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Young readers get a clue

"Doctor Shock" gives children a taste of CSI: Lee County.

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WEST POINT -- Dressed in a white lab coat with "Mad Science" etched on his breast, Doctor Shock held a small piece of white paper with the name of a criminal cohort etched in black in one hand. In the other hand, he held a burning match.

Eager to get rid of the incriminating evidence, he touched fire to paper and with a flash it disappeared leaving no smoke, ash or other evidence it had ever existed.

With raised eyebrows and a grin plastered on his face, Jim Birkel, the mad scientist also known as Doctor Shock, looked down at the group of about 40 amazed children sitting at his feet in the West Point Library.

"This paper is called trinitrocellulose," Birkel told the children as they oohed, ahhed and learned a little science.

The demonstration Tuesday morning was called "Detective CSI," and part of the county funded "Get a Clue @ Your Library," program.

As part of a tour of the county's five libraries, Birkel, owner of the Mad Science of Central Iowa educational franchise, performed at West Point, Montrose and Fort Madison libraries Tuesday.

He will perform today from 10 to 10:45 a.m. at the Keokuk Public Library, 210 N. Fifth St.; and from 1 to 1:45 p.m. at the Donnellson Public Library, 500 Park St.

Birkel uses lasers, chemical reactions and goofy antics to teach children about crime science.

"Do you know what forensic science is," Birkel asked the children. "Forensic means suitable for a court of law. Forensics is science that figures out he done it, or she done it ... who done it."

Birkel showed the children a host of experiments including how to make a cast of a footprint with Plaster of Paris. After he pried a plaster print from a Tupperware container filled with sand and dirt, Birkel held the cast up and told the children police could use casts to help track down a criminal by comparing them to people's feet and shoes.

"Like Cinderella," said 7-year-old Wendolyn Hannum.

At the end of his show, Birkel signed and left the plaster print with the library in hopes children would return to get a second look at the shoe print.

Hannum, however, said she doesn't need another reason to come to the library, reading is reason enough for her.

"It's fun to learn about stories and how to do stuff. I love to read," Hannum said. "I don't have a favorite book, I love them all. But my main favorite kind would be fairy tales."

With a crazy gleam in his eye, Birkel also taught the children about acids and bases.

"Who in here has ever thrown-up? If you've thrown-up more than once raise your other hand," Birkel said, and 80 little hands waved in the air.

"In all that liquidy stuff that comes out is an acid, a stomach acid called hydrochloric acid."

Toothpaste, however, is a base and will neutralize the acid, stopping it from dissolving tooth enamel. Which is why everyone should brush their teeth after they vomit, Birkel said.

Based in the Des Moines area, Birkel has been performing as a mad scientist at schools, birthday parties, libraries and summer camps for the past three years.

An educator at heart, Birkel said he bought into the Montreal, Canada, based franchise to help children learn in a fun and interactive way about math and science.

Since beginning to provide franchise rights in 1995, Mad Science has ballooned to include more than 200 franchises world wide according to the company's Web site.

The company provides each franchisee with the equipment and educational tools to put on 40 different educational programs, as well as the territorial rights to a given region, Birkel said.

West Point Library Director Cathy Schwartz organized the Lee County tour after hearing about Birkel's educational presentation on a state library e-mail service.

"I think it's good for children to have a broad range of acts presented to them," Schwartz said.

Other library programs have included puppet presentations, music, finger printing and animal identification.