

The FEC Gap: A Framework for Understanding What Family Entertainment Parks Leave Unresolved

Dr. Maksim Godovykh

Abstract

Family entertainment parks are commonly evaluated through attraction mix, attendance, revenue, capacity, and customer satisfaction. These indicators are important, but they can conceal structural weaknesses in how the experience is designed and renewed. This article introduces the FEC Gap framework as a system-level approach to understanding recurring limitations in equipment-led family entertainment centers, activity parks, indoor playgrounds, trampoline parks, arcades, and related venues. Building on the FEC Gap Taxonomy, the framework organizes 128 identified gaps into ten interdependent domains: novelty and repeat visitation; child development and meaningful value; personalization, progression, and age relevance; parent and whole-family experience; social, community, and programming; physical environment, accessibility, and comfort; technology, data, and digital continuity; operations, staffing, and service delivery; business model and revenue; and brand, storytelling, and emotional engagement. The central proposition is that many apparent attraction problems are actually experience-system problems. The article develops an industry-oriented logic linking attraction performance to family experience, emotional response, perceived value, repeat behavior, and economic outcomes, and proposes a research agenda for testing these relationships.

Family Entertainment Parks as Experience Systems

A family entertainment park is not experienced as a spreadsheet of attractions. A family arrives with expectations, moves through a physical and social environment, encounters staff and other guests, waits, eats, rests, makes choices, participates in activities, experiences emotions, and leaves with a memory of the visit. Customer experience research therefore provides a more appropriate starting point than equipment inventory alone. Experience is multidimensional and unfolds through interactions among cognitive, emotional, sensory, behavioral, and social components rather than through a single moment of consumption (Godovykh & Tasci, 2020a). In tourism and hospitality, the environment, service system, and sequence of encounters can influence experienced utility, satisfaction, memory, and loyalty in different ways (Godovykh & Tasci, 2020b; Godovykh & Tasci, 2021).

This perspective is especially important in family entertainment because the product is jointly consumed. Children may focus on excitement, challenge, autonomy, novelty, and peers, while parents may simultaneously evaluate safety, cleanliness, developmental value, comfort, food, price, and convenience. A park can therefore contain strong attractions and still produce a weak family experience. The FEC Gap Taxonomy was developed to describe precisely these recurring mismatches in traditional equipment-led family entertainment centers and related activity-park formats (Godovykh, 2026).

The framework does not assume that traditional attractions are undesirable. Trampolines, slides, climbing structures, arcade games, ropes courses, soft play, and obstacle courses can generate substantial value. The problem emerges when the attraction itself becomes the dominant design unit and when the surrounding experience lacks progression, personalization, storytelling, social connection, parent value, or a content-refresh system. In this sense, the distinction is between owning attractions and operating an experience platform.

Ten Domains of the FEC Gap

The first domain is novelty, content, and repeat visitation. The initial excitement of a new venue can decline when repeated exposure makes the environment predictable. The taxonomy therefore separates novelty decay from related problems such as attraction fatigue, experience repetition, static infrastructure dependence, weak replayability, insufficient discovery, limited seasonal programming, slow trend adaptation, and a single-visit design bias (Godovykh, 2026). The managerial implication is that repeat visitation cannot depend exclusively on the physical novelty of the equipment.

The second domain concerns child development and meaningful value. Play and active leisure can support physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development, but not every entertaining activity provides the same developmental opportunities. The taxonomy identifies gaps in creativity, problem solving, agency, collaboration, communication, real-world relevance, digital creation, and tangible outcomes. This expands the design question from whether children are occupied to what the experience allows them to practice, decide, create, improve, or communicate. The argument is consistent with child-development literature emphasizing active, socially interactive, meaningful, and iterative play (Yogman et al., 2018).

The third domain addresses personalization, progression, and age relevance. Many parks reset the customer relationship at every visit. A child may use the same attraction in essentially the same way regardless of prior experience, interests, or skill. In contrast, motivational theory suggests that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are important conditions for sustained intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Levels, adaptive challenge, interest-based pathways, persistent identity, saved projects, and recognition of mastery can therefore be understood as experience-design mechanisms rather than superficial gamification.

The fourth domain is the parent and whole-family experience. Parents are often treated as payers and supervisors rather than co-users of the venue. Passive waiting, poor adult comfort, weak progress communication, limited co-creation, and fragmented sibling experiences can lower total family value even when the child is having fun. The fifth domain extends this logic to social and community programming. Clubs, recurring workshops, exhibitions, competitions, school relationships, community partnerships, and intergenerational activities can transform a park from an occasional destination into a recurring family platform.

