



The fourth- and fifth-graders from James River Elementary School who have been learning to play bridge are competing against each other in an American Contract Bridge League tournament at the Williamsburg Marriott. Adults are competing, too, but the kids have their own table. At left, fourth grader Madeline Montgomery carefully chooses her next card. At right, fourth-grader Leah Johnson anticipates fifth-grader Tony Anderson's next play. PHOTOS BY BUDDY NORRIS/DAILY PRESS

Bridge tricks are for kids

The Bridge in Schools program raises math skills and the game's popularity.

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When it's time to play bridge, it's time to get serious and pay attention.

Fourth grader Annie Downing struggles over which card to play next.



"Trump," said Annie Downing, calling the suit that would beat out all others.

"Oh, come on! Oh snap," Clare McMurry replied.

"Dude, you have all of these, you have to follow suit," Downing said later, pointing to the cards in the middle of the table.

"Just go, Annie," Madeline Montgomery said with a sigh.

"Hang on," she replied.

These friends don't share pictures of each other's grandchildren, they share recess. They're part of a group of fourth- and fifth-graders at James River Elementary School in Williamsburg that has been learning to play bridge.

Bridge is the card game that involves numbers and tricks and books and trumps and bids and

declarers. Huh? Yeah. Simply put, the game usually has four players in two pairs that bid for the right to declare a trump suit. The pairs try to win tricks equal to the final bid, and play with the hand of the declarer's partner exposed.

That's as simple as it gets reading about it. It's easier to follow along by watching them play.

Sam DeCroes, duplicate bridge instructor/director, has been teaching as part of the Bridge in Schools program for three years. He's been teaching the students at James River for about four months. It's a voluntary program where the kids spend lunch and recess learning the basics of the game.

"I've always been convinced that children can learn how to play bridge, at least a modified form

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of it,” he said. “It’s basically to show them that it’s a serious game and that a lot of people play it.”

And the game is supposed to help improve a child’s critical thinking, math and social skills.

The 16 students in the class at James River were getting a few final tips before competing in a tournament a couple of days later.

“Um, so, if you lead with your highest trick, does that mean your partner will lead with their lowest trick?” asked Leah Johnson, a cherubic 9-year-old with red ribbons in her hair.

“That’s right,” said DeCroes. “So, you play your low card. What kind of card is your partner going to play?”

“The high card,” the kids call out in unison.

“Um, I play chess and at the end of the tournament, if you don’t learn anything new, then you weren’t playing right. Is this game like that?” Johnson asked.

“Yes,” said DeCroes.

Enrichment teacher Courtney Walter said the kids really enjoy playing bridge.

Keyana Fauntleroy, 10, has been playing bridge with her grandmother for five years. DeCroes’ lessons have taught Fauntleroy how to count her points and how to win.



Fourth grader Michael Mason gets a little help with his next card from Sam DeCroes, left, and Mary Radoye. PHOTO BY BUDDY NORRIS/DAILY PRESS

“I can beat her now,” she said of the games against grandma.

The young bridge converts fit right in with the same focus as the big-timers at the tournament at the Williamsburg Marriott. They had on their bridge club T-shirts in red, black and white with cards on the front and “Bridge Rules” on the back. They spread out among five tables at the back of the ballroom. Their voices hushed.

“They’re behaving and their concentration’s good for fourth-graders. I wasn’t sure if they could play cards for two hours since we usually only play for 30 minutes,” said DeCroes. “It’s a social game, but it’s also a sport. A mental sport.”

At one table, there’s tension.

Tony Anderson, 10, started to put his card down out of turn. It was Ailsa Firstenberg’s turn.

“You haven’t even seen her card yet,” Christian Patterson, 11, said lunging forward a little in his partner’s defense.

Bridge information

If your child wants to learn to play bridge, Sam DeCroes is willing to start a bridge summer camp for elementary and high school students, either as part of an existing program or as a separate activity. The program is free, except for the cost of copying handouts, and will involve about 20 hours of instruction time, including card playing, in five weekly, four-hour sessions. DeCroes is the duplicate bridge instructor/director with the Bridge In Schools program at James River Elementary School in Williamsburg. Call him at 258-3332 or e-mail samdecroes@cox.net.

Ben Trainer, Anderson’s partner, held up his ace as if to say it didn’t matter what she had because no one was going to be able to beat his card.

“It doesn’t matter,” Patterson said, exasperated.

A couple of hours later, the score cards were filled out and the winners announced. Rachel Braig, Clare McMurry, Annie Downing and Ashlin Jones each received a trophy – a gold hand holding a set of cards – as the rest of their club members scrambled to get a closer look.

If only Keyana Fauntleroy had remembered to bring her diamond ring good luck charm.

“My grandma would be so disappointed,” she said. “I forgot it at home.”

That’s OK. After two hours of card playing with math and logic, it’s time to go upstairs to the hospitality room for a pizza party.

In fourth and fifth grades, pizza is the great equalizer.

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