

Walt Disney World with Kids

The Ecstasy and the Agony

So overwhelming is the Disney media and advertising presence that any child who watches TV or shops with Mom is likely to get revved up about going to Walt Disney World. Parents, if anything, are even more susceptible. Almost every parent brightens at the prospect of guiding their children through this special place. But the reality of taking a young child (particularly in summer) can be closer to the agony than to the ecstasy.

A Dayton, Ohio, mother took her five-year-old to Disney World in July:

I felt so happy and excited before we went. I guess it was all worth it, but when I look back I think I should have had my head examined. The first day we went to [the Magic Kingdom] it was packed. By 11 in the morning we had walked so far and stood in so many lines that we were all exhausted. Kristy cried about going on anything that looked or even sounded scary and was frightened by all of the Disney characters (they are so big!) except Minnie and Snow White.

We got hungry about the same time as everyone else, but the lines for food were too long and my husband said we would have to wait. By one in the afternoon we were just plugging along, not seeing anything we were really interested in, but picking rides because the lines were short, or because whatever it was was air-conditioned. ... At around 2:30 we finally got something to eat, but by then we were so hot and tired that it felt like we had worked in the yard all day. Kristy insisted on being carried, and we had 50 fights about not going on rides where the lines were too long. At the end, we were so P.O.'d and uncomfortable that we weren't having any fun. Mostly by this time we were just trying to get our money's worth.

Before you stiffen in denial, let me assure you that this family's experience is not unusual. Most young children are as picky about rides as they are about what they eat, and more than half of preschoolers are intimidated by the Disney characters. Few humans (of any age) are mentally or

physically equipped to march all day in a throng of 50,000 people in the hot Florida sun. And would you be surprised to learn that almost 60% of preschoolers said the thing they liked best about their Disney vacation was the hotel swimming pool?

Reality Testing: Whose Dream Is It?

Remember when you were little and you got that nifty electric train for Christmas, the one Dad wouldn't let you play with? Did you wonder who the train was really for? Ask yourself that question about your vacation to Disney World. Whose dream are you trying to make come true: yours or your child's?

Young children read their parents' emotions. When you ask, "Honey, how would you like to go to Disney World?" your child will respond more to your smile and enthusiasm than to any notion of what Disney World is all about. The younger the child, the more this is true. From many preschoolers, you could elicit the same excitement by asking, "Honey, how would you like to go to Cambodia on a dogsled?"

So, is your happy fantasy of introducing your child to Disney magic a pipe dream? Not necessarily, but you have to be practical and open to reality testing. For example, would you increase the probability of a successful visit by waiting a couple of years? Is your child adventuresome enough to sample the variety of Disney World? Will your child have sufficient endurance and patience to cope with long lines and large crowds?

Recommendations for Making the Dream Come True

When planning a Disney World vacation with young children, consider:

Age Although Disney World's color and festivity excite all children, and specific attractions delight toddlers and preschoolers, Disney entertainment is generally oriented to older children and adults. Children should be a fairly mature seven years old to *appreciate* the Magic Kingdom and the Animal Kingdom, and a year or two older to get much out of Epcot or Disney-MGM Studios.

Our readers have an ongoing debate on how old a child should be or the ideal age to go to Disney World. A Waldwick, New Jersey, mother reports:

My kids, not in the least shy or clingy, were frightened of many attractions. I thought my six-year-old was the "perfect age" but quickly realized this was not the case. Disney makes even the most simple, child-friendly story into a major theatrical production, to the point where my kids couldn't associate their beloved movies to the attraction in front of them.

A Rockaway, New Jersey, mom writes:

You were absolutely right about young kids—I found myself re-reading your section "The Ecstasy and the Agony." Unfortunately, our experience was

pure agony, with the exception of our hotel pool. It was the one and only thing our kids wanted to do. I planned this trip and saved for over a year and cried all week at the disappointment that our kids just wanted to swim.

A Dallas, Texas, dad says:

I must echo the thoughts of readers about parents who bring infants and toddlers to WDW. Are these people nuts? They should find a better way to waste their hard-earned vacation dollars. These children (and therefore their parents) cannot ride any of the best rides and won't remember the ones they do ride five minutes after they get off. It is tough enough walking these huge parks without pushing around one or more children in a stroller. My advice to these parents is to go to a nice beach, rest, let the kids play in the sand, spend less money, and come back in a few years. Disney World will still be there.

A Lexington, Kentucky, couple agrees:

To the folks with kids in strollers . . . Six years ago we carried an infant in a Snuggli, pushed another child in a stroller, and carried the diaper bag from hell. This year, all were on their own foot power. What a difference. Those of you with preschoolers, please wait until they are older. The kids will have just as much fun and may even remember it when they are older. You will actually enjoy the trip instead of being a Grand Canyon pack mule.

But a Cleveland, Ohio, mother takes exception:

The best advice for parents with young kids is to remember for whom you are there and if possible accommodate the kids' need to do things again and again. I think you underestimate Disney's appeal to young children. Since we've gotten home my four-year-old has said "I don't want to live in Cleveland. I want to live at Disney World" at least five times a day.

Mental preparation is key, says a New York mother of two:

I disagree with what you say about toddlers being too young. My two-year-old had a great time! He loved the Animal Kingdom, the characters, and many of the rides. Even my seven-month-old enjoyed Disney World. He had a good time just looking at the colors and lights. As long as you understand that going with babies will take a little extra work, you can have a good time. . . . If one of my children was cranky, we just left.

A Lawrenceville, Georgia, mother of two toddlers advises maintaining the children's normal schedule:

The first day, we tried your suggestion about an early start, so we woke the children (ages four and two) and hurried them to get going. BAD IDEA with toddlers. This put them off schedule for naps and meals the rest of the day. It is best to let young ones stay on their regular schedule and see Disney at their own pace.

Finally, an Alabama woman encourages parents to be more open-minded about taking toddlers to Disney World:

Parents of toddlers, don't be afraid to bring your little ones! Ours absolutely loved it, and we have priceless photos and videos of our little ones and their grandparents with Mickey and the gang. For all those people in your book who complained about our little sweethearts crying, sorry, but we found your character-hogging, cursing, ill-mannered, cutting-in-line, screaming-in-our-ears-on-the-roller-coasters teens and preteens much more obnoxious.

When to Visit Avoid the hot, crowded summer months, especially if you have preschoolers. Go in October, November (except Thanksgiving), early December, January, February, or May. If you have children of varied ages and they're good students, take the older ones out of school and visit during the cooler, less congested off-season. Arrange special assignments relating to educational aspects of Disney World. If your children can't afford to miss school, take your vacation as soon as the school year ends. Alternatively, try late August before school starts.

Build Naps and Rest into Your Itinerary The parks are huge; don't try to see everything in one day. Tour in early morning and return to your hotel around 11:30 a.m. for lunch, a swim, and a nap. Even during off-season when crowds are smaller and the temperature more pleasant, the major parks' size will exhaust most children younger than eight by lunchtime. Return to the park in late afternoon or early evening and continue touring. A family from Texas underlines the importance of naps and rest:

Despite not following any of your "tours," we did follow the theme of visiting a specific park in the morning, leaving midafternoon for either a nap back at the room or a trip to the [hotel] pool, and then returning to one of the parks in the evening. On the few occasions when we skipped your advice, I was muttering to myself by dinner. I can't tell you what I was muttering ...

Regarding naps, this mom doesn't mince words:

For parents of small kids: take the book's advice and get out of the park and take the nap, take the nap, TAKE THE NAP! Never in my life have I seen so many parents screaming at, ridiculing, or slapping their kids. (What a vacation!) WDW is overwhelming for kids and adults. Even though the rental strollers recline for sleeping, we noticed that most of the toddlers and preschoolers didn't give up and sleep until 5 p.m., several hours after the fun had worn off, and right about the time their parents wanted them to be awake and polite in a restaurant.

A Rochester, New York, mom was adamant:

[You] absolutely must rest during the day. Kids went from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. in the Magic Kingdom. Kids did great that day, but we were all completely

worthless the next day. Definitely must pace yourself. Don't ever try to do two full days of park sight-seeing in a row. Rest during the day. Go to a water park or sleep in every other day.

If you plan to return to your hotel at midday and want your room made up, let housekeeping know.

Where to Stay The time and hassle involved in commuting to and from the theme parks will be less if your hotel is close by. This doesn't necessarily mean you have to lodge inside Disney World. Because the World is so geographically dispersed, many off-property hotels are closer to the parks than some Disney resorts (see our chart on pages 210–233 showing commuting times from Disney and non-Disney hotels). Regardless where you stay, it's imperative that you take young children out of the parks each day for a few hours of rest. Neglecting to relax will get the whole family in a snit and ruin the day (or the vacation).

If you have young children, book a hotel within 20 minutes of the theme parks. It's true you can revive somewhat by retreating to a Disney hotel for lunch or by finding a quiet restaurant in the parks, but there's no substitute for returning to the comfort of your hotel. Regardless of what you've heard, children too large to sleep in a stroller won't relax unless you take them back to your hotel. If it takes renting a car to make returning to your hotel practicable, rent the car.

Thousands of new rooms have been built in and near Disney World, many of them affordable. With planning, you should have no difficulty finding lodging to meet your requirements.

If you're traveling with children 12 and younger and want to stay in the World, we recommend the Polynesian, Grand Floridian, or Wilderness Lodge and Villas Resorts (in that order) if they fit your budget. For less expensive rooms, try the Port Orleans Resort. Bargain lodging is available at the All-Star and Pop Century resorts. Log cabins at Fort Wilderness Campground are also economical. Outside the World, check our top hotels for families on pages 197–205.

Be in Touch with Your Feelings When you or your children get tired and irritable, call time-out. Trust your instincts. What would feel best? Another ride, an ice-cream break, or going back to the room for a nap?

The way to protect your considerable investment in your Disney vacation is to stay happy and have a good time. You don't have to meet a quota for experiencing attractions. Do what you want.

Least Common Denominators Somebody is going to run out of steam first, and when they do, the whole family will be affected. Sometimes a snack break will revive the flagging member. Sometimes, however, it's better to return to your hotel. Pushing the tired or discontented beyond their capacity will spoil the day for them—and you. Energy levels vary.

