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### Amusement Park Survival

How to make these outings fun for the whole family  
Teresa Pitman

I developed my amusement park expertise the hard way. I once spent a day at a large theme park with my own four children (ages eight, six, four and one) plus an extra four-year-old girl I was babysitting at the time. I was the only adult. Friends thought I was crazy, but we had a wonderful time. A few years later, I took my children for the first of several trips to the biggest park of all: Disney World. We've hit plenty of others along the way, and I've learned some tips to make these outings fun for the whole family.

Kris Williams, manager of public relations and special events for Paramount Canada's Wonderland in Maple, Ontario, got her knowledge in an easier way - through working at the parks. Her number one piece of advice? Plan your outing. "Most of the bigger parks have Web sites," she notes. "Review the site with your child and see what rides are new and which ones they really want to ride." You may also be able to print out a map of the park that will help you plot a route for the day.

"List your must-do's," Williams suggests, "and plan your day around them. The most popular rides will have shorter lines early in the morning and in the evening." During the busier times in the middle of the day, plan to catch some of the shows, enjoy a water play area, visit some stores, or try out some less crowded rides. It's also helpful to plan your meals for non-traditional times - eating lunch at 11 or two, for example, rather than noon.

Here are more planning tips to consider:

- Ask if there are any special events or activities for children. My kids were thrilled to meet some of the Star Trek characters at a Wonderland event, for example.
- To reduce the begging and pleading for expensive souvenirs, plan what you will buy before you go. Maybe your child would like to collect postcards of the most thrilling rides, or pick one T-shirt with his favourite character.
- Figure out your best compromise between carrying too much stuff and spending too much money. Food and drinks in amusement parks are notoriously overpriced, but carrying enough for your entire family in a backpack all day in the heat will exhaust most parents. Perhaps each child could have his own backpack with snacks and a water bottle, or carry a sports bottle that attaches to a belt loop.
- Plan clothing for the day. Most amusement parks have lockers near the entrance, so you can stash jackets or rain ponchos in case the weather changes. Pick something bright for both adults and children so you can easily

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spot each other in a crowd. Wear comfortable shoes and don't forget a hat! Make a plan in case you are separated. As soon as you arrive, point out to your children the staff members wearing uniforms and name tags. Those are the people they should go to for help if they are lost. But if they lose sight of you, and don't see any staff around, tell your kids they should stay in one place and you will come to find them - that way you're not all running around and missing each other.

If you didn't get a map in advance, get one at the entrance and plan your route. Amusement parks inevitably mean a lot of walking, and you want to avoid backtracking as much as possible.

Consider renting a wagon, even if your child is too big to ride in it. If you have lots of backpacks or end up removing a layer of clothing, you can dump everything in the wagon - especially appreciated in hot weather.

Know your child when it comes to the fear factor. If your child has a phobia about insects, for example, avoid "It's Tough to Be a Bug" in Disney World's Animal Kingdom. Roller coasters are great fun for some kids, and absolutely terrifying for others. If your child has a queasy stomach, avoid rides that go in circles and the "simulator" rides that usually involve lots of bouncing around. Signs at the entrance to these rides will warn you to stay away if you suffer from motion sickness - and they're not kidding.

Sometimes kids in this age group don't have a good time because they are too short for the more exciting rides and think the rides they are allowed on are babyish. (You may be able to determine if your child is the right height from a park's Web site, or you may have to wait until you arrive.) If your child is at this in-between stage, talk about it before you go. If it is going to be too frustrating, perhaps this is the year to skip the park altogether.

Don't burn out early. Watch for signs of tiredness and break up the day with quieter activities. Sit down to watch a show (if it's hot, try an air-conditioned theatre), head to a restaurant for a sit-down meal, or look for a shady area where everyone can rest. "You should be able to go at a relaxed pace and still fit in all the things you really want to do," says Williams.

The work you put into planning for a theme park outing will be worth it. You'll hit your favourite rides, take time to relax and keep your cool, despite tired feet and a trace of sunburn on your nose. You may even end up loving amusement parks as much as I do.

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### At what age would you be comfortable letting your child walk to school alone?

Under 8 – with me trailing half a block behind

8 or 9 – so long as it's a really short distance and we've done lots of safety planning

10 or 11 – As long as I feel he's mature enough to handle it

12 or 13 – Kids are babysitting by this age, so she's probably ready for this kind of independence

14 and up – He'll be in high school by then, time to start letting him flap his wings!

Results are for an upcoming issue of *Today's Parent*