

The Passive Parent Problem: Why Family Entertainment Parks Design for Children and Forget Half of the Customer

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Abstract

Many family entertainment parks are built around an implicit division of labor: the child plays, while the adult pays, supervises, waits, and manages logistics. This article argues that the passive-parent model is both an experience-design gap and a commercial constraint. Family entertainment is jointly consumed, but parents and children may evaluate the same visit through different criteria. Drawing on family decision-making, servicescape research, parent-child play, customer experience theory, and child-centered design, the paper proposes a Parent Experience Continuum in which adults can move among six legitimate modes: Relax, Work, Observe, Join, Connect, and Understand. The most strategically distinctive mode is co-creation, in which parents and children jointly solve, build, design, compete, or present rather than merely sharing physical proximity. The article argues that parent value should be designed intentionally but participation should remain optional. Comfortable waiting is important; eliminating the assumption that waiting is the parent's only role is more important.

The Adult as a Co-User of the Park

Family entertainment parks frequently devote most of their design effort to the child-facing attraction floor. Adult needs are addressed later through benches, perimeter seating, Wi-Fi, or food. This hierarchy reflects a narrow definition of the user. Parents are not only purchasers. They experience the noise, queues, temperature, seating, food, cleanliness, staff interactions, sightlines, sibling logistics, and emotional rhythm of the visit. These elements affect overall customer experience even when they are not the reason the child initially asked to attend (Bitner, 1992; Godovykh & Tasci, 2020a).

Children also influence family consumption and leisure decisions. Their preferences can affect where the family goes and what it purchases, while parents retain control over budget, safety, transportation, time, and repeat visitation (Flurry, 2007). The FEC Gap Taxonomy captures this asymmetry through the parent-child expectation gap, parent experience deficit, passive waiting model, parent-child co-creation gap, family unity gap, and progress communication gap (Godovykh, 2026). The underlying issue is that the same visit contains more than one customer experience.

Kid-Friendly World makes a related argument in a wider context: communities, destinations, hotels, events, and experiences should treat families as foundational users, not as a peripheral audience, and should position children as co-creators rather than passive recipients (Godovykh, 2025). The same principle is particularly relevant to family entertainment parks because adults may remain inside the venue for hours.

Waiting Is Not Neutral Time

Waiting is often treated as the absence of experience, but in service environments it is part of the experience. The servicescape – the physical environment in which service is delivered – can influence emotional responses, perceptions, and behavior (Bitner, 1992). In an activity park, a parent who spends two hours on an uncomfortable bench, cannot see children easily, has nowhere to charge a phone, dislikes the food, and struggles with noise may evaluate the visit negatively even if the child reports strong enjoyment.

This makes basic adult comfort commercially relevant. Reliable Wi-Fi, power, ergonomic seating, clean restrooms, reasonable acoustics, visibility, coffee, adult-oriented food, and calm zones are not luxury add-ons. They reduce the friction of family leisure. A venue that enables a parent to read, answer email, talk with another parent, or eat comfortably can increase perceived value without changing the children's attractions.

However, improving the waiting area does not fully resolve the strategic gap. A beautiful lounge still assumes that the adult's primary role is to wait. The stronger model gives parents a choice among multiple modes of involvement.

The Parent Experience Continuum

A whole-family family entertainment park can be designed around six adult modes. Parents may Relax in a comfortable environment; Work when family routines require productivity; Observe through clear sightlines and understandable supervision; Join an activity; Connect with other parents, schools, providers, or community programs; and Understand what the child attempted, created, practiced, or achieved. These modes should coexist rather than compete.

The model is intentionally flexible. A parent should not be forced to participate in every activity. For some families, an hour of independent child play and quiet adult time is highly valuable. For others, the memorable part of the visit is completing a challenge together. Good design allows the parent to change modes over the course of the visit. The key is optionality rather than compulsory togetherness.

The final mode – Understand – is particularly relevant to development-rich family entertainment. Parents may observe a child completing an obstacle but not recognize the planning, persistence, coordination, or social skills involved. Simple progress summaries, portfolios, levels, or explanations of the capabilities embedded in activities can make developmental value visible without turning the attraction into a classroom.

Co-Creation Versus Mere Co-Presence

Family togetherness is often measured implicitly by physical proximity: the family entered the venue together, therefore it had family time. Yet co-presence does not guarantee interaction. Parents may remain seated while children disperse into different zones. Siblings of different ages may separate. The venue can therefore keep a family in the same building without creating meaningful shared experience.

Co-creation offers a different mechanism. Parent and child can jointly design a game, create a story, build a structure, complete a movement mission, plan a future city, solve a mystery, record a family podcast, develop a simple business concept, or present a project. Such activities create interdependence: the outcome is produced through shared decisions rather than parallel participation. Research on father-child play and broader parent-child interaction suggests that active play relationships can contribute to developmental processes, although effects vary by context and study design (Robinson et al., 2021).

The commercial implication is not that every station needs to be parent-child. Rather, parks should intentionally create a portfolio that includes independent child play, sibling activities, peer challenges, parent recovery, and genuine family co-creation. The Future Experience Park strategy formalizes this through parent modes of Relax, Work, Observe, Join, Connect, and Understand, and through dedicated parent-child creation opportunities (Future Experience Park, 2026).

