

# The New York Times

PATENTS

## Not Too Young for a Patent

By TERESA RIORDAN

LAST week, Dustin Satloff, a fifth grader at the Collegiate School in Manhattan, received his first patent at the age of 10. It was for a new way to play fantasy baseball with special trading cards.

While it might seem unusual for a child to obtain a patent, it is not. About half of the 70 young people who competed to be selected for this year's National Gallery for America's Young Inventors - the equivalent of an inventor's hall of fame for youngsters - have filed for patent rights. And By Kids For Kids, a new company in Stamford, Conn., plans to commercialize children's patented inventions.

Some inventions, like Dustin's, are games or toys - but by no means are all of them so. As young inventors reach high school, their inventions can become highly sophisticated. Children's inventions are "all over the map," said Ruth Nyblod, a public relations officer for the United States Patent and Trademark Office, who keeps track of young inventors informally. (Because the patent applications do not ask for an inventor's age, there is no formal way to track how many patents are issued annually to those under 18.)

When she was 6, Lauren Scafidi (and her parents) filed for a patent for a toy that is supposed to help children pester their parents graciously.

"We had a terrible problem with Lauren interrupting us on the phone," said her father, Sal Scafidi, a chiropractor in Waterford, Mich. "The condition is known as blurt-itis, and it's a problem a lot of kids have."

The solution he and his wife, Diane, came up with was to write a question mark on a piece of paper and tell Lauren to give it to them when they were on the phone so they could remember that she had a question. Lauren elevated the idea



Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times  
Dustin Satloff, a 10-year-old from Manhattan, with the baseball card collection that inspired him to invent a fantasy game. He recently received a patent for it.

to a plush-toy question mark that can hook around a parent's wrist.

Two years later, Lauren's parents and other investors have put \$80,000 into developing the toy, and last week they started selling it at [www.qwesty.com](http://www.qwesty.com). Which brings up the question: Do most young inventors have mom or dad, or some behind-the-scenes equivalent, propelling their careers forward?

Daniel Gwartz, chief operating officer of By Kids For Kids, does not go quite that far, but he says that young inventors usually have some sort of mentor, like a parent, grandparent or teacher.

"That's a common thread, that there has been the right encouragement for them to continue down

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the invention path," Mr. Gwartz said. "Clearly this doesn't just come from within the kids; they need the right environmental support."

Elena Leah Glassman, a senior from Pipersville, Pa., credits her father, an electrical engineer, with being her mentor. Ms. Glassman was selected as one of seven inductees into the young inventors' gallery for her "brain-computer interface for the muscularly disabled." (The formal induction ceremony will be in May.)

She is developing software that she hopes will enable someone wearing a special cap that detects brain waves to direct the movement of a computer's cursor with thoughts rather than hands.

"My dad got me interested and excited about engineering," Ms. Glassman said. "And he introduced me to useful tools and programs that enabled me to do my project."

A fellow inductee, Vaishali Kiran Grover, now a junior at Phillips Academy in Andover, Mass., says she received some guidance from her father, a chemist. Ms. Grover's invention is an environmentally friendly paint that keeps barnacles, algae and mollusks from attaching to ship hulls. "My father mostly lent me morale support, but my parents' collective motto on science projects: 'It's your experiment, your ideas and your work,'" Ms. Grover said. (She is not the only student with patent aspirations at Andover this year. Palmer Rampell, 15, received a patent in August for a hard baseball cap intended to protect sailors from head injury in the event they are struck by a sail boom.)

Those who do not find guidance at home can sometimes find it in the classroom, said Nick Frankovits, who is executive director of the Partnership for America's Future, based in Akron, Ohio, and administers the young inventors' gallery.

"Inventing is something I could use to reach students who were not stars in math or English - who were not the perfect students," said Mr. Frankovits, who taught high school science in Ohio for 27 years. "I've worked with some very tough kids, but they really jumped on the idea of invention."

Dustin's father, James Satloff, said he was skeptical that mentors or parents made a big difference.

"The desire to invent is something that can be cultivated but not really imbued," said Mr. Satloff, executive managing director of Standard & Poor's Institutional Market Services Group. "You either have the desire to invent or you don't."

And there is no guarantee that the inventive passions of childhood will carry on through adulthood. "I love science," Ms. Grover said, "but I will probably end up going into documentary filmmaking."

*Patents may be viewed on the Web at [www.uspto.gov](http://www.uspto.gov) or may be ordered through the mail, by patent number, for \$3 from the Patent and Trademark Office, Washington, D.C. 20231.*