Be prepared to respond to members of your group who poop out. *Hint:* “We’ve driven a thousand miles to take you to Walt Disney World and now you’re ruining everything!” is not an appropriate response.

Building Endurance Though most children are active, their normal play usually doesn’t condition them for the exertion required to tour a Disney park. Start family walks four to six weeks before your trip to get in shape. A mother from Wesconsville, Pennsylvania, reports:

We had our six-year-old begin walking with us a bit every day one month before leaving—when we arrived [at Walt Disney World], her little legs could carry her, and she had a lot of stamina.

Setting Limits and Making Plans Avoid arguments and disappointment by establishing guidelines for each day, and get everybody committed. Include:

1. Wake-up time and breakfast plans.
2. When to depart for the park.
3. What to take with you.
4. A policy for splitting the group or for staying together.
5. What to do if the group gets separated or someone is lost.
6. How long you intend to tour in the morning and what you want to see, including plans in the event an attraction is closed or too crowded.
7. A policy on what you can afford for snacks.
8. A time for returning to the hotel to rest.
9. When you will return to the park and how late you will stay.
10. Dinner plans.
11. A policy for buying souvenirs, including who pays: Mom and Dad or the kids.
12. Bedtimes.

Be Flexible Any day at Disney World includes surprises; be prepared to adjust your plan. Listen to your intuition.

Maintaining Some Semblance of Order and Discipline OK, OK, wipe that smirk off your face. Order and discipline on the road may seem like an oxymoron to you, but you won’t be hooting when your five-year-old launches a screaming mimi in the middle of Fantasyland. Your willingness to give this subject serious consideration before you leave home may well be the most important element of your pre-trip preparation.

Discipline and maintaining order are more difficult when traveling than at home because everyone is, as a Boston mom put it, “in and out”—in strange surroundings and out of the normal routine. For children, it’s hard to contain excitement and anticipation that pop to the surface in the form of fidgety hyperactivity, nervous energy, and sometimes, acting out. Confinement in a car, plane, or hotel room only exacerbates the situation, and kids often tend to be louder than normal, more aggressive with siblings, and much more inclined to push the envelope of parental patience. Once in the theme parks, it doesn’t get much better. There’s

more elbow room, but there's also overstimulation, crowds, heat, and miles of walking. All this, coupled with marginal or inadequate rest, can lead to a meltdown in the most harmonious of families.

Sound parenting and standards of discipline practiced at home, applied consistently, will suffice to handle most situations on vacation. Still, it's instructive to study the hand you are dealt when traveling. For starters, aside from being jazzed and ablaze with adrenaline, your kids may believe that rules followed at home are somehow suspended when traveling. Parents reinforce this misguided intuition by being inordinately lenient in the interest of maintaining peace in the family. While some of your home protocols (cleaning your plate, going to bed at a set time, etc.) might be relaxed to good effect on vacation, differing from your normal approach to discipline can precipitate major misunderstanding and possibly disaster.

Children, not unexpectedly, are likely to believe that a vacation (especially a vacation to Walt Disney World) is expressly for them. This reinforces their focus on their own needs and largely erases any consideration of yours. Such a mindset dramatically increases their sense of hurt and disappointment when you correct them or deny them something they want. An incident that would hardly elicit a pouty lip at home could well escalate to tears or defiance when traveling. It's important before you depart on your trip, therefore, to discuss your vacation needs with your children, and to explore their wants and expectations as well.

The stakes are high for everyone on a vacation—for you because of the cost in time and dollars, but also because your vacation represents a rare opportunity for rejuvenation and renewal. The stakes are high for your children too. Children tend to romanticize travel, building anticipation to an almost unbearable level. Discussing the trip in advance can ground expectations to a certain extent, but a child's imagination will, in the end, trump reality every time. The good news is that you can take advantage of your children's emotional state to establish pre-agreed rules and conditions for their conduct while on vacation. Because your children want what's being offered soooooo badly, they will be unusually accepting and conscientious regarding whatever rules are agreed upon.

According to *Unofficial Guide* child psychologist Dr. Karen Turnbow, successful response to (or avoidance of) behavioral problems on the road begins with a clear-cut disciplinary policy at home. Both at home and on vacation the approach should be the same, and should be based on the following key concepts:

- 1. Let Expectations Be Known** Discuss what you expect from your children, but don't try to cover every imaginable situation (that's what lawyers are for—just kidding). Cover expectations regarding compliance with parental directives, treatment of siblings, resolution of disputes,

schedules (including morning wake-up and bedtimes), courtesy and manners, staying together, and who pays for what.

2. Explain the Consequences of Noncompliance Detail very clearly and firmly the consequence of not meeting expectations. This should be very straightforward and unambiguous. If you do X (or don't do X), this is what will happen.

3. Warning You're dealing with excited, expectant children, not machines, so it's important to issue a warning before meting out discipline. It's critical to understand that we're talking about one unequivocal warning rather than multiple warnings or nagging. These last undermine your credibility and make your expectations appear relative or less than serious. Multiple warnings or nagging also effectively pass control of the situation from you to your child (who sometimes may continue acting out as an attention-getting strategy).

4. Follow Through If you say you're going to do something, do it. Period. Children must understand that you are absolutely serious and committed.

5. Consistency Inconsistency makes discipline a random event in the eyes of your children. Random discipline encourages random behavior, which translates to a nearly total loss of parental control. Long term, both at home and on the road, your response to a given situation or transgression must be perfectly predictable. Structure and repetition, essential for a child to learn, cannot be achieved in the absence of consistency.

Although the above are the five biggies, there are several corollary concepts and techniques that are worthy of consideration.

First, understand that whining, tantrums, defiance, sibling friction, and even holding up the group are ways in which children communicate with parents. Frequently the object or precipitant of a situation has little or no relation to the unacceptable behavior. A fit may on the surface appear to be about the ice cream you refused to buy little Robby, but there's almost always something deeper, a subtext that is closer to the truth (this is the reason why ill behavior often persists after you give in to a child's demands). As often as not, the real cause is a need for attention. This need is so powerful in some children that they will subject themselves to certain punishment and parental displeasure to garner the attention they crave, even if it is negative.

To get at the root cause of the behavior in question requires both active listening and empowering your child with a "feeling vocabulary." Active listening is a concept that's been around a long time. It involves being alert not only to what a child says, but also to the context in which it is said, to the words used and possible subtext, to the child's emotional state and body language, and even to what's not said. Sounds complicated, but

it's basically being attentive to the larger picture and, more to the point, being aware that there is a larger picture.

Helping your child to develop a feeling vocabulary consists of teaching your child to use words to describe what's going on. The idea is to teach the child to articulate what's really troubling him, to be able to identify and express emotions and mood states in language. Of course, learning to express feelings is a lifelong learning experience, but it's much less dependent on innate sensitivity than being provided the tools for expression and being encouraged to use them.

It all begins with convincing your child that you're willing to listen attentively and take what he's saying seriously. Listening to your child, you help him transcend the topical by reframing the conversation to address the underlying emotional state(s). That his brother hit him may have precipitated the mood state, but the act is topical and of secondary importance. What you want is for your child to be able to communicate how that makes him feel, and to get in touch with those emotions. When you reduce an incident (hitting) to the emotions triggered (anger, hurt, rejection, etc.) you have the foundation for helping him to develop constructive coping strategies. Being in touch with one's feelings and developing constructive coping strategies are essential to emotional well being, and they also have a positive effect on behavior. A child who can tell his mother why he is distressed is a child who has discovered a coping strategy far more effective (not to mention easier for all concerned) than a tantrum.

Children are almost never too young to begin learning a feeling vocabulary. And helping your child to be in touch with—and communicate—his or her emotions will stimulate you to focus on your feelings and mood states in a similar way. In the end, with persistence and effort, the whole family will achieve a vastly improved ability to communicate.

Until you get the active listening and feeling vocabulary going, be careful not to become part of the problem. There's a whole laundry list of adult responses to bad behavior that only make things worse. Hitting, swatting, yelling, name-calling, insulting, belittling, using sarcasm, pleading, nagging, and inducing guilt (as in, "we've spent thousands of dollars to bring you to Disney World and now you're spoiling the trip for everyone") figure prominently on the list.

Responding to a child appropriately in a disciplinary situation requires thought and preparation. Following are things to keep in mind, and techniques to try, when your world blows up while waiting in line for Dumbo.

1. Be the Adult It's well understood that children can punch their parents' buttons faster and more lethally than just about anyone or anything else. They've got your number, know precisely how to elicit a response, and are not reluctant to go for the jugular. Fortunately (or unfortunately), you're the adult, and to deal with a situation effectively, you've got to act

like one. If your kids get you ranting and caterwauling, you effectively abdicate your adult status. Worse, you suggest by way of example that being out of control is an acceptable expression of hurt or anger. No matter what happens, repeat the mantra, "I am the adult in this relationship."

2. Freeze the Action Being the adult and maintaining control almost always translates to freezing the action, to borrow a sports term. Instead of a knee-jerk response (at a maturity level closer to your child's than yours), freeze the action by disengaging. Wherever you are or whatever the family is doing, stop in place and concentrate on one thing, and one thing only: getting all involved calmed down. Practically speaking this usually means initiating a time-out. It's essential that you take this action immediately. Grabbing your child by the arm or collar and dragging him toward the car or hotel room only escalates the turmoil by prolonging the confrontation and by adding a coercive physical dimension to an already volatile emotional event. If for the sake of people around you (as when a toddler throws a tantrum in church) it's essential to retreat to a more private place, choose the first place available. Firmly sit the child down and refrain from talking to him until you've both cooled off. This might take a little time, but the investment is worthwhile. Truncating the process is like trying to get on your feet too soon after surgery.

3. Isolate the Child You'll be able to deal with the situation more effectively and expeditiously if the child is isolated with one parent. Dispatch the uninvolved members of your party for a Coke break or have them go on with the activity or itinerary without you (if possible) and arrange to rendezvous later at an agreed time and place. In addition to letting the others get on with their day, isolating the offending child with one parent relieves him of the pressure of being the group's focus of attention and object of anger. Equally important, isolation frees you from the scrutiny and expectations of the others in regard to how to handle the situation.

