

*Wondering how to plan a local celebration of young children and their families? These practical tips—based on years of successful experience—can help you set the stage for your community's Family Fun Day! Start planning now for 2007!*

# Family Fun Day: Make a Difference in Your Community

Laurelle Phillips and Pamela Evanshen

## Family Fun Day

**Saturday, April 4, 10 am to 1 pm**  
**East Tennessee State University**  
**Gymnasium**

Signs all over town announce the community event. What is Family Fun Day? How did it get organized? Why do it? This is the story of early childhood education students, members of East Tennessee State University's Student Association for Young Children (SAYC), who wanted to make a difference in the lives of children. In the process, they grew professionally (Robinson & Stark 2002). Their success story is one of action, advocacy, and professional growth—and it could be repeated in any community.

## Planning the Day

Family Fun Day began in 1991 on East Tennessee State University's campus. The original idea was to celebrate The Week of the Young Child. The day continues to be an annual April event involving professors, students, local child care centers, various community agencies, and of course families and their young children.

The main focus is for college students to organize a fun-filled morning where families can experience developmentally appropriate activities with their children. Students plan the event, schedule activities, arrange set up and clean up, participate with the children and their families, and evaluate the process at the conclusion of the event.

## Who Are the Organizers?

Sponsors for Family Fun Day are SAYC and two child care centers, both of which are accredited by the Nation-

al Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).

- Little Bucs Center provides child care for students' children while they attend classes. Children from ages 3 months to 8 years are cared for in this unique full-day child care center. Because many families attend classes at the university 5 days a week, there is a high attendance rate for all age groups.
- Child Study Center is a full-day child care center that is open to students, faculty, and the public, serving children 3 months to 5 years of age.

The centers are located on campus and function as practicum and field placement sites for education students. Both centers have student workers, graduate assistants, and full time staff, all of whom are interested in young children.

Together, SAYC and the child care centers sponsor the Family Fun Day as an opportunity to share activities appropriate for young children from ages birth through 8 years. Information about parenting techniques and

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Both authors encourage participation in the fundraising, planning, and implementing of the event through the student organization and through courses that they teach as a step toward becoming a professional in early childhood.

resources, child services, literacy development, and other topics of interest within the community is also provided.

## How Is the University Involved?

The event takes place on the college campus in a gymnasium. Specific spaces in this large open area are identified for conducting the many children's activities.

Staff from the campus child care centers and professors from the university volunteer their time to support this annual event. For example, one professor has painted children's faces with balloons, flowers, and other popular designs for several years. Staff from both of the campus child care centers, Child Study Cen-

**Students plan, implement, and evaluate the event.**

ter and Little Bucs, host an infant and toddler area full of sensory experiences for both young children and their families. Exploration of torn paper and various sensory stimuli excite all who dare to explore!

## How Do Students Participate?

Participating in Family Fun Day is one path on the journey that students take toward the goal of becoming a professional (Hyson 2003). When early childhood education students and SAYC members participate in this event, they solidify their identity with the early childhood profession. By taking part in planning, implementing, and evaluating this event, students gain real-

life experiences that they can apply throughout their careers.

Students create posters and display panels to line the entrance to the gymnasium. These attractive presentations provide information to families on a variety of popular topics such as literacy, nutrition, developmental milestones, and activities in the local community for families of young children. Approx-

imately 30 undergraduate and graduate students choose a learning center to plan for, set-up, and facilitate during the event. They not only guide children in the center, they interact with the adults accompanying the children. They typically talk about the importance of play, sharing time with family, and the many learning opportunities that result from these experiences. SAYC was

### Family Fun Day Activity Ideas

#### *Drawing*

Markers  
Crayons/colored pencils  
Charcoal  
Chalk

#### *Painting*

Fingerpainting  
Easel & brush painting  
Squirt painting with colored water  
Textures (sand, salt)  
Printmaking (sponge)

#### *Science*

Weights & balances  
Earth (soil, minerals, rocks)  
Animals (observe & pet)  
Insects  
Water (sink & float, bubbles)  
Goop in a bag/homemade dough  
Magnets

