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# parent

Spring 2026

A parent's guide  
to gaming **p4**

1000 Books Before  
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Dealing with sibling  
rivalry **p10**

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education **p31**



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# CAPITAL CITY parent

Spring 2026

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# A parent's guide to gaming

## What to do when you're conflicted about letting your kids play video games

PARENT | Pamela Savage

Growing up, my brother had a Game Boy that he let me use on long car rides. It simply wasn't my thing. I remember not having any patience for leveling up in *Zelda*, often choosing to stare out of a window rather than take a turn on the device. As an adult, I am thus a gaming novice, a newbie, a know-nothing.

Nowadays, video gaming seems to be in the very air around me and I still don't know much. The *SuperMario*

*Brothers Movie*, *The Minecraft Movie*, and the *Sonic the Hedgehog* series are just a few of the major movies that have been released in the last few years. And that cultural influence won't slow down. In fact, a 2024 article in *The Economist* declares video games to be the next big thing in film and television.

The kicker is that even though I do not have a specific interest in video games, my kids do. It turns out that in 2026, your children don't have to be

watching movies or playing games at home to know a lot about video games and to find them interesting. Children play out imaginary scenarios with gaming characters on playgrounds and during recess every day. Merchandise and branding from the video gaming world is on clothing, in books, made into toys, and even printed on Band-Aids. Like it or not, gaming is a part of children's worlds, and so I found myself interested in learning about how to

thoughtfully incorporate gaming into our home.

Unfortunately, there is a lot of negative and scary messaging about gaming out there. Questions have been raised about the relationships between gaming and violence, gaming and educational attainment, gaming and health, gaming and tantrums – you name it, you can worry about it. But there is also a lot of messaging about gaming’s positive attributes. Video games may improve attention, enhance hand-eye coordination or foster teamwork and social skills while gaming with friends. Some games are set up to be more educational than others. Like so many important topics, there is nuance.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recognized this nuance when it updated its screentime guidelines in 2025. Previously the AAP had set limits on how many hours to allow kids on screens, but now that children and teenagers are on screens for “school, work, connecting with friends and family members, playing games, browsing social media, watching entertaining videos, learning new hobbies, reading the news and more, rather than setting a guideline for specific time limits on digital media use, **we recommend considering the quality of interactions with digital media and not just the quantity, or amount of time.**” (The AAP still recommends keeping screentime at zero or very limited for kids younger than 2).

OK, so parents should consider the quality of their children’s interactions with screens. This makes a ton of sense to me. But with such a huge library of gaming content out there, how do I consider the options available to my family without becoming overwhelmed?

To start, every game on common gaming platforms has Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) ratings that help parents determine whether a game is appropriate for their children’s age ranges. Common Sense Media also has parent guides to popular platforms like Roblox, Minecraft and Discord, as well as parent and child reviews

of popular games for various gaming systems. Once you’ve determined which games may be fun and engaging for your kids, the Child Mind Institute has tips on setting healthy limits around video games.

One resource that I find to be helpful and informative is Ash Brandin, known as @thegamereducator on Instagram. Brandin has a master’s degree in music education and has recently published a book called *Power On: Managing Screen Time to Benefit the Whole Family*. Given all of the worry and noise about screen use that is out there for parents, part of Brandin’s messaging that I found calming is the idea of being “morally neutral” around screen time. That means treating complaints about screen boundaries with the same neutrality we would treat complaints about bedtime or going to school. Brandin also helped me to understand that gaming is ultimately a leisure tool – just like reading or playing or watching television, gaming in small spurts can be a relaxing way for kids to unwind. When we reframe gaming as a leisure tool instead of something to be feared, we get to help teach kids the importance of managing time as it relates to required activities versus our relaxing ones.

Like anything, there is such a thing as too much gaming, and most parents will easily recognize the signs. We don’t want our kids to prioritize games over social interaction, we don’t want kids playing games late into the night instead of sleeping, and we definitely don’t want kids asking us for more game time every hour on the hour until we cave.

That said, families should talk about what sorts of activities they might want to prioritize above or before video gaming. Do you want your family to engage in outside time before games? What about chores, social time or sports? When it comes to video gaming, you and your family get to decide. It requires some thought and careful planning, but there is definitely some family fun to be had by all. □

*Pamela Savage is a freelance writer and video game “noob” living in Springfield.*



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# 1000 Books Before Kindergarten

## Local libraries incentivize kids and teens who read

PARENT | Karen Ackerman Witter



Kids who track their reading can earn tokens to choose a book from the Inchy Bookworm Vending Machine at Lincoln Library. PHOTO COURTESY LINCOLN LIBRARY

The many benefits of reading to young children are well-documented. The 1000 Books Foundation promotes reading to newborns, infants and toddlers and encourages parent and child bonding through reading. Its 1000 Books Before Kindergarten challenge is a simple way to do this. Many local libraries promote this initiative and create incentives to participate as part of their youth services programs.

The Rochester Public Library is one example. Parents can register in person at the library or sign up online at <https://www.rochesterlibrary.org/1000-books-before-kindergarten/>. When signing up, the child receives a small plushie reading buddy. Every book counts, including reading the same book over and over. Parents can record the books using an app or simply keep a paper list. For each 100 books read, the library presents the child with a tag with various designs to add to a chain. The library tracks the child's progress by moving a pawprint with the child's name on a display in the children's area of the library. With parental permission, the library will take the child's photo with a congratulatory sign and post it on the library's Facebook page. After reading 1000 books, the child receives the "I read 1000 books tag," a certificate and another reading buddy plushie. The library orders a book in the child's name with a nameplate on the inside cover, and the child is the first one to check out the book.