4. Review the Situation with the Child If, as discussed above, you've made your expectations clear, stated the consequences of failing those expectations, and have administered a warning, review the situation with the child and follow through with the discipline warranted. If, as often occurs, things are not so black and white, encourage the child to communicate his feelings. Try to uncover what occasioned the acting out. Lecturing and accusatory language don't work well here, nor do threats. Dr. Turnbow suggests a better approach (after the child is calm) is to ask, "What can we do to make this a better day for you?"

5. Frequent Tantrums or Acting Out The preceding four points relate to dealing with an incident as opposed to a chronic condition. If a child frequently acts out or throws tantrums, you'll need to employ a somewhat different strategy.

Tantrums are cyclical events evolved from learned behavior. A child

learns that he can get your undivided attention by acting out. When you respond, whether by scolding, admonishing, threatening, or negotiating, your response further draws you into the cycle and prolongs the behavior. When you accede to the child's demands, you reinforce the effectiveness of the tantrum and raise the cost of capitulation next time around. When a child thus succeeds in monopolizing your attention, he effectively becomes the person in charge.

To break this cycle, you must disengage from the child. The object is to demonstrate that the cause-and-effect relationship (i.e., tantrum elicits parental attention) is no longer operative. This can be accomplished by refusing to interact with the child as long as the untoward behavior continues. Tell the child that you're unwilling to discuss his problem until he calms down. You can ignore the behavior, remove yourself from the child's presence (or visa versa), or isolate the child with a time-out. It's important to disengage quickly and decisively with no discussion or negotiation.

Most children don't pick the family vacation as the time to start throwing tantrums. The behavior will be evident before you leave home and home is the best place to deal with it. Be forewarned, however, that bad habits die hard, and that a child accustomed to getting attention by throwing tantrums will not simply give up after a single instance of disengagement. More likely, the child will at first escalate the intensity and length of his tantrums. By your consistent refusal over several weeks (or even months) to respond to his behavior, however, he will finally adjust to the new paradigm.

Children are cunning as well as observant. Many understand that a tantrum in public is embarrassing to you and that you're more likely to cave in than you would at home. Once again, consistency is the key, along with a bit of anticipation. When traveling, it's not necessary to retreat to the privacy of a hotel room to isolate your child. You can carve out space for time-out almost anywhere: on a theme park bench, in a park, in your car, in a restroom, even on a sidewalk.

You can often spot the warning signs of an impending tantrum and head it off by talking to the child before he reaches an explosive emotional pitch. And don't forget that tantrums are about getting attention. Giving you child attention when things are on an even keel often preempts acting out.

6. Salvage Operations Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of children? What's for sure is that they are full of surprises, and sometimes the surprises are not good. If your sweet child manages to pull a boner of mammoth proportions, what do you do? This happened to an Ohio couple, resulting in the offending kid pretty much being grounded for life. Fortunately there were no injuries or lives lost, but the parents had to determine what to do for the remainder of the vacation. For starters, they split the group. One parent escorted the offending child back to the hotel, where he was effectively confined to his guest room for the duration. That

evening, the parents arranged for in-room sitters for the rest of the stay. Expensive? You bet, but better than watching your whole vacation go down the tubes.

A family at Walt Disney World's Magic Kingdom theme park had a similar experience, although the offense was of a more modest order of magnitude. Because it was their last day of vacation, they elected to place the misbehavior in time-out, in the theme park, for the rest of the day. One parent monitored the culprit while the other parent and the siblings enjoyed the attractions. At agreed times the parents would switch places. Once again, not ideal, but preferable to stopping the vacation.

About the Unofficial Guide Touring Plans Parents who use our touring plans are often frustrated by interruptions and delays caused by their young children. Here's what to expect:

1. Character encounters can wreak havoc with the touring plans.

Many children will stop in their tracks whenever they see a Disney character. Attempting to haul your child away before he has satisfied his curiosity is likely to cause anything from whining to full-scale revolt. Either go with the flow or specify a morning or afternoon for photos and autographs. Be aware that queues for autographs, especially in Toontown at the Magic Kingdom and Camp Minnie-Mickey at the Animal Kingdom, are as long as the queues for major attractions.

2. Our touring plans call for visiting attractions in a sequence, often skipping attractions along the way.

Children don't like skipping anything! If something catches their eye, they want to see it that moment. Some can be persuaded to skip attractions if parents explain their plans in advance. Other kids flip out at skipping something, particularly in Fantasyland. A mom from Charleston, South Carolina, writes:

We did not have too much trouble following the touring plans at [Disney-] MGM and at Epcot. The Magic Kingdom plan, on the other hand, turned out to be a train wreck. The main problem with the plan is that it starts in Fantasyland. When we were on Dumbo, my five-year-old saw eight dozen other things in Fantasyland she wanted to see. The long and the short is that after Dumbo, there was no getting her out of there.

A mother of two from Burlington, Vermont, adds:

I found out that my kids were very curious about the castle because we had read Cinderella at home. Whenever I wanted to leave Fantasyland, I would just say, "Let's go to the castle and see if Cinderella is there." Once we got as far as the front door to the castle, it was no problem going out to the [central] hub and then to another land.

3. Children have an instinct for finding rest rooms. We have seen adults with maps search interminably for a rest room. Young children, however, including those who can't read, will head for the nearest rest

room with the certainty of a homing pigeon. You can be sure your children will ferret out (and want to use) every rest room in the park.

4. If you're using a stroller, you won't be able to take it into attractions or onto rides. This includes rides such as the Walt Disney World Railroad that are included in the touring plans as in-park transportation.

5. You probably won't finish the touring plan. Varying hours of operation, crowds, your group's size, your children's ages, and your stamina will all affect how much of the plan you'll complete. Tailor your expectations to this reality, or you'll be frustrated as this mother of two from Nazareth, Pennsylvania, was:

We do not understand how anyone could fit everything you have on your plans into the time allotted while attending to small children. We found that long lines, potty stops, diaper changes, stroller searches, and autograph breaks ate huge chunks of time. And we were there during the off-season.

While our touring plans allow you to make the most of your time at the parks, it's impossible to define what "most" will be. It differs from family to family. If you have two young children, you probably won't see as much as two adults will. If you have four children, you probably won't see as much as a couple with only two children.

Overheating, Sunburn, and Dehydration These are the most common problems of younger children at Disney World. Carry and use sunscreen. Be sure to apply it on children in strollers, even if the stroller has a canopy. Some of the worst sunburns we've seen were on the exposed foreheads and feet of toddlers and infants in strollers. To avoid overheating, rest regularly in the shade or in an air-conditioned restaurant or show.

Don't count on hydrating young children with soft drinks and stops at water fountains. Carry plastic bottles of water. Plastic squeeze bottles with caps are sold in all major parks for about \$3. Remember: Excited children may not tell you when they're thirsty or hot.

Blisters and Sore Feet All guests should wear comfortable, broken-in shoes and socks that wick off perspiration, like Smart Wool socks. If you or your children are susceptible to blisters, bring precut Moleskin bandages. They offer the best protection, stick great, and won't sweat off. When you feel a hot spot, stop, air out your foot, and place a Moleskin bandage over the area before a blister forms. Moleskin is available at all drug stores. Preschoolers may not say they're developing blister until it's too late; inspect their feet two or more times a day. For a more expanded discussion about keeping your feet happy, see pages 330–331.

First Aid Each major theme park has a first-aid center. In the Magic Kingdom, it's behind the refreshment corner to the left after you enter. At Epcot, it's on the World Showcase side of Odyssey Center. At Disney-MGM, it's in the Guest Relations Building inside the main entrance. At

Animal Kingdom, it's in Discovery Island. If you or your children have a medical problem, go to a first-aid center. They're friendlier than most doctor's offices and are accustomed to treating everything from paper cuts to allergic reactions.

Children on Medication Some parents of hyperactive children on medication discontinue or decrease the child's dosage at the end of the school year. If you have such a child, be aware that Disney World might overstimulate him/her. Consult your physician before altering your child's medication regimen.

Walkie-Talkies and Cell Phones An increasing number of readers stay in touch while on vacation by using walkie-talkies. From a Cabot, Arkansas, family:

Borrow or get walkie-talkies! ... Our youngest was too scared or too short for some rides, plus I was expecting, so we would sit outside or go to a snack area, but we were always in contact. My husband could tell me how long the wait was, when he was about to come down Splash Mountain (for me to take a photo!), or where to meet.

A dad from Roanoke is on the same wavelength:

The single best purchase we made was Motorola TalkAbout walkie-talkies.

They have a two-mile range and are about the size of a deck of cards. ...

At the parks, the kids would invariably have diverse interests. With walkie-talkies, however, we could easily split up and simply communicate with each other when we wanted to meet back up. At least a half-dozen times, exasperated parents asked where they could rent/buy the walkie-talkies.

If you buy walkie-talkies, get a set that operates on multiple channels, or opt for cellular phones as a Duluth, Georgia, family did:

I spoke with a woman who invested \$100 in walkie-talkies. All day long all she could hear were other people's conversations as so many people are using them. My husband and I used our cellular phones, and they worked beautifully. Even though I pay roaming charges on mine, there's no way I could use \$100 worth!

Sunglasses If your younger children wear sunglasses, put a strap or string on the frames so the glasses will stay on during rides and can hang from the child's neck while indoors. Works for adults, too.

Things You Forgot or Things You Ran Out Of Rain gear, diapers, diaper pins, formula, film, aspirin, topical sunburn treatments, and other sundries are sold at all major theme parks and at Typhoon Lagoon, Blizzard Beach, and Downtown Disney. Rain gear is a bargain, but most other items are high. Ask for goods you don't see displayed.

Infants and Toddlers at the Theme Parks The major parks have centralized facilities for infant and toddler care. Everything necessary for

changing diapers, preparing formulas, and warming bottles and food is available. Supplies are for sale (two diapers plus ointment are \$3.50, for example), and there are rockers and special chairs for nursing mothers. At the Magic Kingdom, the Baby Center is next to the Crystal Palace at the end of Main Street. At Epcot, Baby Services is near the Odyssey Center, right of the Test Track in Future World. At Disney-MGM Studios, Baby Care is in the Guest Relations Building left of the entrance. At Animal Kingdom, Baby Changing/Nursing is in Discovery Island in the park's center. Dads are welcome at the centers and can use most services. In addition, many men's rooms in the major parks have changing tables.

A mom from New Berlin, Wisconsin, offered this tip for families with babies on formula:

A note to families with infants: We got hot water from the food vendors at WDW and mixed the formula as we went. It eliminated keeping bottles cold and then warming them up.

