

4-year-old programmers shine in robot contest

Children take part in an educational robot contest in Shanghai, March 4, 2017. [Photo/Shanghai Observer]

A total of 100 pre-school children recently took part in an educational robot contest in Shanghai, with the youngest contestant only 4 years old, according to Shanghai-based newspapers.

More than 1,000 contestants, usually in teams of two or three, competed in the educational robot match. Their ages ranged from 4 to 18 years old, with 100 of them being pre-school children. Clad in uniformed yellow vests, they were seen piecing their robots together or working on computers to do programming to get the robots going.

Yu Shengming, 4, is one of the contestants. He worked with 6-year-old Yi Yang. They had to assemble a machinery vehicle using plastics and metal parts, and afterwards did some programming to get the vehicle along a designated route to hit ping pong balls and then come back. The two accomplished the task easily.

Another kindergarten child, Dai Kuncheng, told the Shanghai Morning Post that he hasn't learned writing yet but has already learned something about programming and can recognize programming-related and video game-related characters, touting jargon like "main program" and "reference variables."

The newspaper quoted a judge surnamed Zhang who said such contests used to attract children from 10 to 15 years old, but now an increasing number of younger kids are taking part. A report last year revealed there are about 7,600 robotics educational firms in China, a 15-fold increase over the past five years. Some companies, like Lego, charge nearly 10,000 yuan (about US\$1450) per year for training and more than 100,000 yuan for the entire learning process.

The newspaper quoted some educators who argued against pre-school children learning programming as they believe young children shouldn't focus too much on intellectual training, and that long exposure to computers will hurt their eyes. But some educators argue that as times have changed, their interests change too.