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Students gain computing skills at Purdue program

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With two big wheels in back, two small ones in front, and a rainbow-colored Lego body in between, Dani Davis' robot resembles a tractor with a paint job that would upstage a rainbow.

Wednesday morning, Davis sat surrounded by new friends as her robot "Freddy" tried to knock down plastic bowling pins.

The bowling challenge was the culmination of a computer science camp hosted by Purdue University for students in sixth to eighth grade.

The three-day camp teaches students to make Web sites and learn other computer skills, such as writing a program to choreograph the movements of robots.

"Oh, come on!" Davis shouted as "Freddy" took out five pins, spun and then stuck on the foam barriers of the game board. "Move it!"

An advanced camp for older students takes place the rest of this week. Both are designed to teach children computer skills not always learned in a classroom.

Going beyond Internet research and educational software is important for to kindle kids' love of computers, said Scott Nelson, a senior in the College of Education who serves as a camp counselor.

"Most of them have never done anything like this," he said. "We show them how to use the programs and let them go. The best part is seeing them have a good time."

Many will carry their interests back to school with them in the fall as they try to learn more.

James Love, 13, hopes camp will help him better understand computer game design.

"It's something I want to learn how to do," said Love, an Indianapolis resident. "I've seen it done before and it just looked like fun."

For Becca Mimms, a 12-year-old West Lafayette student, camp meant three days of independence.

"My favorite part was being away from my parents for a little bit -- no offense to them -- and making a Web site all my friends can see."

Kaylee Oates, 11, talked about the elements of a good Web site, including making opinion polls,

animated movies and message boards.

"I like the fact that you can learn in a fun, new way and make new friends," she said. "And then, with your Web sites, you can stay in touch."

Linda Gelhausen, a teacher at the private Orchard School in Indianapolis, said the camp also has valuable lessons for educators.

"This hits both the students who are strong in math and those that weaker in math. They can excel in this and it gives them a lot of confidence."