Infants and toddlers are allowed in any attraction that doesn't have minimum height or age restrictions. But as a Minneapolis mother reports, some attractions are better for babies than others:

Theater and boat rides are easier for babies (ours was almost one year old, not yet walking). Rides where there's a bar that comes down are doable, but harder. Peter Pan was our first encounter with this type, and we had barely gotten situated when I realized he might fall out of my grasp. The standing auditorium films are too intense; the noise level is deafening, and the images inescapable. You don't have a rating system for babies, and I don't expect to see one, but I thought you might want to know what a baby thought (based on his reactions). [At the Magic Kingdom:] Jungle Cruise—Didn't get into it. Pirates—Slept through it. Riverboat—While at Aunt Polly's, the horn made him cry. Aunt Polly's—Ate while watching the birds in relative quiet. Small World—Wide-eyed, took it all in. Peter Pan—Couldn't really sit on the seat. A bit dangerous. He didn't get into it. Carousel of Progress—Long talks; hard to keep him quiet; danced during song. WDW RR—Liked the motion and scenery. Tiki Birds—Loved it. Danced, clapped, sang along. At Epcot: Honey, I Shrunk the Audience—We skipped due to recommendation of Disney worker that it got too loud and adults screamed throughout. Journey into Imagination—Loved it. Tried to catch things with his hands. Bounced up and down, chortled. The Land—Watchful, quiet during presentation. El Río del Tiempo—Loved it.

The same mom also advises:

We used a baby sling on our trip and thought it was great when standing in lines—much better than a stroller, which you have to park before getting in line (and navigate through crowds). The food at WDW [includes] almost nothing a baby can eat. No fruits or vegetables. My baby was still nursing

when we went to WDW. The only really great place I found to nurse in MK was a hidden bench in the shade in Adventureland in between the freezee stand (next to Tiki Birds) and the small shops. It is impractical to go to the baby station every time, so a nursing mom better be comfortable about nursing in very public situations.

If you think you might try nursing during a theater attraction, be advised that most shows run about 17–20 minutes. Exceptions are *The Hall of Presidents* at the Magic Kingdom and *The American Adventure* at Epcot that run 23 and 29 minutes respectively.

Strollers The good news: Strollers are available for a modest rental fee at all four theme parks. Even better, Disney has replaced the ancient blue clunkers at Epcot and the Magic Kingdom with brand-new strollers. If you rent a stroller at the Magic Kingdom and decide to go to Epcot, Animal Kingdom, or Disney-MGM Studios, turn in your Magic Kingdom stroller and present your receipt at the next park. You'll be issued another stroller without additional charge.

Obtain strollers to the right of the Magic Kingdom entrance, to the left of Epcot's Entrance Plaza, and at Oscar's Super Service just inside the entrance of Disney-MGM Studios. At Animal Kingdom, they're to the right just inside the entrance. Rental at all parks is fast and efficient, and returning the stroller is a breeze. If you don't mind forfeiting your dollar deposit, you can ditch your rental stroller anywhere in the park when you're ready to leave.

Readers inform us that there is a lively "gray market" in strollers at the parks. Families who arrive late look for families who are heading for the exit and "buy" their stroller at a bargain price. A Chester, New Hampshire, mom, ever vigilant for a bargain, reported: "We 'bought' strollers for \$3 when we saw people returning them. Also, we 'sold' our strollers when leaving for \$3."

When you enter a show or board a ride, you must park your stroller, usually in an open area. If it rains before you return, you'll need a cloth, towel, or diaper to dry it.

Strollers are a must for infants and toddlers, but we have observed many sharp parents renting strollers for somewhat older children (up to five or so). The stroller prevents parents from having to carry children when they sag and provides a convenient place to carry water and snacks.

If you go to your hotel for a break and intend to return to the park, leave your rental stroller by an attraction near the park entrance, marking it with something personal like a bandanna. When you return, your stroller will be waiting.

Rental strollers are too large for all infants and many toddlers. If you plan to rent a stroller for your infant or toddler, bring pillows, cushions, or rolled towels to buttress him in.

Bringing your own stroller is permitted. However, only collapsible strollers are allowed on monorails, parking-lot trams, and buses. Your stroller is unlikely to be stolen, but mark it with your name.

Having her own stroller was indispensable to a Mechanicsville, Virginia, mother of two toddlers:

How I was going to manage to get the kids from the parking lot to the park was a big worry for me before I made the trip. I didn't read anywhere that it was possible to walk to the entrance of the parks instead of taking the tram, so I wasn't sure I could do it.

I found that for me personally, since I have two kids aged one and two, it was easier to walk to the entrance of the park from the parking lot with the kids in [my own] stroller than to take the kids out of the stroller, fold the stroller (while trying to control the two kids and associated gear), load the stroller and the kids onto the tram, etc. ... No matter where I was parked I could always just walk to the entrance ... it sometimes took awhile but it was easier for me.

A Secaucus, New Jersey, mom weighed all the considerations in exemplary Type-A fashion:

If your child is under age two, bring your own stroller. Three reasons to bring your own: First, you have all the way from your car to the TTC to the monorail (or ferry) to the stroller rental without a stroller, but with your child, diaper bag, and own self and stuff in tow. Not half as bad as doing it in reverse when leaving, when you're exhausted and have added to your luggage with purchases and the toddler who might have walked in wants to be carried out. Second, the WDW stroller is simply too large for most children under two to be comfortable without significant padding. The seat is so low that the child is forced to keep their legs straight out in front of them. Third, despite being sooo big, there is NO PLACE to store anything. The body of the stroller is so low, there is no underneath storage for the diaper bag. There is a small net bag on the back of the carriage, but it seems designed to hold, at most, a small purse. If you hang a diaper bag by its straps from the handle, the stroller will tip backwards very, very easily. And you can't balance it on the top or the canopy won't stay open. It amazed me that the Disney folks did not provide ample space for all the souvenirs they want you to buy!

Now, if your child is past needing a diaper bag, the WDW strollers seem like a pretty good deal. You won't need the storage space, and they do maneuver very well. They seem especially good for children who no longer need a stroller at home (ages 4–6) but who won't make it walking all day.

If your child is between ages 2 and 3, it's a toss-up. If you're a Type-A mom, like me, who carries extra clothes, snacks, toys, enough diapers for three days, along with a pocketbook and extra-jackets-for-everyone-just-in-case, you've probably found a stroller that suits your needs, and will be

miserable with the WDW kind. If you're a Type B, "we can get everything else we need at the park, I'll just throw a diaper in my back pocket" mom, you'll probably be tickled with the WDW strollers. Also consider your toddler's personality. Will his familiar stroller add a level of comfort to a pretty intense experience? Or will he enjoy the novelty of the new wheels?

Stroller Wars Sometimes strollers disappear while you're enjoying a ride or show. Disney staff will often rearrange strollers parked outside an attraction. This may be done to "tidy up" or to clear a walkway. Don't assume your stroller is stolen because it isn't where you left it. It may be "neatly arranged" a few feet away.

Sometimes, however, strollers are taken by mistake or ripped off by people not wanting to spend time replacing one that's missing. Don't be alarmed if yours disappears. You won't have to buy it, and you'll be issued a new one. In the Magic Kingdom, replacements are available at Tinker Bell's Treasures in Fantasyland and at the main rental facility near the park entrance. At Epcot, get replacements at the Entrance Plaza rental headquarters and at the International Gateway (in World Showcase between the United Kingdom and France). Strollers at Disney-MGM can be replaced at the Animation Courtyard Shops next to *The Voyage of the Little Mermaid*. In Animal Kingdom, they're available at Garden Gate Gifts and Mombasa Marketplace.

While replacing a stroller is no big deal, it's inconvenient. A Minnesota family complained that their stroller was taken six times in one day at Epcot and five times in a day at Disney-MGM Studios. Even with free replacements, larceny on this scale represents a lot of wasted time. Through our own experiments and readers' suggestions, we developed techniques for hanging on to a rented stroller: Affix something personal (but expendable) to the handle. Evidently, most strollers are pirated by mistake (they all look alike) or because it's easier to swipe someone else's than to replace one that has disappeared. Since most stroller "theft" results from confusion or laziness, the average pram pincher will hesitate to haul off a stroller containing another person's property. We tried several items and concluded that a bright, inexpensive scarf or bandanna tied to the handle works well as I.D. A sock partially stuffed with rags or paper works even better (the weirder and more personal the object, the greater the deterrent). Best might be an Ann Arbor, Michigan, mother's strategy:

We used a variation on your stroller identification theme. We tied a clear plastic bag with a diaper in it on the stroller. Jon even poured a little root beer on the diaper for effect. Needless to say, no one took our stroller, and it was easy to identify.

Strollers as Lethal Weapons A father of one from Purcellville, Virginia, complains about some inconsiderate parents:

The biggest problem is surviving the migrating herds of strollers. The drivers of these contraptions appear to believe they have the right-of-way in all situations and use the strollers as battering rams. ... I know they will not be banned from the parks, but how about putting speed governors on these things?

You'd be surprised at how many people are injured by strollers pushed by parents who are driving aggressively, in a hurry, or in the ozone. Though you may desire to use your stroller to wedge through crowds like Moses parting the seas, think twice. It's very un-Disney to steamroll other guests.

Lost Children

Although it's amazingly easy to lose a child (or two) in the theme parks, it usually isn't a serious problem. All Disney employees are schooled in handling the situation. If you lose a child in the Magic Kingdom, report it to a Disney employee, then check at the Baby Center and at City Hall, where lost-children "logs" are kept. At Epcot, report the loss, then check at Baby Services near the Odyssey Center. At Disney-MGM Studios, report the loss at the Guest Relations Building at the entrance end of Hollywood Boulevard. At Animal Kingdom, go to the Baby Center in Discovery Island. Paging isn't used, but in an emergency an "all-points bulletin" can be issued throughout the park(s) via internal communications. If a Disney employee encounters a lost child, he or she will take the child immediately to the park's guest relations center or its baby-care center.

We suggest that children younger than eight be color-coded by dressing them in purple T-shirts or equally distinctive clothes. Sew a label into each child's shirt that states his name, your name, the name of your hotel, and if you have one, your cell phone number. Accomplish the same thing by writing the information on a strip of masking tape. Security professionals suggest the information be printed in small letters and the tape be affixed to the outside of the child's shirt, five inches below the armpit. Also, name tags can be obtained at the major theme parks.