Kate McKenzie is enthusiastic about her family's experience with the program at the Rochester Public Library. Both McKenzie and her husband are former print journalists and want their son, Ben, to develop a love of reading. They already read to their son regularly, but this program had additional benefits. "A little incentive goes a long way," McKenzie said. Ben was motivated to read more books to achieve the next milestone. He enjoyed going to the physical library, interacting with the librarian



Ben McKenzie receives his 1000 Books Before Kindergarten recognition at Rochester Public Library. PHOTO COURTESY KATE MCKENZIE

and receiving the rewards. “He really enjoyed that sense of accomplishment,” McKenzie said. “It is a good way to instill a love of reading.”

McKenzie grew up going to her community’s library, and she loves introducing her son to a positive library experience. She believes libraries are still important places, with so many valuable resources beyond books. Ben turned 5 in late January and met his 1000 Books Before Kindergarten challenge. The experience made them all proud of their collective accomplishment.

Springfield’s Lincoln Library also participates in the 1000 Books Before Kindergarten challenge, as well as 50 books before middle school, 100 books before graduation and other reading incentive initiatives. Coloring pages are provided to turn in for every 100 books read. Each coloring page submitted earns one token. Each token can be used to select one book from the library’s “Inchy Bookworm Vending Machine” to take home and keep. The vending machine is

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Children from birth to age 17 can earn tokens in a variety of ways. These include completing challenges created by the library's youth services program, celebrating a birthday, obtaining their first library card and for every 100 books read as part of the 1000 Books Before Kindergarten challenge. The token system provides a tangible reading incentive. Denise Fisher, operations coordinator for Lincoln Library, said it was a labor of love to pursue getting this book vending machine for the library. She says it encourages the love of books and also is a way for kids to start their own library at home.

Molly Dunlap, Lincoln Library youth services manager, encourages parents to read to kids. She says that children who are read to at a young age learn a lifelong love of reading. For more information, visit the Youth Services area at the Lincoln Library, 326 S. Seventh St., or call 217-753-4900.

To participate in the 1000 book challenge at the Chatham Public Library, go to <https://www.chathamlib.org/1000-books>. Register on the library's Beanstack app to log books read. For every 100 books, parents can print an activity sheet with an early learning activity and bring that to the library for the child to receive a sticker. Upon completing the 1000 book challenge, the child can select a book to keep. Additional resources and tips for reading to young children are provided on the library's website.

For more information about 1000 Books Before Kindergarten, along with reading lists and other educational resources for parents about phonics, go to <https://1000booksbeforekindergarten.org/>. □

*Karen Ackerman Witter enjoyed reading to her kids when they were little and now enjoys reading some of the same books to her grandchildren. She learned about 1000 Books Before Kindergarten from Kate McKenzie, the development director for NPR Illinois, who she met while serving on the NPR Illinois Community Advisory Board.*

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# Dealing with sibling rivalry

PARENT | Pamela Savage

Imagine coming home from a long day of work or errands and meeting your partner at the door. Your partner gestures for you to take off your coat and sit down at the table. Would you like a snack or a glass of water? There is some big news to share with you! Would you like to know what it is? Another partner is being added to the relationship! Yes, that's right, you are to now share your partner with another human, and isn't this just fantastic news?

You are probably thinking: Huh? Maybe you've thrown in some expletives. Most likely, you are not thrilled. While this is by no means an exact comparison to how your child may feel upon learning they are getting a new sibling, it certainly underlines the need to imagine things

from your kids' perspectives when it comes to the topic of sibling rivalry.

Sibling rivalry has existed since recorded humanity – think the biblical story of Cain and Abel. Siblings often fight for their caregiver's attention, to secure their position in the family or as a reaction to perceived unfairness. Or sometimes siblings fight because they are hungry – who knows? But any parent of more than one child, or any human who has ever had a sibling of their own, knows that siblings are sometimes our best friends and sometimes the only enemies that you cannot live without.

Though complicated sibling dynamics can unfortunately last well into adulthood, sibling rivalry is most pronounced in families where children

are close in age and going through similar developmental phases at the same time. It can also be exacerbated when children are the same gender. This has to do in part with the psychological process of differentiation wherein a child is seeking to figure out what makes them so special. Are they the fastest? Funniest? Best at tying their shoes? Whatever the perceived contest is, winning it means a child has achieved some sort of attention in the family group, and this is sometimes the key to developing their own personality and interests.

But what are bedraggled parents supposed to do with two or more children that pester one another, or even worse, scrap at one another day in and

day out? As it turns out, we should expect some instances of sibling struggles for as long as our kids are living in our homes (and probably even beyond that time). Knowing that some strife is inevitable takes some of the pressure off of worried parents, for sure. And luckily, there are some things that parents can do to lessen the effects of sibling rivalry on the family group as a whole.

### Don't compare

Since siblings most likely engage in comparison naturally, it's important that caregivers don't underline these comparisons by making it seem like one child is better than the other.

### Try not to referee or take sides

Your kids will come to you with long, loud tales of who did what to whom and when and how. Try to get the highlight reel, but don't get down into the nitty gritty details. While things are escalated, help your kids to de-escalate rather than assign blame, and then guide your

children toward repair and "I'm sorry" naturally.

### Have ground rules

It's fine and natural to disagree or even fight, but it's not OK to be mean, or to hit, kick or wrestle your brother to the ground while sitting on his head. Stick to some ground rules, and make sure everyone knows that there are consequences for breaking them.

### Praise the good stuff

Kids are often redirected or told to do something differently. These negative interactions add up, so catch your kids being good to their siblings and shine a light on those positive interactions.

### Encourage collaborative goals

Competitive board games don't always work with kids at different ages and stages, especially if you've got a competitive kiddo in the mix. Collaborative board games exist for that reason (and others). Encourage your

kids to work toward goals together by taking a collaborative approach to life – clean your rooms together, help one another with an assignment, bake brownies as a team.

