



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
April 23, 2015

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More than 400 filled Coconino High School for Circus and STEM fun at the Early Childhood Fair

FLAGSTAFF, Ariz. – Catapults made out of marshmallows, harmonicas made out of Popsicle sticks, planting flowers and stilt walkers were some of the fun and creative things that kids and families recently experienced at the 5th Annual Flagstaff Early Childhood Fair at Coconino High School.

The April 18 event, themed Help Me Grow, focused on providing community resources and ways to help kids, ages birth to 8, develop early skills in STEM or STEAM: Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Math. The event attracted more than 400 parents, children and providers. More than 40 organizations were represented, providing information and showing how play and fun interactive activities can help kids develop early skills like imagination, creativity, exploration and problem solving.

First Things First, a voter-created, statewide organization that funds early education and health programs to help kids be successful once they enter kindergarten co-sponsored the event along with Alliance for Children's Early Success.

"This was by far the best early childhood fair yet," said Sylvia Johnson, Flagstaff Unified School District Director of Educational Enrichment. "It seems to grow every year with more families attending."

Flagstaff Mayor Jerry Nabours was on hand to read a mayoral proclamation declaring the week, April 12-18, 2015 to be Week of the Young Child. "Whereas Flagstaff recognizes that children are the future," Nabours said.

The purpose of National Week of the Young Child is to focus attention on the needs of young children and their families.

First Things First was on hand to remind families that 90 percent of a child's critical brain development occurs before age 5. That means the early years represent an ideal time to introduce math and science to kids. Babies, toddlers and preschoolers learn naturally by exploring and experimenting. What appears to adults as play is really forming and testing theories, and trying out different variables.

"We came in looking for Head Start information, but we got lots of other resources," said Cindy Bitsui as she helped her 8-year-old and 3-year-old daughters pick out free books provided by First Things First. "We are going to do the sink or float activity at home and start a catnip garden for her cat."

By encouraging the development of STEM skills in the early years, kids learn by experimenting with their environments and gain skills that will help them be successful in school and in life. Kids and parents at the fair were entertained with music, story times and other activities that had them using all of their senses.

Joanie Grant, Circus Ring Master and Program Director with Flagstaff Aerial Arts, joined by FunTown Circus youth performers, invited everyone to join the circus. Children got to spin tops, balance wheels on ropes, hula hoop, walk on paint cans to practice becoming stilt walkers and even swing on a large circus ring for some fun in the air.

“Circus is a wonderful tool in early childhood,” Grant said. “Tumbling, aerial dance and other circus skills build coordination and help to develop fine and gross motor skills.”

Circus and other forms of dramatic play are important in early childhood development because it helps lay foundations in the brain for reading comprehension later on, she added.

“When children play make-believe games, they are using their imaginations much in the same way they will use to make images in their brain while reading,” Grant said. “There is a rich social and emotional development piece that is essential to helping kids develop confidence, independence and their own unique self.”

The Early Childhood Fair Committee, made up of organizations with the Alliance for Children’s Early Success would like to thank the community for supporting this event and its sponsors: the Coconino Coalition for Children and Youth, Findlay Toyota, First Things First and Flagstaff Unified School District.

Tips on how to support imagination, creativity and early learning through play can be found at azftf.gov/brains, bornlearning.org or CoconinoKids.org.