A Kingston, Washington, reader recommends recording vital info for each child on a plastic key tag or luggage tag and affixing it to the child's shoe. This reader also snaps a photo of the kids each morning to document what they're wearing. A mother from Rockville, Maryland reported a strategy one step short of a brand or tattoo:

Traveling with a three-year-old, I was very anxious about losing him. I wrote my cell phone number on his leg with a "sharpie" permanent marker, and felt much more confident that he'd get back to me quickly if lost.

How Kids Get Lost

Children get separated from their parents every day at Disney parks under remarkably similar (and predictable) circumstances:

1. Preoccupied Solo Parent The party's only adult is preoccupied with something like buying refreshments, loading the camera, or using the rest room. Junior is there one second and gone the next.

2. The Hidden Exit Sometimes parents wait on the sidelines while two or more young children experience a ride together. Parents expect the kids to exit in one place and the youngsters pop out elsewhere. Exits from some attractions are distant from entrances. Know exactly where your children will emerge before letting them ride by themselves.

3. After the Show At the end of many shows and rides, a Disney staffer announces, "Check for personal belongings and take small children by the hand." When dozens, if not hundreds, of people leave an attraction simultaneously, it's easy for parents to lose their children unless they have direct contact.

4. Rest-Room Problems Mom tells six-year-old Tommy, "I'll be sitting on this bench when you come out of the rest room." Three possibilities: One, Tommy exits through a different door and becomes disoriented (Mom may not know there is another door). Two, Mom decides she also will use the rest room, and Tommy emerges to find her gone. Three, Mom pokes around in a shop while keeping an eye on the bench, but misses Tommy when he comes out.

If you can't be with your child in the rest room, make sure there's only one exit. The rest room on a passageway between Frontierland and Adventureland in the Magic Kingdom is the all-time worst for disorienting visitors. Children and adults alike have walked in from the Adventureland side and walked out on the Frontierland side (and vice versa). Adults realize quickly that something is wrong. Children, however, sometimes fail to recognize the problem. Designate a distinctive meeting spot and give clear instructions: "I'll meet you by this flagpole. If you get out first, stay right here." Have your child repeat the directions back to you. When children are too young to leave alone, sometimes you have to think outside the box as our Rockville mom (quoted above) did:

It was very scary for me at times, being alone with children that had just turned one and two. I'm reminded of the time on the trip when I couldn't fit the double stroller into the bathroom. I was at Epcot inside one of the buildings and I had to leave my kids with a WDW employee outside of the rest room because the stroller just wouldn't fit inside with me. Thinking about the incident now makes me laugh. The good news is that I found that most WDW bathrooms can accommodate a front-and-back, double stroller inside the handicapped stall [with you].

5. Parades There are many parades and shows at which the audience stands. Children tend to jockey for a better view. By moving a little this way and that, the child quickly puts distance between you and him before either of you notices.

6. Mass Movements Be on guard when huge crowds disperse after fireworks or a parade, or at park closing. With 20,000–40,000 people at once in an area, it's very easy to get separated from a child or others in your party. Use extra caution after the evening parade and fireworks in the Magic Kingdom, *Fantasmic!* at the Disney-MGM Studios, and *IllumiNations* at Epcot. Families should plan where to meet if they get separated.

7. Character Greetings When the Disney characters appear, children can slip out of sight. See "Then Some Confusion Happened" (page 255).

8. Getting Lost at the Animal Kingdom It's especially easy to lose a child in Animal Kingdom, particularly at the Oasis entryway, on the Maharaja Jungle Trek, and on the Pangani Forest Exploration Trail. Mom and Dad will stop to observe an animal. Junior stays close for a minute or so, and then, losing patience, wanders to the exhibit's other side or to a different exhibit.

Especially in the multipath Oasis, finding a lost child can be maddening, as a Safety Harbor, Florida, mother describes:

Manny wandered off in the paths that lead to the jungle village while we were looking at a bird. It reminded me of losing somebody in the supermarket when you run back and forth looking down each aisle but can't find the person you're looking for because they are running around, too. I was nutso before we even got to the first ride.

A mother from Flint, Michigan, came up with yet another way to lose a kid: abandonment.

From the minute we hit the park it was gripe, whine, pout, cry, beg, scream, pick, pester, and aggravate. When he went to the rest room for the ninth time before 11 a.m., I thought I'M OUTTA HERE ... let the little snothead walk back to Flint. Unfortunately, I was brought up Catholic with lots of guilt so I didn't follow through.

Disney, Kids, and Scary Stuff

Disney rides and shows are adventures, and they focus on themes of all adventures: good and evil, death, beauty and the grotesque, fellowship and enmity. As you sample the attractions at Walt Disney World, you transcend the spinning and bouncing of midway rides to thought-provoking and emotionally powerful entertainment. All of the endings are happy, but the adventures' impact, given Disney's gift for special effects, often intimidates and occasionally frightens young children.

There are rides with menacing witches, burning towns, and ghouls popping out of their graves, all done with humor, provided you're old enough to understand the joke. And bones. There are bones everywhere: human bones, cattle bones, dinosaur bones, even whole skeletons. There's a stack of skulls at the headhunters' camp on the Jungle Cruise,

a platoon of skeletons sailing ghost ships in Pirates of the Caribbean, and an assemblage of skulls and skeletons in The Haunted Mansion. Skulls, skeletons, and bones punctuate Snow White's Adventures, Peter Pan's Flight, and Big Thunder Mountain Railroad. The Animal Kingdom has an entire playground comprised exclusively of giant bones and skeletons.

Monsters and special effects at Disney-MGM Studios are more real and sinister than those in the other parks. If your child has difficulty coping with the witch in Snow White's Adventures, think twice about exposing him at the Studios to machine-gun battles, earthquakes, and the creature from *Alien* in the Great Movie Ride.

One reader tells of taking his preschool children on Star Tours:

We took a four-year-old and a five-year-old, and they had the shit scared out of them at Star Tours. We did this first thing, and it took hours of Tom Sawyer Island and Small World to get back to normal. Our kids were the youngest by far in Star Tours. I assume other adults had more sense.

Preschoolers should start with Dumbo and work up to the Jungle Cruise in late morning, after being revved up and before getting hungry, thirsty, or tired. Pirates of the Caribbean is out for preschoolers. You get the idea.

You can reliably predict that Disney World will, at one time or another, send a young child into system overload. Be sensitive, alert, and prepared for almost anything, even behavior that is out of character for your child. Most children take Disney's macabre trappings in stride, and others are easily comforted by an arm around the shoulder or a squeeze of the hand. Parents who know that their children tend to become upset should take it slow and easy, sampling benign adventures like the Jungle Cruise, gauging reactions, and discussing with the children how they felt about what they saw.

Sometimes young children will rise above their anxiety in an effort to please their parents or siblings. This doesn't necessarily indicate a mastery of fear, much less enjoyment. If children leave a ride in apparently good shape, ask if they would like to go on it again (not necessarily now, but sometime). The response usually will indicate how much they actually enjoyed the experience.

Evaluating a child's capacity to handle the visual and tactile effects of Disney World requires patience, understanding, and experimentation. Each of us has our own demons. If a child balks at or is frightened by a ride, respond constructively. Let your children know that lots of people, adults and children, are scared by what they see and feel. Help them understand that it's okay if they get frightened and that their fear doesn't lessen your love or respect. Take pains not to compound the discomfort by making a child feel inadequate; try not to undermine self-esteem, impugn courage, or ridicule. Most of all, don't induce guilt by suggesting

the child's trepidation might be ruining the family's fun. It's also sometimes necessary to restrain older siblings' taunting.

A reader from New York City expressed strong feelings about pressuring children:

As a psychologist who works with children, I felt ethically torn (and nearly filed a report!) watching parents force their children to go on rides they didn't want to ride (especially the Tower of Terror and Dinosaur). The Disney staff were more than willing to organize a parental swap to save these children from such abuse!

A visit to Disney World is more than an outing or an adventure for a young child. It's a testing experience, a sort of controlled rite of passage. If you help your little one work through the challenges, the time can be immeasurably rewarding and a bonding experience for you both.

The Fright Factor

While each youngster is different, there are seven attraction elements that alone or combined could punch a child's buttons:

1. Name of the Attraction Young children will naturally be apprehensive about something called "The Haunted Mansion" or "Tower of Terror."

2. Visual Impact of the Attraction from Outside Splash Mountain and Big Thunder Mountain Railroad look scary enough to give adults second thoughts, and they terrify many young children.

3. Visual Impact of the Indoor Queuing Area Pirates of the Caribbean's caves and dungeons and The Haunted Mansion's "stretch rooms" can frighten children.

4. Intensity of the Attraction Some attractions are overwhelming, inundating the senses with sights, sounds, movement, and even smell. Epcot's *Honey, I Shrunk the Audience*, for example, combines loud sounds, lasers, lights, and 3-D cinematography to create a total sensory experience. For some preschoolers, this is two or three senses too many.

5. Visual Impact of the Attraction Itself Sights in various attractions range from falling boulders to lurking buzzards, from grazing dinosaurs to attacking white blood cells. What one child calmly absorbs may scare the bejabbers out of another the same age.

6. Dark Many Disney World attractions operate indoors in the dark. For some children, this triggers fear. A child frightened on one dark ride (Snow White's Adventures, for example) may be unwilling to try other indoor rides.

7. The Tactile Experience of the Ride Itself Some rides are wild enough to cause motion sickness, wrench backs, and discombobulate patrons of any age.

SMALL-CHILD FRIGHT-POTENTIAL CHART

Our “Fright-Potential Chart” is a quick reference to identify attractions to be wary of, and why. The chart represents a generalization, and all kids are different. It relates specifically to kids ages three to seven. On average, children at the younger end of the range are more likely to be frightened than children in their sixth or seventh year.

MAGIC KINGDOM

Main Street, U.S.A.

Walt Disney World Railroad Not frightening in any respect.

Main Street Vehicles Not frightening in any respect.

Adventureland

Swiss Family Treehouse Not frightening in any respect.

Jungle Cruise Moderately intense, some macabre sights. A good test attraction for little ones.

