

News Index
Local News
National News
Election 2004
News to Use
News Extras
Opinion
Youth Opinion
Obituaries
Weather
Social Announcements
Tech featuring e
Twin Tiers Life
Photo Galleries

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Local News for Sunday 8/22/04

A day to help kids, parents

Strong Kids Safe Kids dishes up information spiced with fun.

By **MARISA K. PHILLIPS** Star-Gazette

Think a few clouds can put a damper on a day of fun? Think again.

Gloomy weather couldn't rain on the parade of hundreds of families attending the 20th annual Strong Kids Safe Kids event Saturday at Eldridge Park in Elmira.

The event, aiming to promote awareness of children's health and safety, went off without a hitch, to the relief of co-chairwoman Susan Collins, who has been working with Strong Kids Safe Kids for 15 years.

"I was really worried," Collins, 59, said of the rain. "We just crossed our fingers."

The weather held up, and more than 60 community organizations came out to support the effort.

Among them were representatives from St. Joseph's Hospital, Elmira Police Department, Chemung County Department of Social Services and Southern Tier Pediatrics.

Participating organizations offered a variety of children's activities as well as information for parents.

Kids could have their faces painted, be fingerprinted and videotaped and participate in contests. They also could make pasta necklaces at one of many arts and crafts tables and sink putts at a miniature golf course.

Meanwhile, parents could learn about health care and disease prevention and could register to vote.

Mark Hogan, 36, of Catholic Charities, was on hand Saturday to tell parents about state-sponsored health care benefits for children.

"A lot of people haven't heard of Child Health Plus, even with all the advertisement. It offers people savings," he said.



MILES B. NORMAN/Star-Gazette
Dancers from 171 Cedar Arts Center in Corning perform routines from "Cats" at Eldridge Park during Strong Kids Safe Kids.

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Cindy Hale, 53, coordinator of the Labor Religion Coalition, an alliance of unions, religious institutions and youth groups dedicated to fighting economic injustice, signed up parents to vote.

"So far I have about seven people who have registered," she said early in the day.

James Jones, 36, of Elmira Heights, was interested in information on West Nile virus and picked up free school supplies for his children.

The Jones youngsters -- Chelsea, 9, Noah, 7, and Leigha, 5 -- bounced back and forth between activities. Covered with stickers and clutching a balloon, Chelsea, who will enter fourth grade at Cohen Elementary School in the fall, could not decide on a favorite activity.

"I liked all of it," she said with a smile.

Katie DonDero, 6, had her face painted and was videotaped Saturday. "I had fun here," she said. "I wanted to play and meet everybody."

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