### Keep your cool

All of these tips are extremely difficult to remember in the moments where sibling conflict is happening, but this one most of all. It's hard not to add your own emotion to sibling rivalry when it is so loud, sudden or happens around the clock. Unfortunately, adding our fear or anger or annoyance or sadness to the pile of feelings usually just escalates things. If it is safe to do so, take a moment. Remind yourself that sibling rivalry is normal and that you are doing your very best to help your kids grow from these tough spots. □

*Pamela Savage is a freelance writer living in Springfield. She remembers fighting with her sibling as a child, and they get along just fine now.*

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270102-03	13-25	M-F	7:30a-5:30p	6/21-6/25	\$90/\$180
270102-04	13-25	M-F	7:30a-5:30p	6/28-7/02	\$90/\$180
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170270-01	Tu-F	1/06-1/09	\$56/\$66	170270-08	M-F	2/23-2/27	\$70/\$80	170270-15	M-Th	4/20-4/23	\$56/\$66
170270-02	M-F	1/12-1/16	\$70/\$80	170270-09	M-F	3/02-3/06	\$70/\$80	170270-16	M-F	4/27-5/01	\$70/\$80
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# FUNSHOP at Lincoln Park

The **Funshop program** represents a culmination of over 50 years of working with children and families. **Funshop is an exciting, early education program for guardians and children “together.”** It has been uniquely designed to provide the optimal one-on-one learning experience. The program offers a unique, play-based environment where guardians and children can be interactively engaged in the wonderful world of learning. The foundation of the innovative Funshop experience is a firm belief that guardians are not only a child’s first teachers but also his or her most trusted and influential educators.

There are a ton of tantalizing toys and interest areas that will capture your child’s imagination, strengthen their communication skills, exercise their decision-making skills and enhance their sensory motor skills.

**One adult, parent, relative, or caregiver must accompany a child to every class.**

**For a listing of classes, days, age ranges, and questions please call 217-753-6234 or email [Rzaidi@springfieldparks.org](mailto:Rzaidi@springfieldparks.org)**

For ages 16 months to five years  
**LOCATION: Lincoln Park Funshop building, 1601 North 5th St**



## Funshop

### Where Kids Create Fun!

This program offers a unique, play-based, environment where parents and children can be interactively engaged in the wonderful world of learning. The foundation of the innovative Funshop experience is a firm belief that guardians are not only a child's first teacher, but also their most trusted and influential role model.

There are a ton of tantalizing toys and interest areas that will capture your children's imagination, strengthen their communication skills, exercise their decision-making skills, and enhance their sensory motor skills. One adult, parent, relative, or caregiver must accompany each child to every class.

**Join us! You will be glad you did!**

**Location:** Funshop  
**MIN/MAX:** 8/20

### MORNING CLASSES

Activity #	Age	Day	Time	Date	R/NR Fee
150910-03	1.33-5	Tu	9:30-10:30a	2/03- 2/24	\$56/\$66
150910-04	1.33-5	Th	9:30-10:30a	2/05- 2/26	\$56/\$66
150910-05	1.33-5	Tu	9:30-10:30a	3/03- 3/31*	\$56/\$66
150910-06	1.33-5	Th	9:30-10:30a	3/05- 3/26*	\$42/\$47
150910-07	1.33-5	Tu	9:30-10:30a	4/07- 4/28	\$56/\$66
150910-08	1.33-5	Th	9:30-10:30a	4/09- 4/30	\$56/\$66

\* NO CLASS 3/17, 3/19

### AFTERNOON CLASSES

Activity #	Age	Day	Time	Date	R/NR Fee
150911-02	1.33-5	Th	12:15-1:15p	2/05- 2/26	\$56/\$66
150911-03	1.33-5	Th	12:15-1:15p	3/05- 3/26*	\$42/\$47
150911-04	1.33-5	Th	12:15-1:15p	4/09- 4/30	\$56/\$66

\* NO CLASS 3/19

### EVENING CLASS

Activity #	Age	Day	Time	Date	R/NR Fee
150913-02	1.33-5	W	5:30-6:30p	2/04- 2/25	\$56/\$66
150913-03	1.33-5	W	5:30-6:30p	3/04- 3/25*	\$42/\$47
150913-04	1.33-5	W	5:30-6:30p	4/08- 4/29	\$56/\$66

\* NO CLASS 3/18

## Weekend Play & Stay - Funshop

**Start your Saturday with smiles, giggles, and hands-on fun!**

At Weekend Play & Stay, little ones and their caregivers can dive into 2 hours of playful discovery. From building block towers to creative play and interactive storytime, every week brings new ways to spark imagination and connect with other families.

Come anytime, leave anytime – it's flexible, fun, and the perfect Saturday morning adventure!

**Location:** Funshop  
**MIN/MAX:** 1/20

Activity #	Age	Day	Time	Date	R/NR Fee
150920-02	1.33-5	Sa	9:30-11:30a	2/07- 2/28	\$10/\$20
150920-03	1.33-5	Sa	9:30-11:30a	3/07- 3/21	\$10/\$20
150920-04	1.33-5	Sa	9:30-11:30a	4/04- 4/25	\$10/\$20

## Little Creators

**Spark your child's creativity in this 4-week art adventure for ages 3 to 5!** Each week brings a new hands-on theme; from painting and sculpting to collage and wearable art. Kids and caregivers create, play, and explore together!

**Location:** Funshop  
**MIN/MAX:** 10/20

Activity #	Age	Day	Time	Date	R/NR Fee
150971-01	3-5	Th	5:30-6:30p	2/05- 2/26	\$60/\$70

## Little Scientists

**Get ready to spark curiosity and explore the wonders of science!**

Preschoolers become tiny explorers as they dig, mix, pour, and observe through hands-on experiments and play-based discovery. Each week features fun, safe activities like colorful chemical reactions, magnet magic, nature walks, and simple science tools designed just for little hands.

**Location:** Funshop  
**MIN/MAX:** 10/20

Activity #	Age	Day	Time	Date	R/NR Fee
150972-01	3-5	Tu	1:00-2:00p	2/03- 2/24	\$60/\$70



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# Scholarships

AT THE SPRINGFIELD PARK DISTRICT!