Enchanted Tiki Birds A thunderstorm, loud volume level, and simulated explosions frighten some preschoolers.

Pirates of the Caribbean Slightly intimidating queuing area; intense boat ride with gruesome (though humorously presented) sights and a short, unexpected slide down a flume.

Magic Carpets of Aladdin Much like Dumbo. A favorite of most younger children.

Frontierland

Splash Mountain Visually intimidating from outside, with moderately intense visual effects. The ride, culminating in a 52-foot plunge down a steep chute, is somewhat hair-raising for all ages. Switching off option provided (pages 266–268).

Big Thunder Mountain Railroad Visually intimidating from outside, with moderately intense visual effects. The roller coaster is wild enough to frighten many adults, particularly seniors. Switching off provided (pages 266–268).

Tom Sawyer Island Some very young children are intimidated by dark, walk-through tunnels that can be easily avoided.

Country Bear Jamboree Not frightening in any respect.

Frontierland Shootin’ Arcade Not frightening in any respect.

Liberty Square

The Hall of Presidents Not frightening, but boring for young ones.

Liberty Belle Riverboat Not frightening in any respect.

Mike Fink Keelboats Not frightening in any respect.

The Haunted Mansion Name raises anxiety, as do sounds and sights of waiting area. Intense attraction with humorously presented macabre sights. The ride itself is gentle.

Fantasyland

Mad Tea Party Midway-type ride can induce motion sickness in all ages.

The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh Frightens a small percentage of preschoolers.

Snow White’s Adventures Moderately intense spook-house-genre attraction with some grim characters. Absolutely terrifies many preschoolers.

Dumbo the Flying Elephant A tame midway ride; a great favorite of most young children.

Cinderella’s Golden Carrousel Not frightening in any respect.

It's a Small World Not frightening in any respect.

Peter Pan's Flight Not frightening in any respect.

Mickey's Toontown Fair

All attractions except roller coaster Not frightening in any respect.

The Barnstormer at Goofy's Wiseacres Farm (children's roller coaster) May frighten some preschoolers.

Tomorrowland

Buzz Lightyear's Space Ranger Spin Dark ride with cartoonlike aliens may frighten some preschoolers.

Tomorrowland Transit Authority Not frightening in any respect.

Space Mountain Very intense roller coaster in the dark; the Magic Kingdom's wildest ride and a scary roller coaster by any standard. Switching off provided (pages 266–268).

Stitch's Great Escape Very intense. May frighten children age 9 and younger. Switching off provided (pages 266–268).

Astro Orbiter Visually intimidating from the waiting area. The ride is relatively tame.

Walt Disney's Carousel of Progress (open seasonally) Not frightening in any respect.

Tomorrowland Speedway Noise of waiting area slightly intimidates preschoolers; otherwise, not frightening.

Timekeeper (open seasonally) Both loud and intense, with frightening film scenes. Audience must stand.

EPCOT

Future World

Spaceship Earth Dark and imposing presentation intimidates a few preschoolers.

Innoventions East and West Not frightening in any respect.

Universe of Energy Dinosaur segment frightens some preschoolers; visually intense, with some intimidating effects.

Wonders of Life—Body Wars (open seasonally) Very intense, with frightening visual effects. Ride causes motion sickness in riders of all ages. Switching off provided (pages 266–268).

Wonders of Life—Cranium Command (open seasonally) Not frightening in any respect.

Wonders of Life—The Making of Me (open seasonally) Not frightening in any respect.

Mission: Space Extremely intense space simulation ride frightens guests of all ages. Switching off provided (pages 266–268).

Test Track Intense thrill ride may frighten any age. Switching off provided (pages 266–268).

Journey into Imagination—Honey, I Shrunk the Audience Extremely intense visual effects and loudness frighten many young children.

Journey into Your Imagination Ride Loud noises and unexpected flashing lights startle younger children.

The Land—Living with the Land Not frightening in any respect.

The Land—Circle of Life Theater Not frightening in any respect.

The Land—Soarin' Mellow, but may frighten children age 9 and younger.

SMALL-CHILD FRIGHT-POTENTIAL CHART *(continued)*

EPCOT *(continued)*

World Showcase

Mexico—*El Río del Tiempo* Not frightening in any respect.

Norway—*Maelstrom* Visually intense in parts. Ride ends with a plunge down a 20-foot flume. A few preschoolers are frightened.

China—*Reflections of China* Not frightening in any respect.

Germany Not frightening in any respect.

Italy Not frightening in any respect.

The American Adventure Not frightening in any respect.

Japan Not frightening in any respect.

Morocco Not frightening in any respect.

France—*Impressions de France* Not frightening in any respect.

United Kingdom Not frightening in any respect.

Canada—*O Canada!* Not frightening in any respect, but audience must stand.

DISNEY-MGM STUDIOS

The Twilight Zone Tower of Terror Visually intimidating to young children; contains intense and realistic special effects. The plummeting elevator at the ride's end frightens many adults. Switching off provided (pages 266–268).

The Great Movie Ride Intense in parts, with very realistic special effects and some visually intimidating sights. Frightens many preschoolers.

Who Wants to Be a Millionaire Not frightening in any respect.

Sounds Dangerous Noises in the dark frighten some preschoolers.

Indiana Jones Epic Stunt Spectacular! An intense show with powerful special effects, including explosions. Presented in an educational context that young children generally handle well.

Rock 'n' Roller Coaster The wildest coaster at Walt Disney World. May frighten guests of any age. Switching off provided (pages 266–268).

Star Tours Extremely intense visually for all ages. Not as likely to cause motion sickness as *Body Wars* at Epcot. Switching off provided (pages 266–268).

Disney-MGM Studios Backlot Tour Sedate and nonintimidating except for “Catastrophe Canyon,” where an earthquake and a flash flood are simulated. Prepare younger children for this part of the tour.

Backstage Walking Tours Not frightening in any respect.

A Bit of Preparation

We receive many tips from parents telling how they prepared their young children for the Disney experience. A common strategy is to acquaint children with the characters and stories behind the attractions by reading Disney books and watching Disney videos at home. A more direct approach is to rent Walt Disney World travel videos that show the attractions. Of the latter, a father from Arlington, Virginia, reports:

My kids both loved The Haunted Mansion, with appropriate preparation. We rented a tape before going so they could see it, and then I told them it was all “Mickey Mouse Magic” and that Mickey was just “joking you,” to

- Jim Henson's MuppetVision 3-D* Intense and loud, but not frightening.
- Honey, I Shrunk the Kids Movie Set Adventure Playground* Everything is oversized, but nothing is scary.
- Voyage of the Little Mermaid* Not frightening in any respect.
- The Magic of Disney Animation* Not frightening in any respect.
- Walt Disney: One Man's Dream* Not frightening in any respect.
- Playhouse Disney: Live on Stage* Not frightening in any respect.
- Fantasmic!* Terrifies some preschoolers.
- Lights! Motors! Action!* Superstunt spectacular intense with loud noises and explosions but not threatening in any way.

ANIMAL KINGDOM

- The Boneyard* Not frightening in any respect.
- Rafiki's Planet Watch* Not frightening in any respect.
- Dinosaur* High-tech thrill ride rattles riders of all ages. Switching off provided (pages 266–268).
- TriceraTop Spin* A midway-type ride that will frighten only a small percentage of younger children.
- Pimeval Whirl* A beginner roller coaster. Most children age seven and over will take it in stride.
- Festival of the Lion King* A bit loud, but otherwise not frightening in any respect.
- Flights of Wonder* Swooping birds alarm a few small children.
- Pangani Forest Exploration Trail* Not frightening in any respect.
- Pocahontas and Her Forest Friends* Not frightening in any respect.
- It's Tough to Be a Bug!* Very intense and loud with special effects that startle viewers of all ages and potentially terrify young children.
- Kilimanjaro Safaris* A “collapsing” bridge and the proximity of real animals make a few young children anxious.
- Maharaja Jungle Trek* Some children may balk at the bat exhibit.
- The Oasis* Not frightening in any respect.
- Kali River Rapids* Potentially frightening and certainly wet for guests of all ages. Switching off provided (pages 266–268).
- Theater in the Wild* Not frightening in any respect, but loud.
- Wildlife Express Train* Not frightening in any respect.

put it in their terms, and that there weren't any real ghosts, and that Mickey wouldn't let anyone actually get hurt.

A Teaneck, New Jersey, mother adds:

I rented movies to make my five-year-old more comfortable with rides (Star Wars; Indiana Jones; Honey, I Shrunk the Kids). If kids are afraid of rides in the dark (like ours), buy a light-up toy and let them take it on the ride.

If your video store doesn't rent Disney travel videos, you can order the free Walt Disney World Holiday Planning Video/DVD by calling Disney reservations at (407) 824-8000. Ignore all prompts, and the phone system will assume you're on a rotary phone and patch you through to a

live person (though you may be on hold a couple minutes). This video/DVD isn't as comprehensive as travelogues you might rent, but it's adequate for giving your kids a sense of what they'll see. You can also ask for information on lodging, restaurants, etc. Allow at least one month for delivery. Because Disney is in a cost-containment fit, it's possible that the free video/DVD may be discontinued.

A Gloucester, Massachusetts, mom solved the fright problem on the spot: *The three-and-a-half-year-old liked It's a Small World, [but] was afraid of The Haunted Mansion. We just pulled his hat over his face and quietly talked to him while we enjoyed [the ride].*

Sometimes children balk at any attraction that isn't a ride, reports a reader from Lenexa, Kansas:

The one thing I would do differently is prepare my kids for the different kinds of entertainment each park offers. Some have more rides, some more shows, some street performers (very fun), and some interesting things about the world. My eight-year-old especially had trouble admitting he liked anything that wasn't a ride (even if he did).

