

What Matters Most to Families?

Attribute Priorities in Family Entertainment Park Choice

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Abstract

This study examines which characteristics parents prioritize when evaluating family entertainment destinations. A forced ranking of ten attributes was combined with open-ended responses about what matters most when choosing a venue. The results show a clear hierarchy: value, safety and cleanliness, and age-spanning activity choice form the decision foundation. Fun and engagement dominate spontaneous descriptions, while learning, physical play, novelty, parent comfort, food, and personalization operate primarily as differentiators once the basic conditions are satisfied. The findings support an experience-system view in which attraction quality must be interpreted together with family value, convenience, developmental meaning, and reasons to return.

Study design and analysis

Eligible U.S. parents and guardians of children ages 3–14 first described, in their own words, what matters most when choosing a family entertainment destination. They then ranked ten attributes from most to least important. Analysis combined average rank, first-place share, top-three share, and inductive thematic coding of open-ended responses. Qualitative themes are non-exclusive because one response can express several priorities.

Results

Value and safety form the decision foundation

Affordable price and value for money received the strongest overall ranking, closely followed by safety and cleanliness. Both attributes were placed in the top three by a majority of respondents. Activities for different ages formed a third foundational requirement, indicating that parents frequently evaluate a venue as a whole-family purchase rather than as a single-child attraction.

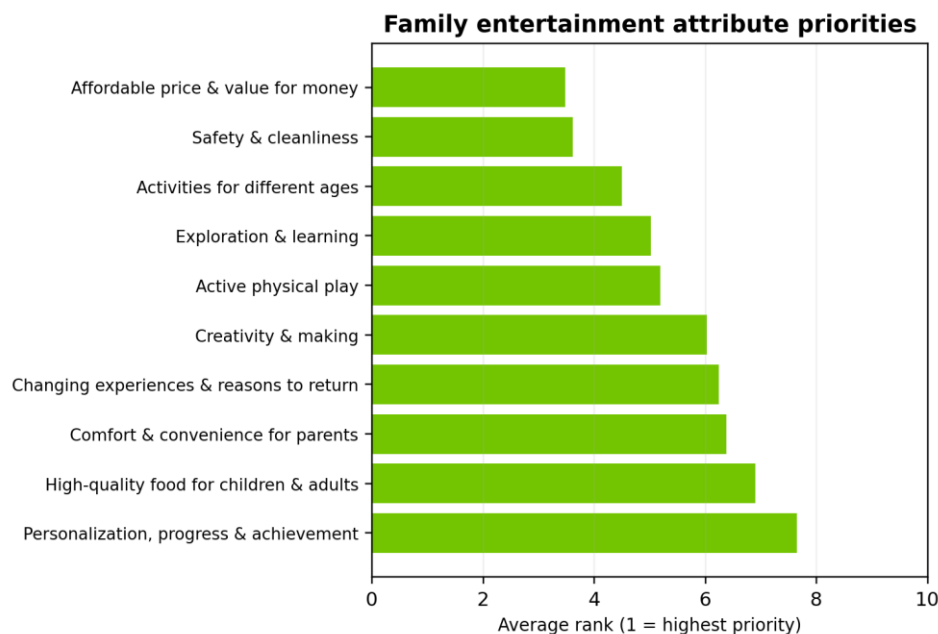


Figure 1. Average ranking of ten family entertainment attributes. Lower values indicate higher priority.

