

Young Einsteins: Fun with Learning

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WOODSTOCK - The biggest cheers invariably came when the foam rubber tip of an air-launched rocket thwacked a nearby car. Children's voices rose, 15 strong, in chants of "hit the Jeep," "hit the plane," "hit the bus" and "hit the can."

Their shouts of encouragement were aimed at two peers who pumped air into a compressor. At the touch of a button, the air was forced out of the container, down a tube, and into the hollow plastic cylinder that was the body of a rocket.

The rocket launched skyward, hovered for a second, and then plummeted, foam-end down. When a camp-mate accidentally complied and hit something, the uproar of excitement echoed off the outside walls of the Challenger Learning Center for Science & Technology. The children cheering on the rockets Thursday were participants in the Woodstock center's two-day Cos-mini Camp. And although adult supervisors worried about the potential for nicked paint, the launchings were all in a day's work.

"The idea is they're going to learn while they have fun," said Windy Krepel, the lead program teacher and curriculum director for the center. The 17 youngsters participating all recently finished second, third and fourth grades. The camp started Thursday and ends today.

Among those attending was Zac Feltman, who has big plans. "I want to be a scientist," the 10-year-old Lake in the Hills boy proudly said. This was his first trip to Cos-mini Camp, although not his first run-in with rockets. "I've been to mad sciences ... and they also make rockets," he said, whooshing his rocket through the air. When it came his turn to launch a rocket - his decorated with a sheet-full of stickers and blue foam tail fins - Feltman was too excited to expound on the experience. "Good," he replied when asked how his rocket flew.

Josh Rich concurred that the rockets were fun, but he said he most enjoyed a stickier project. Covering inflated balloons with newspaper and a home-made paste was the Crystal Lake boy's favorite activity. "I like playing the games and making the space helmets," he said.

The Challenger Center was built in 2001 to foster students' interest in science, math and technology through simulated space exploration. It hosts more than 10,000 students annually, Krepel said, although the majority come during the school year.

During the summer, the center is open for seven camp sessions, including this week's. The Cos-mini Camp is geared toward younger children and lasts for two days, while the weeklong Cosmic Camps give students who just finished fifth, sixth and seventh grades the chance to learn about flight, rocketry, robotics and space travel.

A third camp, Cosmic Camp II, takes students who already have completed Cosmic Camp and offers them advanced flight and space activities, including creating space art.

By REGAN FOSTER