

Fitness festival beats winter blahs

Montessori Children's House play date draws 315 children to school

By Carol South

Herald contributing writer

From disco and snow shoeing to healthy snacks and story time, the Children's Fitness Festival Sunday afternoon provided a range of activities guaranteed to trump cabin fever.

Held at the Montessori Children's House, the event drew 145 families and 315 kids to the school on North Long Lake Road. With activities held throughout the facility, volunteers guided visitors through stations that included planting beans in either the greenhouse or the toddler area, completing a fitness circuit and climbing the boulder wall.

"This is great, we're going to hit everything here," said Stephanie Wiersema, attending the event with her husband and two young children. "This is really fun."

Each young participant received a punch card as they entered the school, which they wore like an identity badge around their neck. When they completed all five of the main events, which in addition to the fitness course and climbing wall included dancing, healthy snacks and greenhouse activities, they received a medal. Other activities included tours of the school, storytelling in the school's Silo — a round, cozy gathering area off the library — physical activities for toddlers, face painting and chair massages.

"It's awesome, really great — everyone's smiling," said David Schaffer of Traverse City as his son, Sam Harris, 4, romped through activities in the school's gym, known as The Barn.

"Kids don't know enough about fitness so programs like this need to happen all the time," he added. "Everybody had fun and is learning."



Steve Maas, a physical education teacher at the Montessori Children's House coaches Sam Harris, 4, on the finer points of push ups.

Herald photos by Carol South



Above: "Y-M-C-A!" Visitors of all ages move to high-energy dance tunes on stage in the school's gym.

Left: Nathalie Wiersema, 4, tackles the climbing wall during the Children's Fitness Festival Sunday at the Montessori Children's House.

Right: Camellia Minervini, 8, tries out some exercises under the watchful eye of Rex Holden, owner of Fast Fitness and Accelerated Mobility Physical Therapy.



The healthy snacks were served in both the toddler wing and in the Elementary Great Hall. Visitors of all ages feasted on fresh fruit cut up and assembled on skewers, a school favorite, as well as fresh-baked muffins in the toddler wing or a range of munchies including pretzels, dried fruit and crackers for older attendees.

The first annual event of what organizers now deem an annual tradition — perhaps even the school's signature outreach event — the festival was meant to provide a winter break for families of young and elementary-age children. Future ideas under consideration next year if the weather cooperates include cross country skiing and possibly ice skating if the school puts up a rink for their students.

"The kids are probably bored with the Christmas toys by now and this is an opportunity to get out and have some fun," said Christie Minervini, a parent volunteer at the school who noted that the lack of snow did not dampen enthusiasm for the snow shoe course, where attendees tried out equipment provided by Brick Wheels. "I thought the weather was going to hurt us but I think it helped us."

From the overwhelming response, the Children's Fitness Festival seemed just what the doctor ordered for many area families.

"[Attendance] was more than twice what I had hoped for — my best hope was for half of that, so it was excellent," said Minervini.

In addition to serving the community at large and their own families, the Children's Fitness Festival was also a way for the school to get the word out about their educational programs, philosophy and facility.

"The most notable thing about the day was that close to 75 percent of the families were not school families," noted Minervini. "That really was what we had hoped for: to introduce the school to the community."