#### *Music/Movement*

Dance  
Movement  
Make/play musical shakers  
Fingerplays  
Singing

#### *Food*

Low-heat cooking  
No-heat food preparation  
Healthy snacks

#### *Quiet Activities*

Puzzles  
Modeling with clay/dough  
Storytelling/writing

#### *Special Activities*

Stage performances  
Face painting  
Storytelling

#### *Socio-Dramatic*

Building blocks (large, table, cardboard)  
Dolls, dress-up, mirrors  
Sensory tables (sand, water, mud)  
Puppets & puppet shows  
Toys, cars, trucks  
Dress-up photo opportunity

#### *Creating*

Sewing/weaving  
Cutting & pasting  
Paper hats  
Paper boats  
Paper airplanes  
Masks  
Musical instruments  
Puppets (paper sacks, stick, face)  
Self-stick paper  
Toys  
Clay/stick sculptures

#### *Large Muscles*

Hoops  
Wagons  
Riding toys/courses  
Bowling  
Hopscotch  
Tumbling on mats  
Balance beams  
Running races (sack, track, obstacle)  
Throwing (Frisbees®, rubber horsehoes, balls, bean bags)  
Parachutes  
Punching balls

presented a campus award for the Best Educational Program in 2005.

## How Is the Event Organized?

In the fall semester, SAYC students hold a silent auction to raise funds for Family Fun Day. Many local businesses donate items or services that are silently auctioned off

during a 3-day period each November. SAYC students venture out into the community to collect items and/or gift certificates. The students set up the auction in the entrance of the College of Education. Faculty, staff, students and other visitors in the building bid on items displayed. The highest bidder at the end of the 3-day auction wins and pays the bid to SAYC in order to collect the item.

Approximately \$1000 is raised at the fundraising event.

In winter and early spring, as students study early childhood development, literacy, creativity, learning centers, and other aspects of programs for young children, they are encouraged to implement some of their new knowledge by participating in Family Fun Day. During SAYC meetings, students generate a list of possible activity centers or other experiences for the upcoming event (see box).

Invitations for participation in this community event are sent to all local child care centers and agencies providing services for young children and their families. Invitations usually go out by early March. Groups are invited to set up a center, activity, or information station to publicize their place of business or service. For example, Tennessee Early Intervention System, a statewide intervention system for infants through 3-year-old children with special needs, sets up an information booth providing parents and educators with valuable resources and ideas.

At the same time, student volunteers sign up to lead specific activities. SAYC then purchases the materials needed for the student-run centers and activities.

Radio spots, signs at local businesses, and newspaper announcements publicize the event. In addition, flyers are included in the invitations sent to local centers and agencies. These organizations are urged to copy and distribute announcements to families throughout the community. Everyone is invited!



Photos courtesy of the authors

*SAYC students hold a silent auction to raise funds for Family Fun Day. SAYC students venture out into the community to collect items and/or gift certificates from local merchants to be auctioned off. The students set up the auction in the entrance of the College of Education.*

## Coordinating Family Fun Day

On the morning of the event, SAYC members and other early childhood teacher candidates, professors, Child Study Center and Little Bucs staff, and community participants gather bright and early to set up.

- Items such as child-sized tables and chairs, small plastic swimming pools, easels, balls, and parachutes may be among the items transported from the campus child care centers to the gym for children's activity areas.
- SAYC executive board members bring the materials and supplies, bought with money donated from the silent auction, to the gym to distribute to designated areas. Early childhood students and other SAYC members quickly and creatively set up their stations.

Within 2 hours, all is set and children and families arrive. Families with infants and toddlers especially enjoy the sensory activities provided by the staff of the Child

**Everyone is invited!**

Study and Little Bucs campus centers. What could be more fun than goop, torn paper in swimming pools, sensory bottles, and calming music?

Preschool and primary-age children rush to the face painting station for their favorite design to be placed where everyone can see! While waiting for this most popular event, there are paper hats to make, seeds to plant, T-shirts to decorate, books to create, art materials to

experience, clothes to dress up in, blocks to build structures, and gross motor equipment to explore.