BECAUSE EVERY KID SHOULD PLAY!

**We believe** that every child deserves the chance to explore, learn, and play, regardless of financial circumstances. That's why we're excited to offer **financial scholarships to our residents**, ensuring that no one misses out on the joy of recreation and learning.

**Scholarships are available for Springfield Park District residents**, making it easier for families to access our diverse range of programs and facilities.

\*Please note that while our scholarships cover a wide range of programs and activities, daily admission, private lessons, and season passes are **not included** in the scholarship program.



For more information about our scholarship program, please go to our website at [bit.ly/SPD\\_Program-Scholarship](https://bit.ly/SPD_Program-Scholarship)

Or scan the QR code!

Have questions? Contact registration at [recreation@springfieldparks.org](mailto:recreation@springfieldparks.org)



# DISCOVER THE SPRINGFIELD PARK DISTRICT!



With **36 parks** and **17 unique facilities**, there's something for everyone!

## PARKS

- Bergen Park
- Bunn Park
- Carpenter Park
- Centennial Park
- Comer Cox Park
- Duncan Park
- Dreamland Park
- Eisenhower Park
- Enos Park
- Fairview Park
- Gehrmann Park
- Gietl Park
- Gurgens Park
- Hobbs Park
- Iles Park
- Indian Hills Park
- Jaycee Park
- Kennedy Park
- Jefferson Park
- Kiwanis Park
- Lake Victoria Park
- Lanphier Park
- Lawless Park
- Lincoln Park
- Lindbergh Park
- Cadigan Park
- Barker Park
- Riverside Park
- Rotary Park
- Schlitt Park
- Southwind Park
- Stuart Park
- Timberbrooke Park
- Vredenburgh Park
- Washington Park
- Westchester Park

## FACILITIES

- Henson Robinson Zoo
- Washington Park Botanical Garden
- Thomas Rees Memorial Carillon
- Washington Park Pavilion
- Eisenhower Aquatic Center
- Riverside Campground
- Lincoln Greens Golf Course
- Bunn Golf Course
- Bergen Golf Course
- Pasfield Golf Course
- Velasco Tennis Center
- Robin Roberts Stadium
- Nelson Center Ice Rink
- Lincoln Park Pavilion
- Nelson Center Pool
- Erin's Pavilion
- Funshop



Find your next adventure at [springfieldparks.org](http://springfieldparks.org)  
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**May 21-24**

Livestream Available

Concerts start at **6 p.m.**  
**Fireworks: May 22 at dusk**

Located at  
*Washington Park*  
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Springfield, Illinois



# EXPERIENCE THE BEST OF SPRINGFIELD PARKS AND RECREATION

From first playdates to family traditions, the Springfield Park District is here for every stage of life and every kind of family. Our parks, facilities, and programs are designed to help everyone explore, learn, and grow, while giving welcoming spaces to connect, relax, and make memories together. Discover how each area of the Springfield Park District offers something special for everyone.



## WASHINGTON PARK PRESCHOOL

A joyful first step into learning, Washington Park Preschool blends education and play in a nurturing environment designed for curious little minds. Through hands-on activities focused on STEM, art, movement, and social skills, children ages 3–5 build confidence, creativity, and friendships—while parents enjoy peace of mind knowing their child is learning through play.

## SPECIAL RECREATION

The Springfield Park District's Special Recreation programs ensure that everyone belongs. Offering inclusive and adaptive activities for individuals of all abilities, these programs support physical activity, creativity, and social connection in a welcoming environment where children and families can thrive together.



## THOMAS REES MEMORIAL CARILLON

Music, history, and wonder come together at the Thomas Rees Memorial Carillon. Families can enjoy free live concerts in the park. Kids love the bells and breathtaking views, while adults appreciate the unique cultural experience nestled in Washington Park.

## VELASCO TENNIS CENTER

Velasco Tennis Center is where kids can learn new skills and adults can stay active. With lessons and programs for all ages and abilities, families can grow a love for tennis together—whether it's a child's first swing or an adult getting back into the game.



## WASHINGTON PARK BOTANICAL GARDEN

A peaceful escape that doubles as a living classroom, the Washington Park Botanical Garden invites families to explore nature up close. Children can discover colorful flowers, towering plants, and tropical environments, while adults can enjoy a calm, beautiful setting perfect for strolling and learning.



## AQUATICS AT EISENHOWER & NELSON CENTER POOLS

Summer fun starts at the pool! From open swims and lessons to competitive teams, our aquatics facilities offer something for everyone during the summer months.



## ERIN'S PAVILION

Located at Southwind Park, Erin's Pavilion is more than an event space—it's a gathering place for families. From birthday parties to celebrations and community events, this eco-friendly facility offers scenic views and modern amenities in a setting that's both welcoming and memorable.



## FUNSHOP

Designed especially for young children and their caregivers, Funshop is where learning meets laughter. Through interactive play focused on creativity, motor skills, and social development, children explore the world around them while parents actively engage and grow alongside them.



## GOLF AT LINCOLN GREENS, BERGEN, PASFIELD, AND BUNN GOLF COURSES

Golf is a game the whole family can enjoy. With four unique courses ranging from beginner-friendly to championship-level play, families can introduce kids to the sport, enjoy junior golf opportunities, or simply spend quality time outdoors together.

## HENSON ROBINSON ZOO

A favorite destination for families, Henson Robinson Zoo brings children face-to-face with animals from around the world. With engaging exhibits, educational programs, camps, and seasonal events, the zoo inspires curiosity and conservation while offering parents a fun, walkable, and enriching outing.



## ICE SKATING AT THE NELSON CENTER

From first skates to family traditions, the Nelson Center Ice Rink offers year-round fun. Kids can build confidence in Learn to Skate classes, teens can play hockey, and families can enjoy public skating sessions that turn chilly days into unforgettable experiences.



