

Playful winter market lessons help children save for months

AT A GLANCE

University of Idaho Extension provides free, hands-on market activities for children aged 2 to 12 to learn saving, budgeting and delayed gratification, building lifelong money habits.

The Situation

Many children have few chances to learn practical money skills early. Saving, spending, budgeting, delayed gratification and goal setting are rarely taught through hands-on experiences children can understand and use in daily life. Without early exposure, children may struggle to build healthy financial habits and confidence with money.

Children ages 2-12 and their families attending the Moscow Winter Market come from Moscow and surrounding rural communities. They represent a broad range of family backgrounds. Although UI Extension works in most of the Latah County schools, many of these children are preschoolers, homeschooled youth and families visiting from surrounding communities.

Children may miss formative experiences that build healthy financial behavior. Poor money habits set early can contribute to future debt, financial stress, limited saving and low confidence managing money. Families also lose chances for positive parent-child conversations about saving and spending.

University of Idaho Extension's "Fun'ancial Kiddo Events" make financial education fun, approachable and memorable. Hands-on play and real-world decisions let children practice the concepts directly, which



A young girl, one of the smallest savers, is excited to show her savings from the event.

is why the program keeps children coming back. What began as a one-time children's activity several years ago is now a monthly favorite at the market's Saturday events.

Local vendors take part in activities and give children real opportunities to practice their money skills. College students and community volunteers help with activities, prizes and encouragement, and families continue the conversations at home.

Our Response

University of Idaho Extension facilitates events through community partnerships and experiential teaching built on creativity, repetition, positive reinforcement and real-life financial decisions.

Educational supplies, piggy banks, decorations, prizes, “Ossie’s Gold” and volunteer support come from the university, county, community and Winter Market partners. The educator introduces new activities and themes each year, building on earlier concepts so children keep returning.

Activities model real-world financial behaviors in age-appropriate ways. After completing the activity, the children are encouraged to “save some and use some” of their play money in the market. Local vendors “sell” special event cookies to the children along with the activity “store” where they can purchase toys and supplies. In addition, the children receive prizes for their saving accomplishments starting at the next market.

Free events run during the Moscow Winter Market from November through March and regularly serve 50 or more children each time. Some of the favorites include:

- Make Your Money Boat Float: foil boats tested how many pennies they hold
- Pick-A-Penguin Purchase: designing and “purchasing” body parts and accessories for foam penguins with magnets
- Make Your Cash Stash Wallet: wallet decorating, spending choices and play-money purchases of prizes, treats and market cookies from local vendors
- Making Piggy Pretty: painting and personalizing piggy banks (or other fun animal banks), the first one many children have owned

The children receive “Ossie’s Gold” (Ossie is the name of the Money Lady character logo) and are encouraged to save the special-colored note for the next Winter Market. The color coding denotes the length of time the child has saved it.

Many families return month after month and look for the program, bringing back wallets and saved “Ossie’s Gold.” Families report high satisfaction and share stories of saving behaviors continuing at home.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Karen Richel, Financial Extension Educator • University of Idaho Extension, Latah County • 208-883-2241 • krichel@uidaho.edu

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A graphic of an example of Ossie’s Gold “money.”

Program Outcomes

The goal is for children to build foundational habits in saving, budgeting, goal setting, delayed gratification and thoughtful spending. That requires behaviors such as choosing, planning ahead, setting money aside for a later reward and learning how small financial decisions affect future rewards.

In the 2025-26, children were asked to save one “Ossie’s Gold” note and bring it back to a later market for a prize. Forty notes were returned, many tucked inside the wallets children had made; others were saved on the fridge at home. Nineteen children saved for 8 months, two for 9 months, two for 11 months, 16 for 2 months and one for a full year, showing remarkable patience and delayed gratification at young ages.

Behavior is carrying over to home as well. One parent reported that her child began collecting spare change in a savings jar after the wallet activity, and families described more interest in saving and more parent-child conversations about money decisions.

The Future

At a back-to-school event, 257 youth were challenged to set a savings goal, show progress toward it and visit the Money Lady at the Winter Market for a prize. The challenge boosts market participation and teaches children to plan and reach a financial goal. The program will continue showing children that even small saving habits can lead to big rewards.