The smiles on the faces of young children, early childhood students, and adults alike tell it all! For 3 hours, everyone enjoys a wonderful event celebrating the lives of young children. It truly is a time of exploration, communication, and joy!

## Growing as Advocates and Professionals

With its emphasis on advocacy for young children, the East Tennessee State faculty encourages early childhood students to participate in Family Fun Day through sharing information with families and helping involve those families in their children's learning. This adds another level of participation for emerging professionals (Kagan & Bowman 1997).

Students in classes on literacy and parent involvement create posters and brochures for families. Some tips they typically include:

- different ways to interact positively with your child
- reasons to read with your child
- ways to handle biting and other difficult behaviors
- how to become involved in your child's care and education

The final aspect of this event is for college students to comment and reflect on its successes and areas for improvement in the future. Reflection within a group and self-reflection both lead to higher learning (Tertell, Klein, & Jewett, 1998). SAYC members reflect on and evaluate the experience each year and begin planning for the following year based on their assessments.

Early childhood education students typically express excitement

about participating in the Family Fun Day. One commented, "It is great to be able to share with families the information that I have learned in classes, especially about

**Smiles on the faces  
tell it all!**

what is appropriate for young children. Not every parent knows these things."

Another student said, "This was a great experience. I talked with parents in ways I had not had the opportunity to before. For example, one parent asked me about why the poster suggested you read to babies. I was able to answer and we had a conversation about it!"

It is hard physical work to set up and tear down the event, but SAYC students, especially the executive board members, state, "It is worth the work to see so many families together experiencing good times with one another, engaged in developmentally appropriate activities."



*Children rush to the face painting station for their favorite design! While waiting for this most popular event, there are paper hats to make, seeds to plant, T-shirts to decorate, books to create, art materials to experience, clothes to dress up in, blocks to build structures, and gross motor equipment to explore.*



The entire process is a learning experience for early childhood students and SAYC members. It is a

**The entire process is a valuable lesson in responsibility, collaboration, and advocacy.**

valuable lesson in responsibility, collaboration, and advocacy. What better way to grow professionally than by getting involved in the lives of young children, right here and now!

Since the first Family Fun Day, the response from the community has been gratifying. Collaboration continues, with professors, students, campus and local child care programs, community agencies, and, of course, families and their young children all involved along with the SAYC organizers. All participants discover new ways to interact and

connect with each other to make a difference in the lives of children.

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## President's Message

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enthusiasm for school is also gone. And that is very sad.

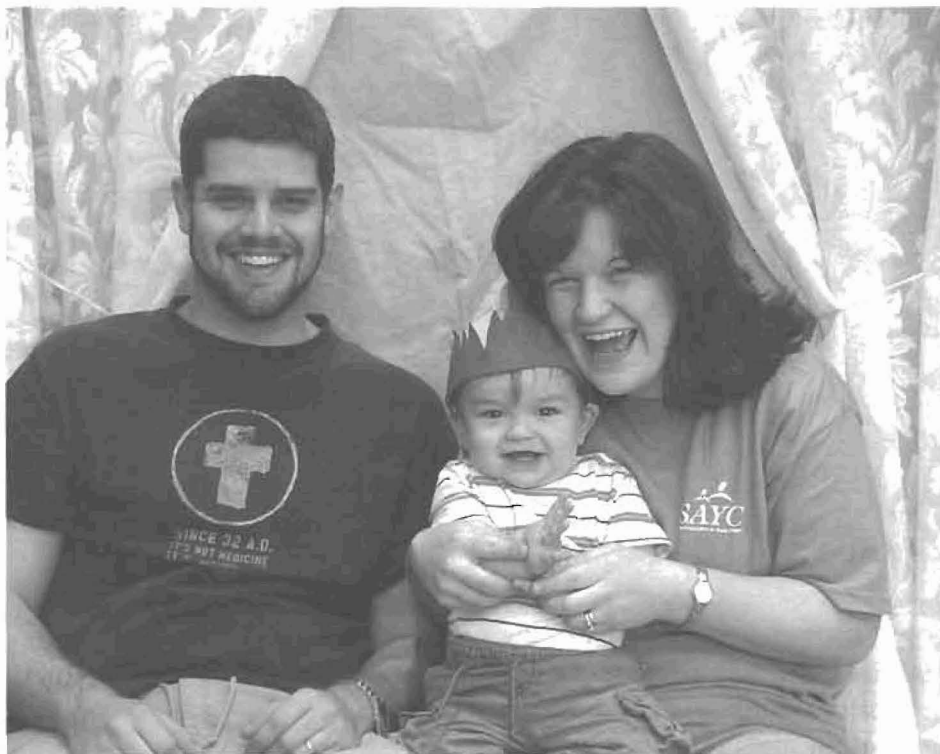
There are too many stories like Zachary's—a child who is filled with all the wonder of learning only to have that wonder swallowed up by adults afraid of academic failure.