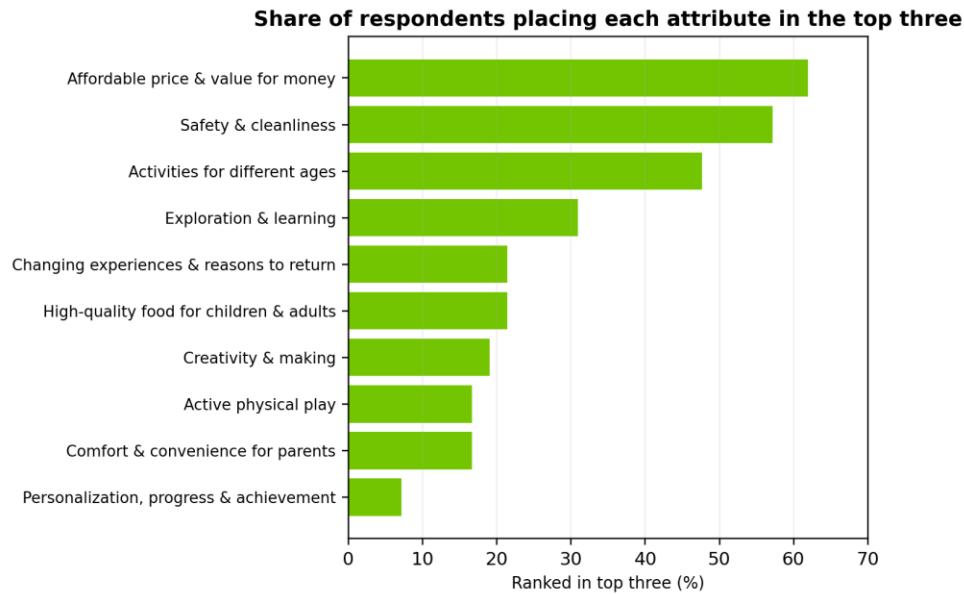


Figure 2. Percentage placing each attribute among the top three priorities.

Attribute	Average rank	Ranked #1	Top three
Affordable price and value for money	3.48	26.2%	61.9%
Safety and cleanliness	3.62	23.8%	57.1%
Activities for different ages	4.50	19.0%	47.6%
Exploration and learning	5.02	7.1%	31.0%
Active physical play	5.19	4.8%	16.7%
Creativity and making	6.02	7.1%	19.0%
Changing experiences and reasons to return	6.24	7.1%	21.4%
Comfort and convenience for parents	6.38	2.4%	16.7%
High-quality food for children and adults	6.90	2.4%	21.4%
Personalization, progress and achievement	7.64	0.0%	7.1%

Open-ended responses reveal the emotional logic behind the rankings

The open-ended answers add an important layer. Parents rarely describe the ideal venue in abstract product language. Instead, they talk about preventing boredom, keeping children happy, avoiding wasted money, staying safe, finding enough choices for different ages, and making the outing enjoyable for adults as well. The dominant qualitative categories were fun and engagement, affordability and value, whole-family experience, safety and cleanliness, variety and age fit, and convenience.

“For me safety is number one but also keeping the kids engaged and enjoying the entire time. I hate paying a fortune and them telling me they are bored rather quickly.” — Safety + value + engagement

“I like when we have things to do for everyone to stay entertained — things for the younger kids and things for the teenagers.” — Multi-age variety

“One thing I look for is accessibility to rides. It’s no fun to go to a park and stand in line for 90 minutes.” — Access and queue friction

“Something that keeps my kids occupied, but isn’t going to rot their brain. I like it to get them moving, and if possible, something they can share together.” — Physical and developmental value

A hierarchy of family entertainment value

The combined quantitative and qualitative evidence supports a three-layer interpretation. Layer 1 is permission to visit: affordable price, safety, cleanliness and basic convenience. Layer 2 is reason to choose: enough fun, variety, age relevance, physical activity and distinctive experiences to justify the trip. Layer 3 is reason to return: changing content, learning, creation, social value and progression. Importantly, a lower explicit rank does not mean an attribute is unimportant; it may mean that parents treat it as a secondary differentiator rather than a threshold requirement.

Learning and development matter, but usually through entertainment

Exploration and learning ranked above creativity, changing programming and personalization. Open-ended comments show that many parents welcome developmental value, but they often describe it as something that should coexist with fun rather than replace it. This pattern aligns with the broader principle that family entertainment can deliver developmental value through active, meaningful and socially interactive play rather than by resembling formal instruction (Yogman et al., 2018).

Personalization and progression remain a latent proposition

Personalization, progress and achievement ranked last in the forced ranking. This is strategically important. The result does not invalidate progression systems, but it suggests that parents may not spontaneously buy a park because it offers profiles, levels or saved achievements. Such mechanisms are more likely to work when translated into visible benefits: age-appropriate challenge, recognition of mastery, easier repeat visits, recommendations, or a new reason for the child to return. The FEC Gap framework similarly treats progression as an experience-design mechanism rather than a stand-alone attraction proposition.

Directional differences

Some directional patterns are worth monitoring in continued data collection. Families with older children placed safety somewhat higher, while families with younger children placed active physical play somewhat higher. More frequent venue visitors placed exploration and learning higher than less frequent visitors. These patterns are best treated as hypotheses for further testing rather than fixed market segments.

Implications for family entertainment design

The results argue against positioning a future family park around a single fashionable feature. The strongest concept should first prove that it is safe, clean, worth the money and broad enough for the family. Differentiation should then be created through a changing mix of physical play, discovery, making and shared experiences. Parent amenities, food, technology and personalization should reduce friction or deepen the experience, not distract from the central promise that children will have a genuinely good time.

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