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Kids of all ages shake things up with winter fun

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Four-year-old Carson Merical grimaced, eyes and mouth opened wide, as a **Mad** Scientist "poured" dry ice vapor over his head from a bucket on the Kidsfest stage.

"It felt like nothing!" the surprised Ankeny boy told his mom, throwing his hands up in the air as he scrambled back into her lap after the **science** demonstration.

The Mericals were one of many families already milling about the Varied Industries Building at the fairgrounds by 10 Saturday morning. Activities for all ages continue today.

The biggest fund-raiser of the year for Children and Families of Iowa began a day early this year, kicking off Friday night with skateboarding demonstrations and a concert by the Nadas. The evening drew more than 700 people, said officials, who plan to repeat a Friday night event next year.

Throughout the weekend, folks young and old have been watching demonstrations and entertainment, doing arts and crafts projects, and tumbling through inflatable obstacle courses and playing games.

For many, the popular event is a way to burn off energy in the middle of winter, when children's activities are scarce. Kidsfest entertained 17,500 people last year and generated \$142,000 in revenue, said Susan Joynt, event coordinator.

On Saturday, Des Moines resident Peggy Mitton and her granddaughter, Melissa Chaffe, 9, stood by an inflatable climbing wall as Melissa's two brothers took turns trying to reach the top.

J.J. Chaffe, 8, jumped up and down eagerly as he waited his turn, the Hawaiian lei around his neck bouncing with him.

"I'm a daredevil," he said, explaining it was worth the wait.

Stepping into the harness, he reached up and began climbing on the foam blocks, stretching his limbs and stocking feet as far as they would reach. Like others in the constant stream of young climbers, he meticulously planned each move, looking down to his cheering squad below for advice. He rappelled back down when he could continue no longer, grabbing his shoes and running toward the next event.

For the family, Kidsfest has become a tradition. Mitton and her granddaughter recalled their favorite memories, like taking a pet crab home one year. It didn't last long, but the thought of it still makes them both chuckle.

In some groups, the adults had as much fun as the youngsters.

Karen Parker sported as many fake tatoos as her granddaughter, Dasia, along with a Hawaiian lei and a plastic ring on her finger. Parker, of Des Moines, held out a bag full of projects they made together. They ranged from paper hats to a homemade picture frame holding a "vacation photo" of the two smiling under a plastic palm tree.

She greeted friends as they passed and helped Dasia, 7, top off a bottle of colored sand.

"You did a wonderful job!" she said as Dasia rushed to show her the finished product. "Love the colors!"

"This is a great event," Parker said, echoing many in the crowd Saturday. "It's so good for the kids. You see people you know, and it's good to bring the children out."

If you are going

WHAT: 13th annual Children and Families of Iowa's 2005 Kidsfest

WHEN: Today from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

WHERE: Varied Industries Building, Iowa State Fairgrounds, East 30th Street and Grand Avenue in Des Moines

COST: \$7 per person. Kids under age 2 get in free. Discount tickets for \$2 off are available at Fareway stores. All profits go to families and children served by the program.

ACTIVITIES: Spiderman will visit from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. today, and Clifford the Big Red Dog will also make appearances. Kids can star as a Channel 13 news anchor, help build a playhouse to be raffled off today, make an ID card at the Safe-T-Kidz booth, play carnival games and slide down the big slide. Most activities are free with price of admission.