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Kids have a ball at annual family event

Strong Kids Safe Kids offers educational activities and fun.

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HORSEHEADS -- Dan Sugg, 16, was at this first Strong Kids Safe Kids event on Saturday, and he says it won't be his last.

Sugg is a member of Boy Scout Troop 84, which is based at First United Methodist Church in Horseheads. He was one of several volunteers at various booths for Strong Kids Safe Kids at the Chemung County Fairgrounds, an annual event that attracted hundreds of area children and parents.

The Scouts' booth featured a rope bridge, a lure-casting game and samples of three types of cobbler cooked over an open campfire on Friday night.

Sugg has been a Boy Scout for five years and is working on his Eagle Scout project -- a bulletin board and birdhouses for Thorne Street Park in Horseheads. On any other Saturday, he would be working on the project. But on this particular Saturday, he was showing area residents what Boy Scouts are all about.

"Even though I'm working the booth, I'm still having fun," he said.

Volunteers like Sugg are critical to the success of the Strong Kids Safe Kids, said Sue Collins, co-chairwoman of the Strong Kids Safe Kids Committee. All told, it took 10 months of planning to pull off the daylong event, along with almost 100 participating organizations and sponsors, and the same number of volunteers. The money needed to finance the event -- between \$10,000 and \$15,000, according to co-chair Misty Purdy -- was secured through donations from area businesses, service clubs and individuals.

"It seems that the busiest time is always the day before, when groups want to sign up at the last minute and those who have signed up have to back out," said Collins, who spent Friday at the fairgrounds preparing for Saturday.

The popularity of the event increases every year, said Purdy, and Strong Kids Safe Kids has outgrown two previous locations, Wisner Park in downtown Elmira and Eldridge Park. This is the second year the event was held at the county fairgrounds, and a free shuttle bus from the fairgrounds to the Elmira bus terminal was available for those who lacked their own transportation.

As the name suggests, Saturday's event was intended to raise awareness of child safety and health issues. And to do that, said Collins, we need to build strong families. To that end, each exhibitor was asked to design educational or fun activities that would involve entire families.

The result? A sun-drenched afternoon filled with wagon rides on the fairground's horse track, exhibits by local law enforcement agencies and fire companies, children's photo IDs that could be submitted to the national Amber Alert program and dance programs by the Donna Brooks Dance Academy.

With the start of school two weeks away, children who attended were given the opportunity to earn school supplies.

"All they have to do is visit 10 booths, get their cards punched and bring the cards back to the Elmira Teachers Association tent for a free bag of school supplies," said Purdy.

One of the more popular activity booths, judging from the constant crowd of youthful participants, was a game called Sheep Leap. It was designed and built by Ben Erway of Hope Community Church in Elmira. The object was simple: use a rubber mallet to hit a springboard to fling stuffed sheep into one of six plastic laundry baskets. Simple, but effective.

"We're pretty loose about playing, and everybody who tries it gets a prize," Erway said. "We ran out of prizes, but this is something we can use at other venues."

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