The remaining domains concern the environment and the operating system. Accessibility, seating, sensory regulation, wayfinding, calm space, and circulation affect whether families can comfortably use the venue. Technology can either deepen the experience through personalization, creation,

feedback, and continuity or become a disconnected screen layer. Staffing, maintenance, facilitation, service recovery, food operations, and scheduling influence whether the designed concept can actually be delivered. Business-model limitations can restrict investment in programming and refresh, while weak storytelling and brand continuity can make every visit feel disconnected from the next. These domains are interdependent rather than additive.

From Individual Gaps to a Causal System

A useful way to interpret the taxonomy is as a sequence of linked outcomes. Attractions and service processes first influence what the family actually experiences. That experience generates emotions, perceived value, effort, learning, social connection, and memories. These responses shape the desire to return, willingness to recommend, membership retention, birthday conversion, and other behavioral outcomes. Those behavioral outcomes ultimately affect unit economics. The proposed sequence is therefore: attraction and service performance → experience quality → family value and emotion → memory and return motivation → repeat behavior → economic performance.

This sequence is deliberately more complex than a simple satisfaction model. Satisfaction can be measured after a visit, but it is not identical to the moment-by-moment utility experienced during the visit, nor does it capture every memory process that later influences choice (Godovykh & Tasci, 2020b). Post-visit emotions can also influence loyalty beyond global evaluations of satisfaction (Godovykh & Tasci, 2021). For family entertainment parks, this means that operators should examine not only whether families report being satisfied, but what happened during the visit, which moments produced strong emotions, what children and parents remember differently, and what unfinished or future-oriented reasons exist to return.

The experience-economy perspective further supports the need to stage coherent experiences rather than merely deliver services. Pine and Gilmore (1998) argued that economic value can increasingly be created through memorable experiences. In a family entertainment park, however, memorability should not be equated with spectacle alone. A child may remember completing a difficult climbing level, presenting a robot, creating a game with a parent, winning a team challenge, or contributing to a collaborative project. Development, agency, and social meaning can therefore become components of experiential differentiation.

Beyond the Equipment-Centered Response

The most important use of the FEC Gap framework is diagnostic. A park experiencing declining repeat visitation might conclude that it needs a new attraction. The gap framework asks a wider set of questions: Has the existing attraction developed new challenges? Does the child have a next level? Are there rotating missions or competitions? Does the park remember prior achievements? Is there a social or club layer? Are parents receiving a reason to value frequent visits? Are there monthly or seasonal content changes? If several of these mechanisms are absent, an expensive equipment purchase may create a temporary spike without solving the structural problem.

A development-rich response does not require every park to resemble a school. The principle is entertainment first, with development embedded in the activity. A climbing wall can include

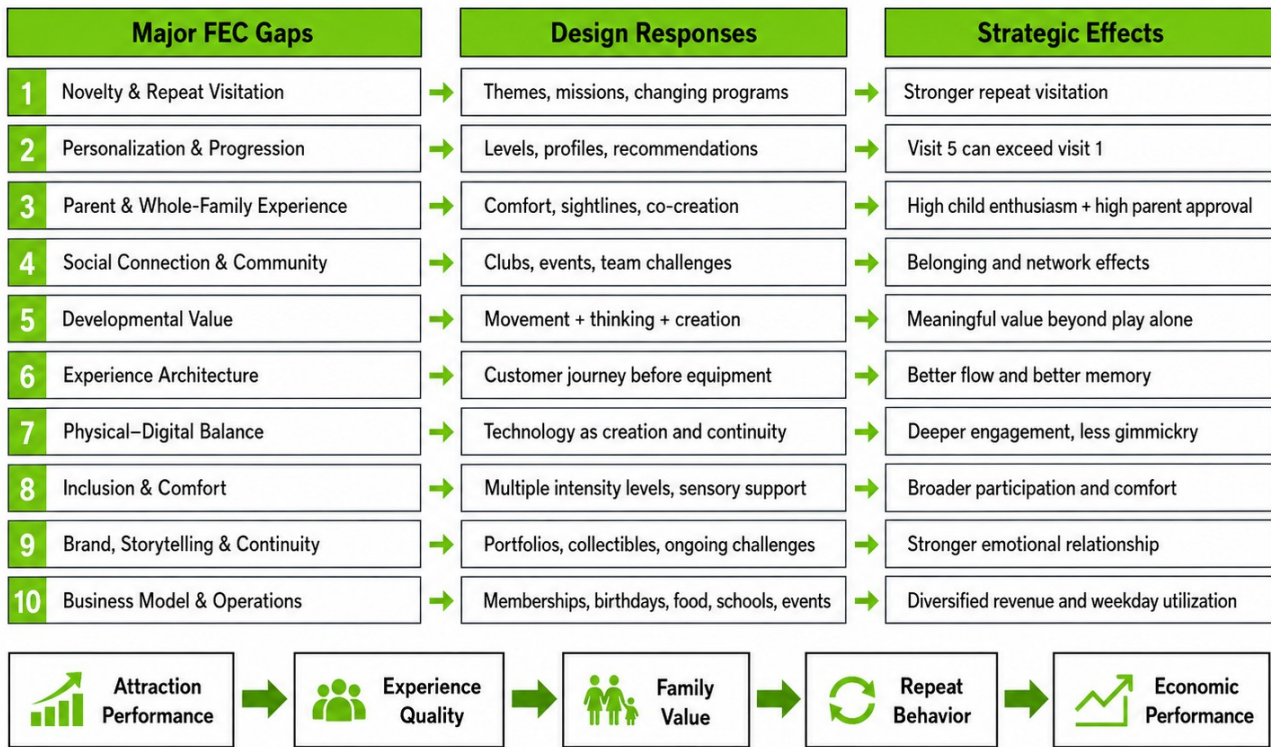
progressive routes and problem solving. A trampoline court can use targets, team missions, movement sequences, and personal records. An interactive screen can allow children to create a game rather than only consume one. A multipurpose room can host presentations, robotics competitions, family challenges, or children's business fairs. These ideas align with the broader operating framework in *How to Build the Best Activity Park*, which treats child development, market strategy, design, operations, loyalty, and economics as one system (Godovykh et al., 2026).