# MEMBERSHIPS & SEASON PASSES



## Made for YOU!

Enjoy unlimited access to your favorite Park District spots all season long with a membership or season pass.

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**VELASCO TENNIS CENTER**



**BOTANICAL GARDEN**



**NELSON CENTER AND EISENHOWER POOLS**



**HENSON ROBINSON ZOO**



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# Firefighter Explorers Program

## Youth from 14-20 can practice basic firefighting skills

PARENT | Ashley Meyer

Do you know a young person interested in the fire service? Springfield's Fire Explorer Post 300 is a program open to youth between the ages of 14 and 20 that provides a unique opportunity to experience the life of a firefighter firsthand. In partnership with Scouting America (formerly known as Boy Scouts of America), this program offers hands-on training, mentorship and real-world experience alongside professional firefighters. Students not only become familiar with career opportunities available in the fire service, they also gain real-world skills and a sense of responsibility for their community.

Locally, the program meets twice a month on Wednesdays from 7-9 p.m. and is led by Springfield firefighter Brad Miller. During these sessions, explorers are taught the basic skills of firefighting in hands-on lessons with supervision from instructors from within the department.

"When kids first join, they get suited up in proper fire gear," Miller said. "We focus a lot on body mechanics in those first few sessions, how firefighters move around buildings, how they stay low and flexible. As they progress, they learn about how to do forcible entries, like breaking holes into walls for egress as well as fire suppression activities."

Search and rescue training is consistently a favorite part of the curriculum, Miller said. "Students get to go in with full gear and crawl around a building and look for dummies. Sometimes one of the kids will shed their gear and pretend to be a victim so they can understand the difference in the feeling of a dummy compared to a human body, which is important."

The Firefighter Explorers Program runs year-round with registration taking place in January and June. There is a \$60 annual registration fee to participate, but thanks to fundraising and donations, Miller said no participant has ever been turned away for financial reasons.

Beyond learning the basics of firefighting, Miller hopes that participation in the Explorers program helps to develop a deep sense of responsibility and care for their community.

"We really work on building their core values," Miller explained. "We use the acronym DRILL, which stands for determination, respect, integrity, loyalty and leadership. So even if they don't stick



Bella Walden, a Springfield High School student, has been a member of the Fire Explorer Post 300 for about a year. She is pictured at a training event at Mt. Zion Fire Protection District. PHOTO BY BRAD MILLER

# Looking for a fun and educational way to engage your kids this summer?



With classes like Robotics Quest, Garden Innovators, Buzz into Honeybee Camp and Magical Yoga Adventures – join our summer camps, a perfect blend of learning and adventure!

Don't wait!  
Registration opens in March, and classes fill up fast.



**Lincoln Land Community College**  
Community Education

Visit [www.llcc.edu/youth-classes](http://www.llcc.edu/youth-classes)

with the fire service, we're still building values that are going to help them succeed in any venture that they take on."

In addition to wrangling hoses and practicing multi-person search and rescue operations, Firefighter Explorers also participate in community events such as the downtown Springfield holiday lights parade, Salvation Army fundraisers and dressing up in costumes for the Firefighters Lake Club annual Halloween trunk or treat.

This hands-on experience also offers a valuable leg-up in the hiring process if the participant ultimately decides to stick with firefighting, Miller pointed out. "If they test for the Springfield Fire Department, they get two preference points on the hiring eligibility tests. Two points doesn't sound like much, but typically the top people on the list are only separated by a few points or even fractions of points, so those two points can make a big impact on whether an applicant gets hired or not."

Miller explained that while benefiting the fire department is certainly a top priority, ultimately the real value of the Firefighter Explorers comes down to the benefit to the individual kids that they mentor through the program.

"I was a troubled youth," Miller acknowledged. "I made a lot of questionable decisions and ended up going into the military when I was 25. That experience really opened up my eyes, and a lot of my motivation in promoting this program is to prevent kids from making some of the same mistakes I did. We certainly can't save all of them, but we'll do everything possible to help these kids succeed in life."

Miller continues to develop programs that can help inspire youth to become professional firefighters, such as an apprenticeship program, as well as potentially increase the preference points for those who have participated in the program. □

*For more information about the Springfield Fire Department Explorer Post 300, email Brad Miller at [Boxcar1332@gmail.com](mailto:Boxcar1332@gmail.com) or call 217-415-5391.*

*Ashley Meyer is a mom of two and freelance writer who lives in Springfield.*

## COMMUNITY CHILD CARE CONNECTION

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# A center for STEAM education

## Kidzeum receives federal grant to involve the community in designing expansion

PARENT | Karen Ackerman Witter



Children engage in a focused learning activity while exploring Kidzeum's pollinator exhibit.  
PHOTOS COURTESY OF KIDZEUM

In 2025, Kidzeum was voted the Best Family Fun Spot in the *Illinois Times* Best of Springfield competition. Kidzeum is that and so much more. It is a place where children explore new skills, think critically and engage in hands-on learning.

Kidzeum recently received a grant of nearly \$150,000 from the National Science Foundation to engage the community in designing a cutting-edge center for STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Math) education. The project will position Kidzeum as a learning hub where children and families engage with hands-on science and technology activities in ways that are meaningful and relevant to them.

Kidzeum executive director Leah Wilson is the driving force behind this initiative. She envisions Kidzeum as an essential learning hub for informal science where kids can begin to see themselves as engineers, scientists or mathematicians. Dr. Catherine Haden of Loyola University and Dr. David Uttal of Northwestern University are collaborators.

"Being selected for this funding reflects national confidence in Kidzeum's approach to learning through play," says Wilson. "It also positions our work as part of a broader effort to improve student competency in STEM subjects by expanding access to programs in informal educational settings." Adding art creates opportunities to foster creativity and innovation and makes STEM concepts more interesting and relevant for learners who gravitate toward the creative fields.

