toy to take home with them at the end of the week.

As a yapping canine nudges Ava's feet, she leans down to pet it. "I love you, too, little dog," she says affectionately.

I smile again, because that is, in essence, what exasperated parents say, too. ■

Ann K. Howley enjoys writing about STEAM-related projects, classes and activities for kids. Contact her at akhowley@gmail.com.

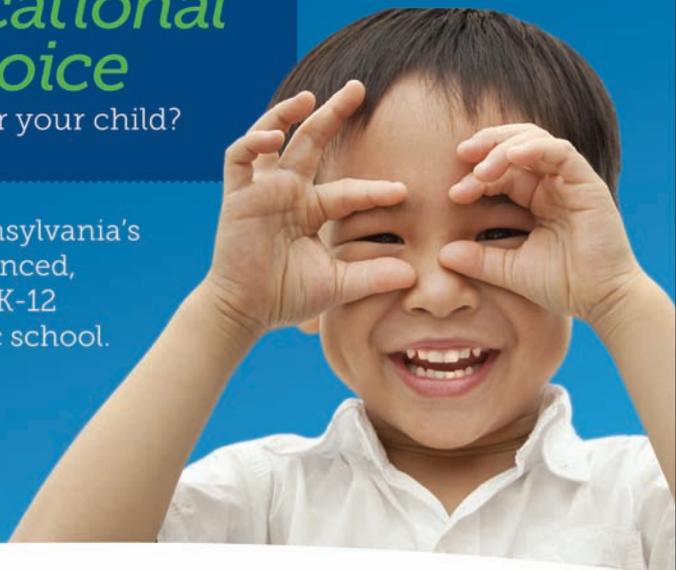


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