

Kids can cook – just show them how

IGNORED. Overlooked. Unappreciated. Underrated. Unacknowledged. Dismissed. Looked down on. Sidelined. Marginalised. Probably the lot of children the world over.

But definitely not for Dario Stephen, Miami-hailed founder of “Kids Can Cook” programme.

“Kids can cook but you must show them how,” he said after a packed cooking workshop at the 16th Sharjah Children’s Reading Festival.

He tells *Daily Express* why.

“Cooking is my passion. It’s what wakes me up every day. And I love sharing my passion with the kids all over the world.”

“That’s what gets me up and gets me going.”

“My goal is to cook on every continent on earth. And right now, I’ve only done two.”

“I’ve done Asia, North America, I need Australia, I need Africa and I’m really working on Antarctica. That’s going to be the hard one,” he quipped.

Daily Express: You must be very famous to have been invited to UAE to conduct this workshop?

“Definitely. I was found by Sharjah Children’s Reading Festival. In 2019, they found me on Instagram, and the coordinator reached out and asked me if I would come. And that’s when my journey began. This is my third time here (2025).”

Daily Express: What did you teach the Emirati mother to Dario: ‘You are right, children can cook. It fosters excitement’.



kids today?

“I taught them how to make quesadillas, a really fun dish from North America. It comes out of Latin cultures.”

Mexican delight

Quesadilla is a Mexican dish consisting of a tortilla that is filled primarily with cheese (queso) and sometimes meats, spices and other fillings.

This writer had piece of it. The verdict? Delicious!

Dario wasn’t the only instructive chef. I have met Russian chefs, Lebanese chefs etc. The spectacle ignites a moment of rethink. Children aren’t dumb.

“Kids can cook, not only healthy food but cooking up confidence and joy, from simple dishes like French toast to globally inspired dishes,” Dario declared.

The calls are out: Teach kids how to cook because it provides essential life skills, fosters not only healthy eating but also excitement, creates opportunities for family bonding and cultural appreciation.



Dario tells the world: ‘Children can cook’.

Bouncing back when the chips are down



Inset above: A close-up of the finished product – a colourful Spinning Robot.

Left: A participant finalising the installation of her Spinning Robot from scratch – a sense of pride and confidence exudes.

Third of a series

Kan Yaw Chong

THIS is an iconic story of resilience. A champion showman who was shut down by Covid but bounces back quickly.

Thanks to relentless learning. Beat this into your head, parents.

Train children to a lifelong of reading and learning. This story vindicates it.

When the chips were down, he weathered unexpected storms.

He read and learnt – lots of it, to stay relevant.

Daniel Simul was a Dutch circus juggling champion. For 15 years, he kept circus audience around the world awestruck with his 53 balls feats.

Then Covid struck in 2020-22. All performances shut down. He lost his job.

“I could no longer perform, because there was no performance.”

To cut the story short. He moved on. He poured into reading. He devoted himself into relentless learning. He created a dancing acrobat.

He thrived with its acrobatic performances. Interesting case.

Circumstances make man? Stoic thinker Epictetus disagrees.

Circumstances only reveals him. Challenges (Covid) exposed his true nature. Character makes man.



Daniel Simul seen during a professional stage performance with his acrobat.



Audition on America’s Got Talent

Adversity revealed Simul’s character, tribute to reading, study, lots of learning to shift his personal fortune.

“It took me two years,” he said.

By 2024, his acrobat auditioned in the 1904 Episode of America’s Got Talent, Spain’s Got Talent, appeared in TED etc; its acrobatic routines stunned millions, wowed judges.

A new career in acrobatics. He was noticed. Fame spread.

By 2025, he showed up at the 16th Sharjah Children’s Reading Festival, by a special invitation, with his self-built acrobat, reeled in kid’s interest with its acrobatic stunts.

“This is my first visit to the Middle East,” he beamed.

His story? Covid slammed a crushing problem on him.

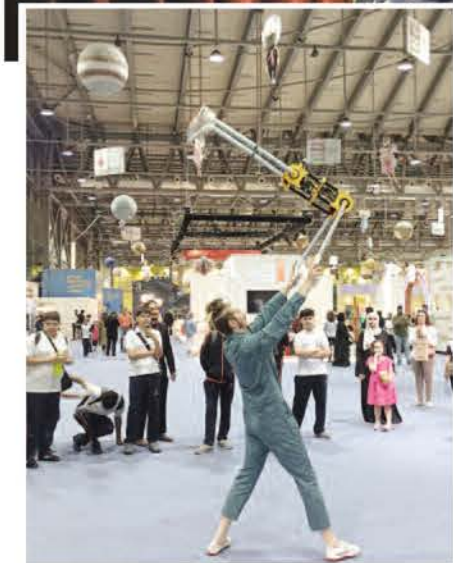
He broke the problem into a solution.

Daily Express noticed the phenomenon.

‘It took me two years’

Here it is. “I made the robot myself. It took me two years,” he repeated.

“I’m a circus artist, I didn’t learn robotics (in school), but I look online on YouTube how to do 3D printing, electron-



A gymnastic moment from Daniel’s acrobat.

ics, programming. Then I bring it all together in this robot that I built.”

Daily Express: You just look at the internet?

“Yes, I look on the internet to learn how to make this.”

Daily Express: What’s the core message behind your acrobat you want to tell the children at Sharjah?

“Yes, reel the children in with a little bit of entertaining act. I do two minutes of dancing with the robot. More than that,

the robot is completely open, it’s see-through.

