



THE KIDS ARE ALRIGHT

Childcare options at the Fair BY RACHAEL CARNES

"Childcare has been a part of the Oregon Country Fair for 37 years," co-coordinator Johnny Whiddon says. "Parents need a break, kids need a break. We try to provide a Fair experience, tailored to the little guys." Children who are potty-trained, up to age 12 or 13, can come to one of two childcare locations for two hours at a time, to enjoy live music, face painting, entertainment, acrobatics, arts and crafts, quiet activities like board games and chess and good ol' story time.

"We have a lot of sensory activities this year, like an oobleck table and moon sand," Whiddon says. "We spend a lot of time working on what the kids might want. We have an amazing amount of creative energy on our staff." Oobleck is a non-Newtonian mixture of cornstarch and water that is alternately hard and oozing, while moon sand doesn't dry out and stays in the shapes kids put it in.

There are two childcare sites — one on Sesame Street at the northern end of the Fair and the other on Kid's Loop not far from the Fair's main gate. The service costs \$2 per hour for visitors and is free for folks who are working or volunteering at the Fair.

Staff and volunteers are carefully vetted, Whiddon says, each attendant undergoing a comprehensive background check and training. Most have prior experience in education.

The childcare program also helps to reunite lost children with their parents. Lost kids are brought to the nearest childcare area and, immediately, OCF's comprehensive security and information network is alerted to the child's whereabouts.

"The communication is amazing," Whiddon says. An adult is assigned to look after the lost child while they wait together for mom and/or dad (or other legal guardians). "It runs really smoothly," Whiddon says.

Every season, kids can count on new activities in childcare, and new things to explore.

"We have kids who we've seen year after year," Whiddon says. "They get to the Fair and just say, 'Get me to childcare!'" ■

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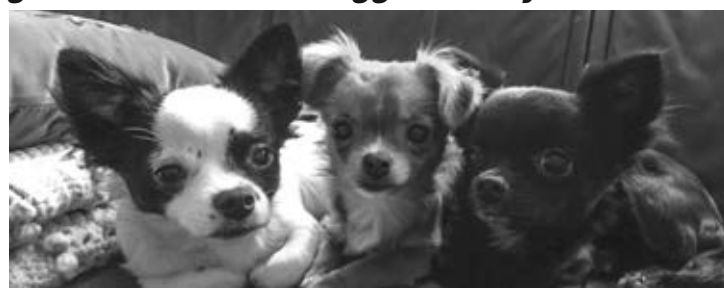
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