Parent Experience and Dual Loyalty

The parent problem becomes especially important when repeat visitation is considered. A child may leave enthusiastic while the parent leaves exhausted, dissatisfied with food, or unconvinced that another visit is worth the price. Alternatively, the parent may value safety and development while the child feels insufficient excitement. These divergent evaluations motivate the Dual-Loyalty Model developed later in this series.

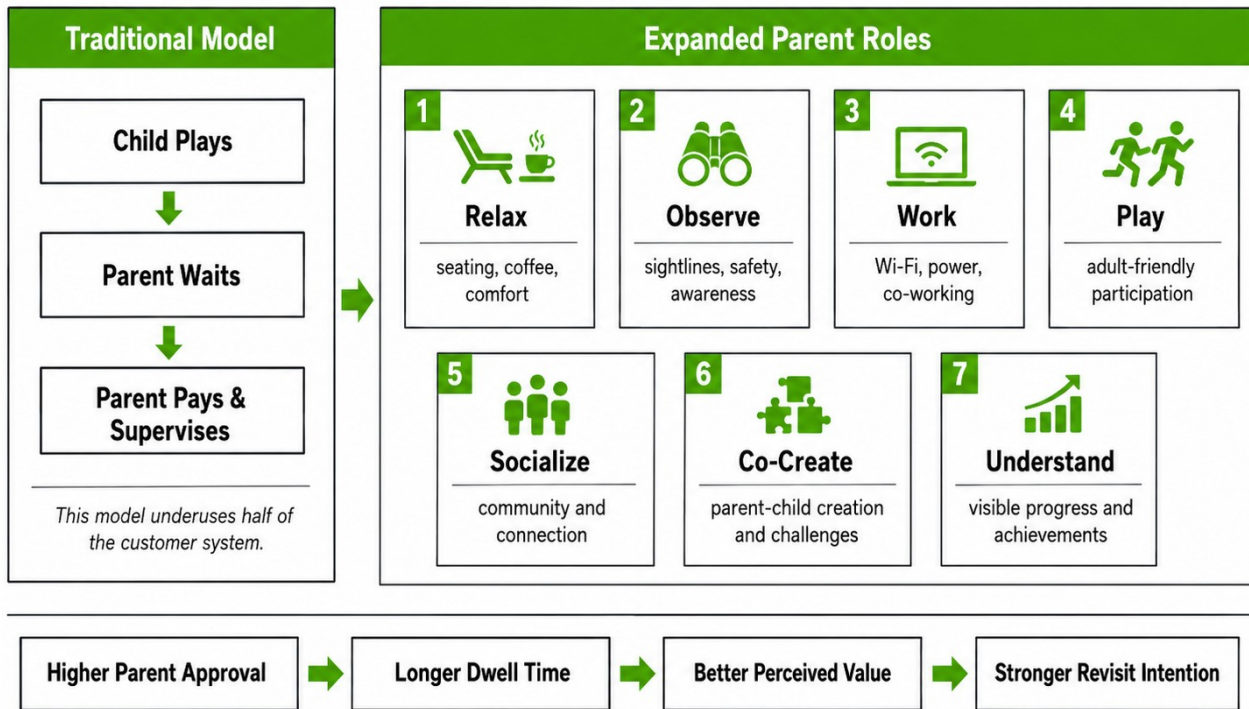
Post-visit emotions are relevant because they can influence loyalty beyond the global cognitive judgment that the experience was satisfactory (Godovykh & Tasci, 2021). Parents may remember relief, frustration, pride, connection, or exhaustion. Children may remember excitement, fear, mastery, competition, or boredom. A whole-family design strategy should therefore consider both emotional trajectories and the moments likely to remain salient after the visit.

Industry Applications

The passive-parent gap can often be addressed incrementally rather than through a major renovation. The first priority is to remove unnecessary friction. The second is to introduce optional participation and co-creation. The third is to make the child's progress and outcomes visible.

- Provide comfortable seating, Wi-Fi, charging, useful work surfaces, good coffee and adult-oriented food where the operating model permits.
- Improve sightlines and wayfinding so supervision feels easier rather than more stressful.
- Create at least several activities in which adults and children can genuinely cooperate rather than simply take turns.
- Program recurring family challenges, creator workshops, exhibitions, and parent-child competitions.
- Communicate achievements, projects, and next challenges so parents can see why frequent visits may be valuable.

- Design sibling-compatible experiences and shared recovery points to reduce fragmentation of the family journey.



Conclusion

The passive-parent model underestimates the family nature of family entertainment. Parents are simultaneous purchasers, evaluators, service users, supervisors, and potential participants. A better activity park does not simply make waiting more comfortable; it gives adults multiple legitimate ways to use their time and to connect with children when they choose. The most differentiated opportunity lies in co-creation, where family members produce a shared solution, challenge, project, or memory. Designing for parents therefore strengthens not only adult satisfaction but the coherence of the entire family experience.

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