Attractions that Eat Adults

You may spend so much energy worrying about Junior that you forget to take care of yourself. If the motion of a ride is potentially disturbing, persons of any age may be affected. These attractions are likely to cause motion sickness or other problems for older children and adults:

Magic Kingdom	Tomorrowland—Space Mountain
	Fantasyland—Mad Tea Party
	Frontierland—Big Thunder Mountain Railroad
	Frontierland—Splash Mountain
Epcot	Future World—Body Wars
	Future World—Test Track
	Future World—Mission: Space
Disney-MGM Studios	Star Tours
	<i>The Twilight Zone</i> Tower of Terror
	Rock 'n' Roller Coaster
Animal Kingdom	Dinosaur
	Kali River Rapids

A Word about Height Requirements

A number of attractions require children to meet minimum height and age requirements. If you have children too short or too young to ride, you have several options, including switching off (described in this chapter). Although the alternatives may resolve some practical and logistical

issues, your smaller children may nonetheless be resentful of their older (or taller) siblings who qualify to ride. A mom from Virginia writes of such a situation:

You mention height requirements for rides but not the intense sibling jealousy this can generate. Frontierland was a real problem in that respect. Our very petite five-year-old, to her outrage, was stuck hanging around while our eight-year-old went on Splash Mountain and [Big] Thunder Mountain with grandma and granddad, and the nearby alternatives weren't helpful [too long a line for rafts to Tom Sawyer Island, etc.]. If we had thought ahead, we would have left the younger kid back in Mickey's Toontown with one of the grown-ups for another roller-coaster ride or two and then met up later. ... The best areas had a playground or other quick attractions for short people near the rides with height requirements, like the Boneyard near the dinosaur ride at the Animal Kingdom.

The reader makes a point, though splitting the group and meeting later can be more complicated than she imagines. If you split up, ask the Disney attendant (called a “greeter”) at the entrance to the attraction(s) with height requirements how long the wait is. If you tack five minutes for riding onto the anticipated wait and add five or so minutes to exit and reach the meeting point, you'll have a sense of how long the younger kids (and their supervising adult) will have to do other stuff. Our guess is that even with a long line for the rafts, the reader would have had sufficient time to take her daughter to Tom Sawyer Island while the sibs rode Splash Mountain and Big Thunder Mountain with the grandparents. For sure, she had time to tour the Swiss Family Treehouse in adjacent Adventureland.

ATTRACTION AND RIDE RESTRICTIONS

Magic Kingdom

<i>Stitch's Great Escape</i>	44 inches minimum height
Big Thunder Mountain Railroad	40 inches minimum height
Goofy's Barnstormer	35 inches minimum height
Mickey's Toontown playground attractions	40 inches maximum height
Space Mountain	44 inches minimum height
Splash Mountain	40 inches minimum height
Tomorrowland Indy Speedway	52 inches minimum height (to drive unassisted)

Epcot

Body Wars	40 inches minimum height
Mission: Space	44 inches minimum height
Test Track	40 inches minimum height
Soarin'	40 inches minimum height

ATTRACTION AND RIDE RESTRICTIONS (continued)**Disney-MGM Studios**

Honey, I Shrunk the Kids playground	4 years minimum age
Rock n' Roller Coaster	48 inches minimum height
Star Tours	40 inches minimum height
Tower of Terror	40 inches minimum height

Animal Kingdom

Dinosaur	40 inches minimum height
Kali River Rapids	38 inches minimum height
Primeval Whirl	48 inches minimum height

Blizzard Beach Water Park

Chair Lift	32 inches minimum height
Downhill Double Dipper slide	48 inches minimum height
Slush Gusher slide	48 inches minimum height
Summit Plummet slide	48 inches minimum height
T-Bar (in Ski Patrol Training Camp)	48 inches maximum height
Tike's Peak children's area	48 inches maximum height

Typhoon Lagoon Water Park

Humunga Kowabunga slide	48 inches minimum height
Ketchakiddee Creek children's area	48 inches maximum height
Mayday Falls raft ride	48 inches minimum height
Shark Reef saltwater reef swim	10 years minimum age unless accompanied by an adult
Wave Pool	Adult supervision required

Disney Quest

Buzz Lightyear's AstroBlasters	51 inches minimum height
CyberSpace Mountain	51 inches minimum height
Mighty Ducks Pinball Slam	48 inches minimum height

Waiting-Line Strategies for Adults with Young Children

Children hold up better through the day if you minimize the time they spend in lines. Arriving early and using our touring plans immensely reduce waiting. Here are additional ways to reduce stress for children:

1. Line Games Anticipate children to get restless in line, and plan activities to reduce the stress and boredom. In the morning, have waiting children discuss what they want to see and do during the day. Later, watch for and count Disney characters or play simple games like "20 Questions."

Lines move continuously; games requiring pen and paper are impractical. Waiting in the holding area of a theater attraction is a different story. Here, tic-tac-toe, hangman, drawing, and coloring make the time fly.

A Springfield, Ohio, mom reports on an unexpected but welcome assist from her brother:

I have a bachelor brother who joined my five-, seven-, and nine-year-olds and me for vacation. Pat surprised all of us with a bunch of plastic animal noses he had in his hip pack. When the kids got restless or cranky in line, he'd turn away and pull out a pig nose or a parrot nose or something. When he turned back around with the nose on, the kids would majorly crack up. The other people in line thought he was nuts, but he restored my kids' good humor more times than I can count.

2. Last-Minute Entry If an attraction can accommodate many people at once, standing in line is often unnecessary. The Magic Kingdom's *Liberty Belle* Riverboat is an example. The boat holds about 450 people, usually more than are waiting in line. Instead of standing in a crowd, grab a snack and sit in the shade until the boat arrives and loading is under way. When the line is almost gone, join it.

At large-capacity theaters like that for Epcot's *The American Adventure*, ask the greeter how long it will be until guests are admitted for the next show. If it's 15 minutes or more, take a toilet break or get a snack, returning a few minutes before show time. Food and drink aren't allowed in the attraction; be sure you have time to finish your snack before entering.

Attractions You Can Usually Enter at the Last Minute

Magic Kingdom

Liberty Square	<i>The Hall of Presidents</i>
	<i>Liberty Belle Riverboat</i>

Epcot

Future World	<i>The Circle of Life</i> (except during mealtimes)
World Showcase	<i>Reflections of China</i>
	<i>The American Adventure</i>
	<i>O Canada!</i>

Disney-MGM Studios

<i>Sounds Dangerous</i>	Backlot Tour
-------------------------	--------------

Animal Kingdom

<i>Flights of Wonder</i>

3. The Hail Mary Pass Certain lines are configured to allow you and your smaller children to pass under the rail to join your partner just before entry or boarding. This technique allows children and one adult to rest, snack, cool off, or potty while another adult or older

sibling stands in line. Other guests are understanding about this strategy when used for young children. Expect opposition, however, if you try to pass older children or more than one adult under the rail.

Attractions Where You Can Usually Complete a Hail Mary Pass

Magic Kingdom

Adventureland	Swiss Family Treehouse
Frontierland	Country Bear Jamboree

Attractions Where You Can Usually Complete a Hail Mary Pass (cont'd)

Fantasyland	Mad Tea Party
	Snow White's Adventures
	Dumbo the Flying Elephant
	Cinderella's Golden Carrousel
	Peter Pan's Flight

Epcot

Future World	Spaceship Earth
	Living with the Land

Disney-MGM Studios

<i>Sounds Dangerous</i>	<i>Indiana Jones Epic Stunt Spectacular!</i>
-------------------------	--

Animal Kingdom

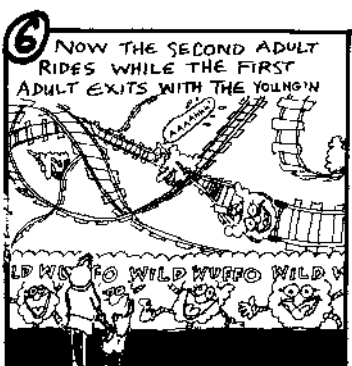
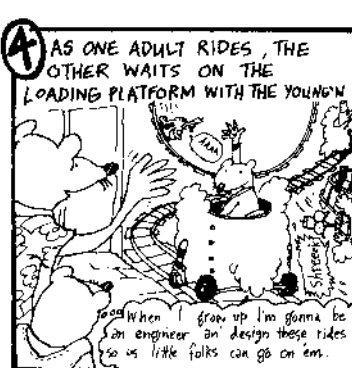
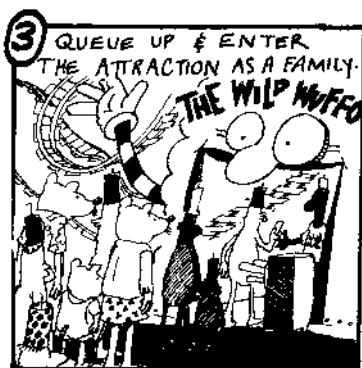
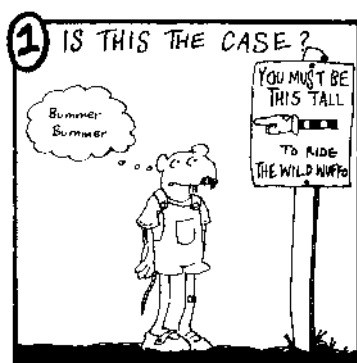
Dinoland USA	TriceraTop Spin
--------------	-----------------

4. Switching Off (a.k.a. The Baby Swap) Several attractions have minimum height and/or age requirements. Some couples with children too small or too young forgo these attractions, while others take turns riding. Missing some of Disney's best rides is an unnecessary sacrifice, and waiting in line twice for the same ride is a tremendous waste of time.

Instead, take advantage of the "switching off" option, also called "The Baby Swap." To switch off, there must be at least two adults. Adults and children wait in line together. When you reach an attendant, say you want to switch off. The cast member will allow everyone, including young children, to enter the attraction. When you reach the loading area, one adult rides while the other stays with the kids. Then the riding adult disembarks and takes charge of the children while the other adult rides. A third adult in the party can ride twice, once with each switching-off adult, so that the switching-off adults don't have to ride alone.

Most rides with age and height minimums load and unload in the same area. An exception is Space Mountain, where the first adult at the conclusion of the ride must inform the unloading attendant that he or she is switching off. The attendant then admits the first adult to an internal stairway that returns to the loading area.

Attractions where switching off is practiced are oriented to more-mature guests. Sometimes it takes a lot of courage for a child just to move



through the queue holding Dad's hand. In the boarding area, many children suddenly fear abandonment when one parent leaves to ride. Prepare your children for switching off, or you might have an emotional crisis on your hands. A mom from Edison, New Jersey, writes:

Once my son came to understand that the switch-off would not leave him abandoned, he did not seem to mind. I would recommend to your readers that

they practice the switch-off on some dry runs at home, so that their child is not concerned that he will be left behind. At the very least, the procedure could be explained in advance so that the little ones know what to expect.

