Why Odyssey of the Mind is Good for Kids

The Odyssey of the Mind teaches students to learn creative problem-solving methods while having fun in the process. For more than twenty five years, this unique program has helped teachers generate excitement in their students. By tapping into creativity, and through encouraging imaginative paths to problem-solving, students learn skills that will provide them with the ability to solve problems -- great and small -- for a lifetime. The Odyssey of the Mind teaches students how to think divergently by providing open-ended problems that appeal to a wide range of interests. Students learn how to identify challenges and to think creatively to solve those problems. They are free to express their ideas and suggestions without fear of criticism. The creative problem-solving process rewards thinking "outside of the box." While conventional thinking has an important place in a well-rounded education, students need to learn how to think creatively and productively.

In the Odyssey of the Mind . . .

- Students learn to work together and develop team-building skills.
- Students learn to examine problems and to identify the real challenge without limiting the possible solutions and their potential success.
- The creative-thinking process is nurtured and developed as a problem-solving tool.
- Students of all types will find something that will appeal to them.
- The fun of participation leads to an elevated interest in regular classroom curricula.
- Teachers have a program to further provide students with a well-rounded education.

Referring to the Odyssey of the Mind volunteers:

"Behind each one of our finalists is a volunteer support network that can proudly claim to be one of those thousand points of light that I like to talk about." - George Bush, President of the United States

Odyssey of the Mind Problems

The problems are designed for competition, with scoring components and limitations, or rules to be followed. The long-term problems change every year. They fall into five general categories. These are mechanical/vehicle, technical performance, classics, structure and performance.

Mechanical/Vehicle (Problem # 1)

Teams design, build and operate vehicles of various size and with various power sources. Sometimes they drive the vehicles, and sometimes the vehicles perform tasks, such as overcoming obstacles or visiting other "countries" to retrieve artifacts.

Technical Performance (Problem # 2)

Teams make innovative contraptions and incorporate artistic elements into their solutions. They might be asked to write an original musical score to play on a "new" type of instrument, or to build a robot with human characteristics, or to perform tasks using a chain reaction of snapping mousetraps.

Classics (Problem # 3)

The theme of this problem is based on the classical -- from literature to architecture to art. Whether it's writing an additional chapter to Moby Dick or bringing paintings to life, it's always a terrific learning experience.

Structure (Problem # 4)

Teams design and build structures, using only balsa wood and glue. They test them by supporting and holding as much weight as possible -- sometimes more than a thousand pounds! Teams usually present a skit as part of the Style presentation.

Performance (Problem # 5)

In this problem, teams present performances that revolve around a specific theme and incorporate required elements. Past themes include "morphing" objects, animals that express human emotions, and originating folktales.

A Brief History

The Odyssey of the Mind has its roots in the Industrial Design classes of Dr. Sam Micklus, Odyssey of the Mind founder. As a professor at Rowan University in New Jersey (formerly Glassboro State College) Dr. Micklus challenged his students to create vehicles without wheels, mechanical pie throwers and flotation devices that would take them across a course on a lake. He evaluated them not on the success of their solutions, but on the ingenuity applied and the risk involved in trying something new and different. Students had fun. Word spread and the students' activities attracted attention from the local media. Soon, people on the outside wanted a part of the action. This public interest led to the development of a creative problem-solving competition for school children.