“Children can look inside, see all the wires, see how it works. They were very curious. Ask me questions about electronics or programming like: Is this related to computer science? I say yes of course. That’s how it works. It’s really nice that I can guide them from seeing something fun to talking about the future of technology.”

Daily Express: You created the acrobat. What capabilities did you build into it?

“It can do handstands, it is very strong, stronger than me. It can do a planche (hold body parallel to ground on arms and hands as in gymnastics and calisthenics). But it cannot walk by itself, it cannot do your dishes, it’s just designed to do handstands, basically. And as my acrobatic partner, it needs to have very strong handstands. So that’s perfect.”

Daily Express: How does all that fit into the purpose of the Sharjah Children’s Reading Festival themed ‘Dive into Books’?

“I guess the festival is to committed to inspire and foster learning. Basically, I had to learn a lot to make the robot. I hope that by showing the kids what you can do if you read and learn things yourself, they also want to make things like this in the future.”

Daniel cherished his debut in the UAE.

“My first time in the Middle East, it’s historic, a bit hot outside,” he gleamed.



Daniel and his self-built acrobat – now his dancing partner – in shows.

Raise confident children

HERE’S an intriguing project called Steam. Can it increase children’s confidence? No, it’s not gas. It’s Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics combined.

Behold – a vibrant Spinning Robot was created from scratch, through the power of Steam.

Pride erupts. Confidence grows – a momentum set in motion that may last for life! Exactly what the organisers intended! Sustainable confidence!

“The project is designed to enhance creativity and increase confidence,” said Mahmoud Hachem, Lebanese conductor of the workshop.

It highlights a core mission of the Sharjah Children’s Reading Festival.

“It’s very important to increase the confidence of children,” Mahmoud said.

He gave them challenging but not too complex projects to build the motorised Spinning Robot from scratch.

“When a kid finalises his project and it’s working, he can proudly say that I did it,” Mahmoud captured the idea.

From all accounts, there are at least eight reasons why it is important to build confident children.

It promotes a growth mindset. Confidence helps children to develop a growth mindset where they view challenges as opportunities for learning and growth rather than as failure.

It fosters resilience.

Meaning a confident child is better equipped to handle setbacks, learn from mistakes, bounce back more quickly from setbacks.

It boosts motivation.

Children who believe in their abilities are more motivated to pursue goals and take on new challenges in various aspects of their lives.

It improves academic performance.

Confident children perform better in school as they are more willing to participate and persevere through difficult academic tasks.

Confident children find it easier to make friends, form positive relationships and stand up for themselves when necessary.

Confidence helps children feel secure, cope with stress and keep a positive outlook.

Confident children are likely to take initiatives, make decisions, and feel a sense of responsibility.

Willingness to tackle challenges and persistence form a strong foundation for success in adulthood.

The point is this is a state driven project.

In particular, Emirate Sharjah – one of the eight emirates that form UAE.

Daily Express: What is your project all about?

“Project Stem which stands for Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics. We add A to the mix so it becomes Steam (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics), let them see technology is fun. Concepts learned at school they can practice them here in a new creative way, by combining the practical and the theoretical knowledge of the kids.”

Daily Express: How do they build a Spinning Robot from scratch?

“The first part we teach the kids how to install the circuits, from wires to conductive tape to batteries to the motor. Then they install their own discs and spin the robot. They can colour it as they want. Basically it is a hands-on workshop. These projects include hands-on experience where they can cut their own digital cube, connect their wires, colour as they want, tape and use the scissors, the rulers, all these components to reach the final product.

Daily Express: How does it fit into the theme of this festival ‘Dive into Books’?

“It includes more than one objective. It includes creativity, it triggers the curiosity, increase their problem solving skills. Because we are dealing with science, with batteries, with wires, LED, all these stuff on how to do this. When a kid finalises his project and it’s working, he/she can proudly say that I did this. At the end, enhances their creativity and increases their self-confidence.”

Mahmoud enumerated three science projects.

“The first one is the LED Cube, they build it from scratch. The spin robot, they know how to install, but the time is a little bit insufficient to install their own spinning robot. So, they colour their disks using the spin robots after they learn how to install it. The third one is the motorised toothbrush, and they also started from scratch. The workshop combines fashion with science.”

Daily Express: Why are you combining science and fashion?

“Science and creativity. Nowadays, fashion enters everything, technology or science. It enters all fields.”



Hachem

Celebrity and talent shows all over the world

Daniel Simul appeared in Sharjah somewhat as a celebrity who made eyes turned.

“I went to a lot of talent shows, like America’s Got Talent, France’s Got Talent, Spain’s Got Talent, Germany’s Got Talent, Romania’s Got Talent. You find a lot of videos of me on Instagram,” he enumerated.

His life journey?

“I started as a circus artist, as an acrobat and a juggler, then during Covid, I could not perform because there was no performance going on. That’s when I learned a little bit about electronics myself. Then I turned that into the robot,” Daniel repeated.

Daily Express: You have shifted to professional acrobatics now?

“Yes, this is my full-time job now.”

Daily Express: Really?

“Yes, as an acrobat before, I was working with also partner acrobatics, I would lift my partner up in the air doing handstands. But in the end, I replaced my partner with a robot now. My career.”

Daniel studied at the National Centre for Circus Arts, London, where he earned a Bachelor’s degree.

Daily Express: What do you think of the objective of the Sharjah Children’s Reading Festival?

“To inspire kids to read more and learn more is a good thing.”