

# Tourist Attractions & Parks

WORLD'S LEADING PUBLICATION FOR MANAGEMENT OF  
FAMILY ENTERTAINMENT CENTERS, ATTRACTIONS AND AMUSEMENTS

APRIL/MAY 1995

VOLUME 25, NUMBER 2

## PAY-FOR-PLAY:

# When It Comes to Children's Play, Simplify, Simply, Simplify

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**I**t's Christmas morning. You've bought your four-year-old the latest toy, an expensive, complex, computer-driven robot with more bells and whistles per square inch than a one-man band. The child rips into the package, paper and ribbon flying, and squeals with delight. The robot walks, talks, beeps and flashes.

"Score one for Santa," you think, delighted that your child is happy. When you check back an hour later, the robot lies silent and abandoned under the tree; suspicious giggling bubbles from one corner of the den. Your child has put the robot's box over the head of the family dog, which has magically transformed

into a prehistoric square-headed monsterbeast.

Technology, fueled by our desire to be amazed, continues to leap forward. As adults, we have the chance to experience strange new worlds through virtual reality and high definition simulation, the

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hottest phenomena to hit the location-based entertainment industry since film and sound recording. More and more, adults depend on other people's imaginations to keep us amused. While that's fine for us, it doesn't work for children. When it comes to younger children, the best that technology can provide is no match for an empty cardboard box, some old clothes, a sandbox and their own imaginations.

Why does this matter? All across the country, family entertainment center owners are finding out the hard way that young children know what they want, and it's not the adult-designed, technological environments being created for them. And, as always, when we ignore the customer the consequences can be unpleasant.

### The Unchanging Nature of Imagination

It's tempting to assume that young children will respond as enthusiastically as we do to new technological possibilities. But while entertainment for adults has undergone amazing leaps in the last 50 years, children have resisted attempts to complicate their play.

New technology seeks to transport the participant to another time and place through visual, aural and other sensory input. External stimulus is used to create the perception of a reality that doesn't exist, so that the perception becomes the reality. This depends on sending enough information to the participant's brain that it allows him or her to suspend the present reality and jump into the new world.

These externally generated virtual experiences contrast with another state of mind that all humans are equipped to experience – the world of our own imaginations. The ability to imagine tends to vary with age. Unfortunately, it appears that as we grow up, we lose the richness of imagination that a child's mind is biologically programmed to possess.

As adults, with the exception of daydreams and some pretend play, much of which is related to sex, we are far more dependent on external stimulation and programming to jump start our imaginations. Reading is one obvious form where the storyline and words lead us through imaginary worlds. Another form, having lost much of its place in the modern world, is the spoken word. Radio, in its heyday, was rich with storytelling that allowed the listener to create the scene. The masters, like Orson Wells

and his *War of the Worlds* or the radio skits of Stan Freberg, triggered rich and exciting mental images.

More and more, we count on our entertainers to create the mental images for us. As the silicon chip continues to transform entertainment, it is important that we keep our realities in balance. We must remember a time in our lives when such an externally stimulated experience was inappropriate, even damaging.

### The Brain: Use It Or Lose It

As we grow from infancy through childhood to adulthood, our brains and bodies grow and develop through various stages, all mysteriously and miraculously biologically programmed by eons of evolution. Research on child development tells us that at the earliest ages, our mental development is dependent on external stimuli from the real world. Recent research suggests that we are born with many more neural networks and brain connections than we retain into adulthood and that those that are not stimulated and used at very specific periods of childhood wither away permanently.

This concept that the brain's development is shaped by its interaction with the external environment is called *neuroplasticity*. The stimulus that causes the brain to grow and program its thought processes needs to come from interaction with the real world, as it is through such contact that children develop the skills to survive in their environment. Skills acquired through real-world contact affect the physical, social, cognitive and emotional realms of development.

Around age two or three, a child's developmental journey takes the programming of our brains to a rich and diverse world of imagination that becomes the primary means of learning until around age six. At first, children need much structure and literal meaning in order for play objects to guide their imaginations. This is when children want realistic playhouses or rides on coin-operated fire trucks. Soon, this kind of structure, themeing and storyline becomes a constraint on the child's need to internally generate its own worlds and impose itself on the outside world. Then, the simplest props work best.