Community involvement makes this project unique. "Too often STEAM programming for young children is



A young engineer proudly displays a 3D print project.



A young scientist discovers the joy of homemade lava lamps.

designed *for* communities rather than *with* them,” says Haden. “This project offers a fundamentally different approach – one that positions parents, educators and community members as experts and genuine co-designers.”

Uttal is excited about the partnership between Northwestern University and Kidzeum. “This innovative approach could serve as a model for other institutions across the country, helping to make science education more accessible and relevant to a variety of communities,” he said.

Kidzeum is hosting a series of workshops and focus groups, inviting input from a diverse cross-section of urban and rural constituents. This will involve identifying existing community assets that support STEM/STEAM education and barriers that must be overcome. The first workshops took place in early February and more will follow.

By co-designing the center with the community, the intent is to develop exhibits and programs that not only teach important STEM/STEAM concepts but also connect to the daily lives and experiences of learners. Programs that help young children develop an interest in STEM/STEAM can lay a foundation for a stronger labor pool for the future.

“We can’t underestimate the value of pretend play,” says Wilson. “When children put on a white coat, pick up a toy stethoscope and pretend to give mom a physical, they are building memories that can turn into dreams. And dreams can turn into goals. And goals can become reality.”

The STEAM center will be housed on the first floor of the Kidzeum in two rooms that were totally renovated in 2022 with funding from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources Museum Capital Grant Program. The goal is to launch the center within the next three years, pending additional funding for implementation.

Everyone who has an interest in expanding STEM/STEAM programs for children is invited to participate. For more information on how to get involved, visit <https://kidzeum.org/education> or email [leah.wilson@kidzeum.org](mailto:leah.wilson@kidzeum.org). □

*Karen Ackerman Witter is a former board president of Kidzeum. She is a frequent contributor to Illinois Times, and many of her articles relate to science, technology, engineering, art and math.*

# Family event calendar

PARENT | Daron Walker

## FEBRUARY

### Funshop: Little Creators

Thursdays, 5:30-6:30pm. Through Feb. 26. Get a little messy in this four-week, hands-on art program designed to spark creativity and self-expression. Young children will explore colors, textures, and materials through painting, sculpting and more. Caregivers can join in. All classes blended ages 3 to 5 years of age. Activity #150971. Register at [bit.ly/SPD\\_Art-Explore-1](http://bit.ly/SPD_Art-Explore-1). Residents \$75, non-residents \$85. Lincoln Park Funshop, 1601 N. Fifth St., 217-753-6234.

### Lincoln's Birthday at ALPLM

Thu., Feb. 12, 9am-5pm. Celebrate Abraham Lincoln's 217th birthday with free admission. Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum, 212 N. Sixth St., 217-558-8844.

### Poetry Out Loud Central Illinois Regional Contest

Thu., Feb. 12, 4pm. In Poetry Out Loud, teens select, analyze and commit to memory classic and contemporary poems for recitation. This year's event features 155 students and 21 teachers from six area high schools. Winners will advance to one of seven regional competitions in Illinois; then to the state tournament (also held in Springfield, 10am March 2); and ultimately to the national finals in Washington, D.C., in late April. Presented by the Springfield Area Arts Council and Illinois Arts Council. Free. Hoogland Center for the Arts Club Room, 420 S. Sixth St., 217-753-3519.

### The Addams Family

Fri., Feb. 13, 7:30pm, Sat., Feb. 14, 7:30pm and Sun., Feb. 15, 2pm. This comedy - presented by the Springfield Theatre Centre - features an original story about Wednesday Addams, who has grown up and fallen in love with a young man from a respectable family. She confides in her father, Gomez, who keeps the secret. Everything changes during a dinner for



**Springfield Jr. Blues vs. Fairbanks Ice Dogs**, Fri., Feb. 13, 7:05pm and Sat., Feb. 14, 6:05pm. Nelson Center, 1601 N. Fifth St.

the boyfriend and his parents. \$20-\$22. Hoogland Center for the Arts LRS Theatre 1, 420 S. Sixth St., 217-523-2787.

### Parents Night Out | Kidz Night In

Fri., Feb. 13, 5-8pm. Looking for a Valentine's Day date night plan that everyone will love? Drop the kids off and enjoy a worry-free evening out while they enjoy a fun-filled night made just for them. Open to children ages 4 and up. Must be potty-trained. Pizza dinner included for kids. Drop-off starts at 5pm with pickup at 8pm. [kidzeum.org](http://kidzeum.org). \$35. Kidzeum of Health and Science, 412 E. Adams St., 217-671-2123.

### Springfield Jr. Blues vs. Fairbanks Ice Dogs

Fri., Feb. 13, 7:05pm and Sat., Feb. 14, 6:05pm. The Jr. Blues take on the Ice Dogs in the first two games of a four-game home stand. [jrblues.com](http://jrblues.com). \$10, \$6 children 12 and

younger. Nelson Center, 1601 N. Fifth St., 217-525-2589.

### Funshop Kids Club

Fridays, 3:30-6pm. Through April 24. This is a fun and welcoming drop-off program where children ages 6 to 12 explore themes through crafts, STEM projects and interactive play. It includes group games, hands-on stations and active play. Pack a snack or light meal for your child. Kid's Club encourages creativity, teamwork, and a love of learning—all while having a great time! Register at [bit.ly/Funshop\\_KidsClub1](http://bit.ly/Funshop_KidsClub1). Activity #140910. \$30 residents, \$35 non-residents for 1 day only. Lincoln Park Funshop, 1601 N. Fifth St., 217-753-6234.

