

## Camp allows kids to hone engineering skills on a small scale

By Dana Herra - Staff Writer

DeKALB - By mid-afternoon, the Capitol Room at Northern Illinois University's Holmes Student Center is filled with castles and skyscrapers. Children launch race cars off ramps and cruise them down city streets complete with stoplights. What's remarkable about this miniature scene is that it is built entirely out of Legos.

NIU is hosting a series of weeklong Lego camps this summer. The camps are put on by Green Apple Camps of Naperville and are broken into age groups from preschool through eighth grade. Each camp has a theme, like basic structures or Chicago architecture.

Dee Guiney, Green Apple area vice president, said the great thing about Legos is that they are both fun and educational.

"We're definitely interested in the fun factor," she said. "But there's quite a bit of math and science subtly built in."

Camp director Joanie Mehlan said campers learn about engineering concepts like friction, kinesiology and weight distribution, all through Legos.

"(Architecture with Legos) camp consists of building structures," she said. "We're teaching kids that you have to start with a solid base, you can't just build Legos up really high. Today we're going through the principles of friction. We built race cars and launchers, and we're learning about different kinds of wheels and which cars go farther."

Mehlan said campers have 10 minutes of free time when they first arrive, and then they go over the theme for the day.

"Yesterday, our theme was castles," she said. "So we have castle books, and we talked about what is a castle, why there are castles, what's found around a castle, things like that. Then they broke into small groups and built castles, and then we all worked together to build a castle neighborhood."

Guiney said teamwork is an important part of the camps.

"That cooperative sense lets the kids see something bigger than their individual contribution," she said. "It also gives kids of all different abilities a chance to work together on a project."

Camper Mitchell Griesbaum, 11, said he prefers working in teams to playing alone.

"It gets done quicker," he said. "And you can hear what the other ideas are."

Mehlan said campers also are learning valuable social skills.

"They learn how to plan and how to work with each other," she said. "I've seen a lot of good team-building here. And they learn about communication, where they have to discuss which colors to use, what kind of Legos to use."

Camper Peter Gavin, 12, also likes working in teams.

"We all get to put in our own ideas and put them together," he said.

Guiney said the half-day camps are win-win for children and parents.



Mitchell Griesbaum (right), 11, and Tom Johnson, 11, both of DeKalb, work on building cars and ramps out of Legos during a Lego camp at NIU Wednesday afternoon. Chronicle photo HOLLY LUNDH

"You want your child to be in an unstructured environment during the summer so you get that summer feel," she said. "But you like the fact that they're learning something and working together."

Gavin said he's learned a lot at camp, but the best part, of course, has been the Legos.

"I like it because Legos are mainly my most favorite thing to play with," he said.

Lego Camps are weeklong, half-day programs. The camps are different each week, and are open to children in preschool through eighth grade. The program will continue through August. For more information or to register, visit [www.greenapplecamps.com](http://www.greenapplecamps.com).

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