The Future Experience Park concept represents one application of this logic rather than the sole possible solution. Its proposed standard combines child excitement, developmental value, agency, creation, physical-digital balance, progression, family value, social connection, inclusion, measurable outcomes, and operational sustainability (Future Experience Park, 2026). Other operators can use different attractions, brands, technologies, and business models while applying the same research question: which gaps are most important for their families, and which solutions create measurable improvement?

Research Agenda

The FEC Gap framework should ultimately be tested with direct industry data rather than accepted only as a conceptual classification. Priority empirical work should link specific gaps to observed behaviors and financial outcomes across different park formats.

- Develop and validate multi-item scales for the major FEC gap domains using parent, child, operator, and expert samples.
- Measure how gap severity differs among trampoline parks, indoor playgrounds, hybrid FECs, adventure parks, creator-oriented concepts, and destination attractions.
- Test whether reductions in novelty, parent, progression, and social gaps predict repeat visitation after controlling for price, distance, demographics, and attraction quality.
- Separate child and parent evaluations rather than combining the family into one satisfaction score.
- Use experimental pilots to determine whether low-capital interventions such as missions, programming, progression, or co-creation can improve retention without major equipment replacement.



Conclusion

The FEC Gap framework reframes family entertainment park development from an attraction-acquisition problem into an experience-system problem. Equipment remains essential, but its value depends on what families can do with it, how the experience changes over time, how well different family members are served, and whether the visit creates reasons to return. By organizing 128 recurring gaps into ten domains, the framework provides a research agenda for understanding why some venues become repetitive, fragmented, parent-unfriendly, or difficult to differentiate. The broader opportunity is to design family entertainment parks as adaptive environments where physical play is integrated with challenge, creativity, skills, social connection, co-creation, progression, and community life.

References

- Future Experience Park. (2026). Future Experience Park: Master concept & website strategy [Internal strategy document].
- Godovykh, M. (2026). FEC gap taxonomy.
- Godovykh, M., Kovsharov, P., & Parker, A. (2026). How to build the best activity park: A complete guide for owners, operators, investors, and franchisees. KFW Publishing.
- Godovykh, M., & Tasci, A. D. A. (2020a). Customer experience in tourism: A review of definitions, components, and measurements. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 35, 100694. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2020.100694>
- Godovykh, M., & Tasci, A. D. A. (2020b). Satisfaction vs experienced utility: Current issues and opportunities. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 23(18), 2273–2282. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2020.1769573>

- Godovykh, M., & Tasci, A. D. A. (2021). The influence of post-visit emotions on destination loyalty. *Tourism Review*, 76(1), 277–288. <https://doi.org/10.1108/TR-01-2020-0025>
- Pine, B. J., II, & Gilmore, J. H. (1998). Welcome to the experience economy. *Harvard Business Review*, 76(4), 97–105.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 68–78. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68>
- Yogman, M., Garner, A., Hutchinson, J., Hirsh-Pasek, K., & Golinkoff, R. M. (2018). The power of play: A pediatric role in enhancing development in young children. *Pediatrics*, 142(3), e20182058. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2018-2058>