By age four, the child's mind is its own virtual reality machine. All that is required from the outside world is the canvas and



objects to link the imagination to the real world. This is the age of imaginary friends, caves of chairs and sheets and civilizations of cardboard and sand. The process and creative storylines of the imagination become primary rather than a result.

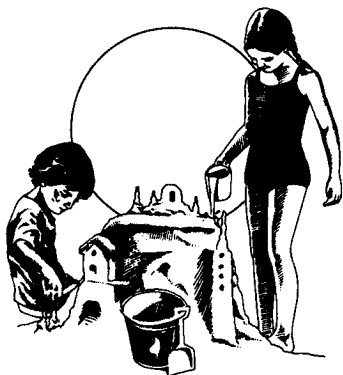
### Young Children Know What They Want

It is one of the ironies of nature that by the time we can create places and playthings for children, we have long ago lost touch with the child's play world. As an adult, our thought processes, tastes and preferences are radically different than that of the child we once were. Try as we might, that world is lost. Instead, adults offer children what we *think* they will want. Sometimes, in our arrogance, we offer what we think children *should* want.

The evidence of this failure to understand the young child's world of play and imagination is seen in the design of family entertainment centers and the equipment that fills them. Designers and proprietors continue, out of ignorance or arrogance, to impose their preferences on their young guests with a near-total misunderstanding of what appeals to them. They also assume all children are the same, not realizing that children develop through the different stages or ages of play that change significantly every few years.

Two of the greatest design myths that permeate the industry are that children six and younger prefer physical exercise and that they prefer electronic technology. The results can be read in the sales declines of many family entertainment and children's pay-for-play centers after the opening-day thrills have worn off.

You cannot force-feed an unappealing diet of play to volunteer visitors; they



will simply refuse to return. Although it may be the parent who drives the child to the center and pays the admission — and therefore the parent who needs to be pleased — the last thing a parent wants to do is to be responsible for the misery of deliberately creating an experience that produces a bored child.

On the flip side, since the family or children's entertainment center thrives based on repeat business from the local community, if you can create a play environment that children nag their parents to visit, you've solved a profitable puzzle.

### The Simplest Things Work Best

Adults look at children slipping through climbing tubes, wallowing in ball pits and whipping down slides, and we envy them their mobility. Maybe we should build these habitrail-type environments for grown-ups, because to a child, especially a preschooler, they quickly become boring. Electronic technology, too, bores the heck out of young children.

Preschoolers are not biologically programmed to pursue an externally-generated virtual world. What their brains are telling them to do is to create their own virtual imagined worlds in a real-world environment. Loose parts like sand and water have infinite play possibilities, and their total lack of structure allows children to impose their imaginations on them. And, through their handling of the materials, children learn the rules and principles that make the real world operate. They learn to navigate in the real world. They learn how to socially interact and the meaning of rules.

Electronic sound effects can make the spiral slide fun for a few more times, but they fail to please in the long run. Laser tag and other electronic immersion games can't compete with the b-a-a of a lamb or the chance to toot a real horn. Preschoolers have not yet cognitively developed enough to understand any but the simplest games. At first the lights, bells and whistles will catch their attention, but they are quick to learn that the gadgets have no substance.

Young children want the high touch of the real world because they are just discovering all it has to offer. It is only teenagers and adults who have lost their sense of discovery who crave an artificially generated, high-tech world.



Our company has conducted extensive research on children's play and play preferences. This research has included children's focus groups, play observation and extensive review of the body of play theory and applied research, along with work with existing play facilities. We continue to be amazed at how complicated most designers and owners try to make what should be so simple. We continue to be amused at the downright inappropriate play and equipment that the family entertainment center industry offers up to young children.

Leave the bells and whistles for those who have forgotten how astounding the real world can be. Offer young children the reality of the world around them, and the chance to impose their own imaginations on it.

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