### Lincoln Birthday Bash

Sat., Feb. 14, 9am-4pm and Sun., Feb. 15, 9am-4pm. A free, all-day public celebration marking the 217th anniversary of

Abraham Lincoln's birth. Event features family-friendly crafts and activities including a button making station, a chance to design a birthday card for Abraham Lincoln and a photo booth with Lincoln Home and National Park Service props. On Feb. 14, the bookstore will host book signings with Marla Harms Judge and Jan Jacobi and provide cake to commemorate Lincoln's birthday. Free, no cost. Lincoln Home National National Home Site Visitor Center, 426 S. 7th St., 217-391-3254.

**Abe Lincoln Route 66 Chili Cook-off**  
Sat., Feb. 14, 11am-5pm. Cook-off with sampling from cooks far and wide. Proceeds benefit the Shriners Hospital for Children and Springfield Dyslexic Center. Competitors must be members of the International Chili Society. Judging begins at 3pm. Includes cash bar, silent auction. \$10. VFW Lafore Lock Post 755, 2211 Old Jacksonville Road, 217-341-1782.

**Valentine's Day Community Meal**  
Sat., Feb. 14, 11am-1pm. Enjoy a delicious meal. No signups, no requirements. All are welcome. Use ramp on Carpenter Street side to enter. Free. Kumler United Methodist Church, 600 N. Fifth St., 217-523-2046.

**Learn to Play Hockey**  
Saturdays, 8:15-9:15am. Through Feb. 14. Does your child dream of hitting the ice like a pro? The Springfield Park District's Learn to Play Hockey program is the perfect way to start. This fun, skill-building program helps kids improve coordination, build confidence and learn teamwork. Registration deadline is Jan. 1. Participants must have passed Basic 1 before enrolling in Learn to Play. Register now at [bit.ly/L3arn-to-Play1](http://bit.ly/L3arn-to-Play1). Residents \$67, non-residents \$77. Nelson Center Ice Arena, Lincoln Park, 1601 N. Fifth St., 217-753-2800 ext.1503.

**Ice Skating**  
Saturdays, 1-4pm, Sundays, 1-4pm and Mon., Feb. 16, 1-4pm. Through Feb. 15. An age-old holiday tradition. Skating and skate rental are free, though donations are welcome to help maintain equipment. A full schedule can be found on ALPLM website. Free, donations accepted. Union Square Park, 212 N. Sixth St.



**Free Ice Skating**, Through Feb. 15. Union Square Park, 212 N. Sixth St.

**Mansion Tours**  
Saturdays, Sundays, 1:45-2:45, 3-4pm. Illinois Department of Natural Resources trained staff and volunteers lead this tour of the official residence of Gov. JB and first lady MK Pritzker. Tour focuses on the history of the mansion. No self-guided tours are permitted. Reserve a spot on [eventbrite.com](http://eventbrite.com). Free. Illinois Governor's Mansion, 410 E. Jackson St., 217-782-6450.

**Springfield International Folk Dancers**  
Mondays, 7-9pm. Experience the joy of folk dancing from many cultures. All skill levels welcome and no partners necessary. Free. Hoogland Center for the Arts, 420 S. Sixth St., 217-793-8035.

**The Foundation Academy LLC Youth Program**  
Tuesdays, 4:30-7:30pm. Through March 5. The Foundation Academy LLC serves all central Illinois youths ages 12-18, with emphasis on at-risk and underprivileged individuals, by providing comprehensive, job-focused education. Soft skills are essential for navigating personal life and workplace challenges. Email [Lbrown.thefoundationacademyllc@gmail.com](mailto:Lbrown.thefoundationacademyllc@gmail.com) for registration information. [thefoundationacademyllc.com](http://thefoundationacademyllc.com). Free. Kumler United Methodist Church, 600 N. Fifth St., 217-523-2046.

**Line Dancing Lessons**  
Third Wednesday of every month, 7-9pm and First Monday of every month, 7-9pm. Mrs. Debbie is teaching the lessons. All ages welcome. Kick up those heels and dance. Free. Coghlan's Hideout LLC, Bulpitt, 201 Main St.

**Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat**  
Fri., Feb. 20, 7pm, Sat., Feb. 21, 2, 7pm and Sun., Feb. 22, 2pm. Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat is a reimagining of the biblical story of Joseph, his father Jacob, 11 brothers and the coat of many colors. Presented by the Hoogland Performing Education Creators (grades 7-8) along with a children's chorus of our Dreamers (grades 1-2). \$12-\$20. Hoogland Center for the Arts LRS Theatre 1, 420 S. Sixth St., 217-523-2787.

**Weekend Play & Stay**  
Feb. 21, 28; March 7, 14, 21 and 28, 9:30-11:30am. At Weekend Play & Stay, little ones and their caregivers can dive into two hours of playful discovery. From building block towers to creative play and interactive storytime, every week brings new ways to spark imagination and connect with other families. For children ages 16 months to 5 years with caregiver. No class Feb. 14. \$10 per child when

registered online, \$10 per child day-of when bringing a friend, or \$20 per child for drop-ins. Lincoln Park Funshop, 1601 N. Fifth St., 217-753-6234.

### **Refuge Ranch Pancake Breakfast**

Sat., Feb. 21, 7-11am. Menu includes pancakes, sausage links, toppings and beverages (milk, juice, coffee, or cocoa). Proceeds support the Refuge Ranch, which empowers at-risk and special needs youth through Christ-centered, equine-assisted programs at no cost to program participants. [refuge-ranch.org](http://refuge-ranch.org). \$12, free plate for children 3 and younger. Cherry Hills Church, 2125 Woodside Road, 217-498-7679.

### **Cabin Fever**

Sat., Feb. 21, 1-4pm. Children ages 5-12 can beat the winter blues during a day filled with energy, excitement and endless fun indoors at Erin's Pavilion. The event will promote physical fitness and encourage social interaction. Free. Erin's Pavilion, Southwind Park, 4965 S. Second St., 217-585-2941.

