

AS IT IS Smithsonian Program & Musical Myth

Hello and welcome to As It Is from VOA Learning English. I'm Faith Lapidus in Washington.

Do you think learning to play a musical instrument makes a child more intelligent? The answer may surprise you. But first we hear about a new program at America's world-famous Smithsonian Institution. The program is designed to get young people interested in science.

Hands-on Science for Students at Smithsonian

It is not just another day in a classroom for some students in Washington, D.C. A group of young people is volunteering at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History. They are among the first to test a new program at the museum.

The program has an unusual name – spoken as “Curious” and written as Q-question-mark-r-i-u-s. Q?rius includes hands-on exhibits that teach young visitors science through experiments.

Q?rius is so appealing to young people perhaps because students helped design it. Also, the exhibits, or displays, combine science with art. The exhibits also take a whole body approach to learning that involves all the senses. Q?rius combines the newest technologies and scientific equipment with more than 6,000 museum objects. Objects that are both real and digital.

During their visit, some students explore the mysteries of human bones. Other students examine an insect under a microscope. Many of the students already have their favorites.

Nate Reistetter is 13 years old. He likes using advanced technology to explore dinosaur bones.

“There was a cast of a dinosaur bone and you can scan the QR code [computerized bar code] on the computers and it will tell you all about where it was found and all sorts of stuff about it.”

The “QR Code” that Nate talks about is a computerized bar code assigned to an item in the exhibit. When scanned, this QR code tells a fuller story. What is it? Where was it found? When was it found? The questions scientists ask.

Student Ben Werb enjoys an exhibit that lets people use their senses to learn more about objects. For example, he realizes that a butterfly smells a little like tea. Who knew?

One of the exhibit’s major goals is to involve all the senses -- smell, touch, hearing, taste and sight. This is that “whole body” approach to learning that we mentioned earlier.

In another display they handle real human bones in a laboratory. The science of investigating human remains is called ‘forensic anthropology.’

Forensic anthropology is often used to identify a person who has died and to learn the cause of death.

Olivia Persons is 18 years old. She is one of seven teens who helped develop the exhibit. The laboratory is her favorite display area.

“There’s a lot of digital stuff, there’s a lot of computer screens and touch screens, but in here they are actually able to touch real human bones.”

The “Q?rius” museum exhibit is open to only students in the morning. In the afternoon the public is welcome to explore Q?rius and be – well – curious. There’s also a Q?rius website that allows visitors to continue exploring and experimenting long after they have left the museum.

And I am Faith Lapidus in Washington. You are listening to As It Is from VOA Learning English.

Now we go back to the question we asked at the top of the program – does learning a musical instrument make you smarter? We turn to education reporter Jeri Watson for the answer.

Learning Music Makes You Smarter? Not So Fast...

Many people believe that teaching children music makes them smarter -- better able to learn new things. But the organizers of a new study say there is no scientific evidence that early musical training affects the intelligence of young people.

estimated 80 percent of American adults think music classes improve children's ability to learn or their performance in school. They say that the satisfaction from learning to play a new song helps a child express creativity.

Researchers at Harvard University, however, have found that there is one thing musical training does not do. They say it does not make children more intelligent.

Samuel Mehr is a graduate student at Harvard's School of Education. He said it is wrong to think that learning to play a musical instrument improves a child's intellectual development.

He says the evidence comes from studies that measured the mental ability of two groups of four-year-olds and their parents. One group attended music class. The other went to a class that places importance on the visual arts – arts that can be seen.

"The answer there is 'no.' We found no evidence for any advantage on any of these tests for the kids who were participating in music classes."

Samuel Mehr says researchers have carried out many studies in an effort to learn whether musical training can make children smarter. He says the results have been mixed. He says only one study seemed to show a small percentage increase in IQ – intelligence scores – among students after one year of music less

He says researchers in his study compared how well children in the music training group did on mental processing tasks, or projects. Then the results were compared to those of children who did not take lessons.

There was no evidence that the musical training group did much better on the mental tasks than the other group. The researchers confirmed their results with a larger group of children and their parents.

A report on the benefits of music training in children was published in the journal PLOS ONE. I'm Jeri Watson.

Thank you, Jeri. And thank you for listening to our program. Join us again tomorrow for another As It Is from VOA Learning English. To see more of our programs, visit our website, LearningEnglish.voanews.com.

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I'm Faith Lapidus. Have a great day.