Think Like a Coder

Mission: the thief locked the mascot in the Evidence Locker with a code that only opens for the right steps in the right order. Win the games, put the steps in order on the whiteboard, whisper the password, open the box, free the mascot. Character trait today: **Self-Awareness**.

Grades 3–8 / middle school: run it competitive. Fixed teams for the hour, a visible timer on every round, score each game (winning team, fewest guesses, fastest crack) on the whiteboard, crown a champion at the finale. Push harder versions: chair-maze robots with commands locked in up front, 8 to 10-step dances with two bugs, 6 to 7-letter passwords in a bracket, and let older kids referee and design puzzles for rival teams to crack.

1 · Robot and Programmer (5–16 min), exact steps only, no vague commands

Setup Small groups of 3 to 5. One kid is the Robot, the rest are Programmers. Pick a target spot across the room (chair, taped X, floor tile).

Reach chair "Forward 4 · turn right · forward 2 · stop." One clear action per command; the Robot does exactly that and freezes.

Around cone "Forward 3 · turn left · forward 2 · turn right · forward 2." Shows why order matters.

Demo A Programmer says "just go over there," the Robot freezes or overshoots. Then the group says it in exact steps. Robots walk, never run, hands down.

2 · Debug the Dance (16–31 min), teach it clean, then slip in a bug

Bug swap Clean: Clap, Spin, Jump, Stomp. Bug: Clap, Jump, Spin, Stomp (spin and jump swapped).

Wrong step Clean: Stomp, Clap, Clap, Spin. Bug: third step is a Jump instead of a Clap.

Subtle Clean: Jump, Stomp, Spin, Clap, Freeze. Bug: Stomp and Spin swapped. Kids name the bug AND the fix, run it clean, then a student leads a buggy sequence.

3 · Put the Steps in Order (31–45 min), correct order spells the password

DIRT Plant a seed: **D** Dig a small hole · **I** Insert the seed · **R** Rake soil over it · **T** Trickle water on top. Order: Dig, Insert, Rake, Trickle.

STEP Walk a path: **S** Stand at the start · **T** Take the first step · **E** Each step follows in order · **P** Perfect, you reached the end.

Run it Write the steps scrambled on the board. Teams order them the way they would really do the task, read the letters top to bottom for the password. First team to whisper it correctly opens the box.

4 · Finale + Wristband (45–60 min)

Open Winning team announces the password to the room, coach turns the key, mascot lifts out, big cheer. Optional "thief's note" inside: "You wrote perfect code. I surrender!"

Award the **Self-Awareness** trait wristband to detectives who noticed and named their own thinking steps ("first I did this, then that").

Games bank (zero materials, whole group)

Backups Wink Detective · Guess the Leader · **Detective Mafia** (best for grades 3–8): eyes closed, tap 2 to 3 Culprits and 1 Detective; Night they act in secret, Day the group debates and votes one out; town wins by voting

out all Culprits. 5 to 7 min per round, reshuffle. Great competitive swap for older kids.

Detective's Oath (say together, magnifiers up): I am a detective. / My brain is my best tool. / I don't guess, I reason. / I follow the clues to the truth.