I fear that in our efforts to legitimize Early Childhood Education that we are losing focus on what we know is best for young children. I often hear advocates say that in order for us to gain respect for what we do, we must "learn to use the language of the system and talk their talk." But as I watch what has happened when programs for young children and their families are drawn into the institution of education, I also see our progress being eroded. Preschool children are being expelled for not having social skills that they are developmentally supposed to still be learning. Academic progress is being measured to an extent never before realized. Families are being closed out of the decision making. Educators and policy makers talk a good talk about improving quality, but I wonder how that quality is defined.

SECA was originally called the Southern Association on Children Under Six. Clearly, our founding members saw something unique about the first 5 years that needed to stand out and be celebrated and protected. We must continue to advocate for birth through age 5 programs that are unique to the development of our youngest children—programs that are rooted in research and what we know to be true of young children and their families.

Each of you can continue to be a powerful voice for what we know is good for children in the South. Some of you can advocate to legislators. Many of you make your statement in the way you conduct the work that you do every day with and for young children.

We don't want to look back in a few years to find that we have won the "battle of legitimacy" only to have lost the "war" to protect childhood.



*Family photos with dress-up props are always a bit!*

# Put These Ideas Into Practice!

## Family Fun Day: Make a Difference in Your Community

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### Planning Your Own Family Fun Day

#### Potential organizers

- early childhood students
- child care providers
- college/university faculty
- Head Start
- early childhood professional organizations



#### Funding sources

- auction donations
- pancake breakfast
- student time and talents
- board members
- university facility
- faculty volunteers
- area businesses

#### Possible sites for a Family Fun Day

- gymnasium
- volunteer fire house
- library
- elementary school
- YMCA/YWCA
- recreation center

#### Publicity ideas

- signs placed around town
- radio spots
- newspaper articles
- parent flyers
- TV community listing
- store signs



#### Community groups to invite

- early intervention organizations
- community child care centers
- Health Department
- Fire Department
- Police Department
- pediatric dentist
- local children's museum and attractions
- Department of Children's Services
- library
- community colleges
- university nursing students
- other university student groups
- boys and girls clubs
- Head Start

#### Suggested planning timeline for an April event

- early fall semester—assign student committee chair
- mid-fall semester—fundraising event
- February—meeting to explain event to students and solicit their participation
- February—secure site
- early March—mass mailing to local child care centers/organizations
- late March—final assignments for centers; gather and purchase materials for centers
- evening before April event—sort materials; create a map of the center locations for inside and outside area; tag child-size furniture from campus child care centers to be used in the centers
- morning of the event—put out balloons to mark location; 2 hours before, set up all centers and direct organizations to their spaces
- during event—document with photographs; survey parents and participants; enjoy the event
- after the event—clean-up (approximately 2 hours); enjoy pizza with students, faculty, child care centers and organizations that participated
- 1 week after the event—distribute certificates of participation to students

#### Tips for a smooth event day

- review NAEYC Week of the Young Child materials kit, see [www.naeyc.org/about/woyc](http://www.naeyc.org/about/woyc)
- fundraise 6 months before the event
- plan centers and materials needed early to allow adequate time to purchase
- recruit an abundance of student volunteers (approximately 30 students for every 100 families expected)

Note: Dimensions of Early Childhood readers are encouraged to copy this material for early childhood students as well as teachers of young children as a professional development tool.