### **Maple Syrup Time Demonstrations**

Feb. 21-22, Feb.28-March 1, March 14-15, 1, 2:30pm. Demonstrations will show the entire syrup making process from tree tapping to boiling the sap down into syrup. Dress for the weather as this program is hands-on and involves a trek to one of the garden's many sugar bushes. Demonstrations start at Nature Center [lincolnmemorialgarden.org](http://lincolnmemorialgarden.org). Free. Lincoln Memorial Garden, 2301 E. Lake Shore Dr., 217-529-1111.

### **Monster X Tour**

Sat., Feb. 21, 1:30, 7:30pm. The nation's most competitive monster trucks invade the center for two shows. Watch these 10,000-pound, car-crushing giants race, do wheelies and more. Attendees can also see the trucks up close at the pre-event pit party. [theboscenter.com](http://theboscenter.com). \$21-\$48. BOS Center, 1 Convention Center Plaza, 7th & Adams- outdoor, 217-788-8800.

### **Express Yourself! Acting & Improv Class**

Mon., Feb. 23, 5-6:30pm, Mon., March 9, 5-6:30pm and Mon., March 23, 5-6:30pm. by Springfield Park District Special Recreation. Residents \$8, non-residents

\$10.50. Erin's Pavilion, Southwind Park, 4965 S. Second St., 217-585-2941.

### **Young Adult Group**

Fourth Monday of every month, 6-8pm. A drug and alcohol-free space where young adults can be themselves. Ages 18-26. Phoenix Center: Out On Second, 120 E. Scarritt St., 217-528-5253.

### **Special Recreation Cooking Class**

Wed., Feb. 25, 5:30-6:30pm and Wed., March 11, 5:30-6:30pm. This inclusive cooking class is a fun, hands-on experience designed for individuals of all abilities. Participants will build confidence, independence and creativity in the kitchen. Each week, the class will make a simple, tasty recipe with guidance from instructors and volunteers. Register at [bit.ly/SPD\\_SpecRec\\_CookingClass](http://bit.ly/SPD_SpecRec_CookingClass). Activity #170205. [ahawkins@springfieldparks.org](mailto:ahawkins@springfieldparks.org). Residents \$5, non-residents \$7.50 per session. Erin's Pavilion, Southwind Park, 4965 S. Second St., 217-585-2941.

### **Mother Road Bones Trombone Quartet Concert**

Thu., Feb. 26, 7pm. This free, hour-long concert will feature music in a wide variety of styles, showcasing the rich and powerful sound of the trombone quartet. Several selections will be accompanied by St. John's organ, highlighting its broad range of tonal colors and adding a unique dimension to the performance. [stjohnspringfield.org](http://stjohnspringfield.org). Free. St. John's Lutheran Church, 2477 W. Washington St., 217-793-3933.

### **Springfield Jr. Blues vs. Minnesota Wilderness**

Fri., Feb. 27, 7:05pm and Sat., Feb. 28, 6:05pm. The Jr. Blues take on the Wilderness during the last two games of a four-game home stand. [jrblues.com](http://jrblues.com). \$10, \$6 children 12 and younger. Nelson Center, 1601 N. Fifth St., 217-525-2589.

### **Woodlawn Farm Museum open house**

Sat., Feb. 28, 10am-3pm. Learn the about the pioneers who settled Woodlawn Farm and their efforts in the Underground Railroad movement in the mid-1800s. Adults \$5, students \$3. Woodlawn Farm, Jacksonville, 1463 Geirke Lane, 309-678-7716.

### **Learn to Skate**

Feb. 28, March 7, 8 and 14, 10:15-11:55am. Ready to hit the ice? The Springfield Park District's Learn to Skate Academy is the perfect place for kids to build confidence, balance and skating skills in a fun and supportive environment. No session March 28. Class times: 10:15-10:45am - Jumps, Spins and Advanced Skills (ages 6+, must have passed Basic 3); 10:50-11:20am - Snowplow 1-2 (ages 3-5) and Basic 1-2 (ages 6+); 11:25-11:55am - Snowplow 3 (ages 3-5) and Basic 3-6 (ages 6+). Register at: [bit.ly/SPD\\_Ice-Programming](http://bit.ly/SPD_Ice-Programming). Residents \$77, non-residents \$97. Nelson Center, 1601 N. Fifth St., 217-753-2800.

### **Sleeping Beauty**

Sat., Feb. 28, 2pm and Sun., March 1, 2pm. Step into a world of magical fairies, royal courts and timeless romance in this classic tale. Tchaikovsky's glorious score will carry audience members through enchanted forests and glittering palaces as the dancers of the Copper Coin Ballet Company bring this classic to life. Lavish costumes, sweeping waltzes, and dazzling visuals make this beloved ballet a theatrical dream come true. [coppercoinballet.org](http://coppercoinballet.org). Reserved seating, \$40 advance; \$45 day of show. The Legacy Theatre, 101 E. Lawrence, 217-528-9760.

### **A Journey Through Gospel Music**

Sat., Feb. 28, 7pm. Celebrate Black History Month with the Napier Family and friends for The Good News Experience - A Journey Through Gospel Music. This concert will feature local talents highlighting the progression of Gospel music, as well as cultivate an interactive environment for all. Presented by Ryan Napier and the Hoogland Center for the Arts. \$20-\$22. Hoogland Center for the Arts LRS Theatre 1, 420 S. Sixth St., 217-523-2787.

### **Learn to Play Hockey**

Saturdays, 8:15-9:15am. Through April 11. The Learn to Play Hockey program improves physical fitness, builds mental toughness, encourages leadership and fosters character development on and off the ice. Prerequisite: Must have passed Basic 1 or Skating to Hockey before Learn to Play. class for children ages 6-15. On Rink 1. Register now at [bit.ly/Learn-to-Play1](http://bit.ly/Learn-to-Play1). Activity #140402. Residents \$67, nonresidents \$77. Nelson Center, 1601 N. Fifth St., 217-753-2800, ext. 1503.



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