An Ada, Michigan, mother discovered the switching-off procedure varies among attractions. She says:

Parents need to tell the very first attendant they come to that they would like to switch off. Each attraction has a different procedure for this. Tell every other attendant too because they forget quickly.

Attractions Where Switching Off Is Common

Magic Kingdom

Tomorrowland	Space Mountain
Frontierland	Splash Mountain
	Big Thunder Mountain Railroad

Epcot

Future World	Body Wars
	Test Track
	Mission: Space

Disney-MGM Studios

Star Tours
<i>The Twilight Zone</i> Tower of Terror
Rock 'n' Roller Coaster

Animal Kingdom

DinoLand U.S.A.	Dinosaur
Asia	Kali River Rapids
	Primeval Whirl

5. How to Ride Twice in a Row without Waiting Many young children like to ride a favorite attraction two or more times in succession. Riding the second time often gives them a feeling of mastery and accomplishment. Unfortunately, even in early morning, repeat rides can eat time. If you ride Dumbo as soon as the Magic Kingdom opens, for instance, you will wait only a minute or two for your first ride. When you return for your second, the wait will be about 12–15 minutes. For a third, count on 20 minutes or longer.

The best way to get your child on the ride twice (or more) without blowing your morning is to use the “Chuck Bubba Relay” (named in honor of a Kentucky reader):

- a. Mom and little Bubba enter the waiting line.
- b. Dad lets a specific number of people go in front of him (24 at Dumbo), then gets in line.
- c. As soon as the ride stops, Mom exits with Bubba and passes him to Dad to ride the second time.
- d. If everybody is really getting into this, Mom can hop in line again, at least 24 people behind Dad.

The Chuck Bubba Relay won't work on every ride, because waiting areas are configured differently (i.e., it's impossible in some cases to exit the ride and make the pass). For those rides where the relay works, here are how many people to count off:

Magic Kingdom

Mad Tea Party 53

Dumbo the Flying Elephant 24

Peter Pan's Flight 64

Snow White's Adventures 52

Cinderella's Golden Carrousel 75

Magic Carpets of Aladdin 48

Animal Kingdom

TriceraTop Spin 56

If you're the relay's second adult, you'll reach a place in line where it's easiest to make the hand-off. This may be where those exiting the ride pass closest to those waiting to board. You'll know it when you see it. If you reach it and the first parent hasn't arrived with Bubba, let those behind you pass until Bubba shows up.

6. Last-Minute Cold Feet If your young child gets cold feet just before boarding a ride where there's no age or height requirement, you usually can arrange a switch-off with the loading attendant. This is a common occurrence after experiencing Pirates of the Caribbean's dungeon waiting area.

No law says you have to ride. If you reach the boarding area and someone is unhappy, tell an attendant you've changed your mind, and you'll be shown the way out.

7. Elevator Shoes for the Short and the Brave If you have a child begging to go on rides with height requirements but who is a little too short, slip heel lifts into his Nikes before he reaches the measuring point. Be sure to leave the lifts in, because he may be measured again before boarding.

A Huntsville, Alabama, mom has the heel-lift problem under control:

Knowing my wild three-year-old child as I do, I was interested in your comment regarding shoe lifts. I don't know about other places, but in the big city of Huntspatch where we live, one has to have a prescription for lifts. Normal shoe repair places don't make them. I couldn't think of a material with which to fashion a homemade lift that would be comfortable enough to stand on while waiting in line. I ended up purchasing some of those painfully ugly two-inch chunky-heeled sandals at my local mart where they carried these hideous shoes in unbelievably tiny sizes (\$12). Since they didn't look too comfortable, we popped them on her right before we entered the ride lines. None of the height checkers ever asked her to remove them and she clip-clopped onto Splash Mountain, Big Thunder Railroad (Dat BIG Choo-Choo), Star Wars, and The Tower of Terror—twice! ... For adventuresome boys, I would suggest purchasing some of those equally hideous giant-heeled cowboy boots.

A Long Pond, Pennsylvania, mom has this to offer:

Tower of Terror, Star Tours, and Body Wars are 40" requirements. Being persistent with a 39" child, we tried these several times. She got on Tower of Terror two of three times, Body Wars one of one time, and Star Tours one of two tries. She wore elevator shoes and a bun hairstyle to increase height.

Note that boosting your child's height by a couple inches with a heel lift or the like will not compromise his safety on the ride.

8. Throw Yourself on the Grenade, Mildred! For conscientious parents determined to sacrifice themselves on behalf of their children, we provide a Magic Kingdom One-Day Touring Plan called the "Dumbo-or-Die-in-a-Day Touring Plan, for Parents with Small Children." This plan (pages 487–489) will ensure that you run yourself ragged. Designed to help you forfeit everything of personal interest for your children's pleasure, the plan guarantees you'll go home battered and exhausted, with extraordinary stories of devotion and perseverance. By the way, it really works. Anyone under eight will love it.

The Disney Characters

The large and friendly costumed versions of Mickey, Minnie, Donald, Goofy, and others—known as "Disney characters"—provide a link between Disney animated films and the theme parks. To people emotionally invested, the characters in Disney films are as real as next-door neighbors, never mind that they're drawings on plastic. In recent years, theme-park personifications of the characters also have become real to us. It's not a person in a mouse costume; it's Mickey himself. Similarly, meeting Goofy or Snow White is an encounter with a celebrity, a memory to be treasured.

While there are hundreds of Disney animated film characters, only about 250 have been brought to life in costume. Of these, fewer than a fifth are "greeters" (characters who mix with patrons). The others perform in shows or parades. Originally confined to the Magic Kingdom, characters are now found in all major theme parks and Disney hotels.

Character-Watching Watching characters has become a pastime. Families once were content to meet a character occasionally. They now pursue them relentlessly, armed with autograph books and cameras. Because some characters are only rarely seen, character-watching has become character-collecting. (To cash in on character-collecting, Disney sells autograph books throughout the World.) Mickey, Minnie, and Goofy are a snap to bag; they seem to be everywhere. But Daisy Duck seldom comes out. Other characters appear only in a location consistent with their starring role. Cinderella, predictably, reigns at Cinderella Castle in

Fantasyland, while Br'er Fox and Br'er Bear frolic in Frontierland near Splash Mountain.

A Brooklyn dad complains that character-collecting has gotten out of hand:

Whoever started the practice of collecting autographs from the characters should be subjected to Chinese water torture! We went to WDW eleven years ago, with an eight-year-old and an eleven-year-old. We would bump into characters, take pictures, and that was it. After a while, our children noticed that some of the other children were getting autographs. We managed to avoid joining in during our first day at the Magic Kingdom and our first day at Epcot, but by day three our children were collecting autographs. However, it did not get too out of hand, since it was limited to accidental character meeting.

This year when we took our youngest child (who is now eight), he had already seen his siblings' collection, and was determined to outdo them. However, rather than random meetings, the characters are now available practically all day long at different locations, according to a printed schedule, which our son was old enough to read. We spent more time standing in line for autographs than we did for the most popular rides!

A family from Birmingham, Alabama, found some benefit in their children's pursuit of characters:

We had no idea we would be caught up in this madness, but after my daughters grabbed your guidebook to get Pocahontas to sign it (we had no blank paper), we quickly bought a Disney autograph book and gave in. It was actually the highlight of their trip, and my son even got into the act by helping get places in line for his sisters. They LOVED looking for characters (I think it has all been planned by Kodak to sell film). The possibility of seeing a new character revived my seven-year-old's energy on many occasions. It was an amazing, totally unexpected part of our visit.

Preparing Your Children to Meet the Characters Almost all characters are quite large, and several, like Br'er Bear, are huge! Small children don't expect this, and preschoolers especially can be intimidated.

Discuss the characters with your children before you go. On first encounter, don't thrust your child at the character. Allow the little one to deal with this big thing from whatever distance feels safe. If two adults are present, one should stay near the youngster while the other approaches the character and demonstrates that it's safe and friendly. Some kids warm to the characters immediately; some never do. Most take a little time and several encounters.

There are two kinds of characters: those whose costume includes a face-covering headpiece (animal characters and such humanlike characters as

Captain Hook) and “face characters,” those who resemble the characters so no mask or headpiece is necessary. These include Mary Poppins, Ariel, Jasmine, Aladdin, Cinderella, Belle, Snow White, Esmeralda, and Prince Charming.

Only face characters speak. Headpiece characters make no noises. Because cast members couldn’t possibly imitate the character’s distinctive cinema voice, Disney has determined it’s more effective to keep them silent. Lack of speech notwithstanding, headpiece characters are warm and responsive and communicate effectively with gestures. Tell children in advance that headpiece characters don’t talk.

Some character costumes are cumbersome and give cast members very poor visibility. (Eyeholes frequently are in the mouth of the costume or even on the neck or chest.) Children who approach the character from the back or side may not be noticed, even if the child touches the character. It’s possible in this situation for the character to accidentally step on the child or knock him down. A child should approach a character from the front, but occasionally not even this works. Duck characters (Donald, Daisy, Uncle Scrooge), for example, have to peer around their bills. If a character appears to be ignoring your child, pick up your child and hold her in front of the character until the character responds.

It’s okay for your child to touch, pat, or hug the character. Understanding the unpredictability of children, the character will keep his feet still, particularly refraining from moving backward or sideways. Most characters will pose for pictures or sign autographs. Costumes make it difficult for characters to wield a normal pen. If your child collects autographs, carry a pen the width of a magic marker.

The Big Hurt Many children expect to meet Mickey the minute they enter the park and are disappointed if they don’t. If your children can’t enjoy things until they see Mickey, ask a cast member where to find him. If the cast member doesn’t know, he or she can phone to learn exactly where characters are.

“Then Some Confusion Happened” Children sometimes become lost at character encounters. Usually, there’s a lot of activity around a character, with both adults and children touching it or posing for pictures. Most commonly, Mom and Dad stay in the crowd while Junior approaches the character. In the excitement and with the character moving around, Junior heads in the wrong direction to look for Mom and Dad. In the words of a Salt Lake City mom: “Milo was shaking hands with Dopey one minute, then some confusion happened and [Milo] was gone.”

Families with several young children, and parents who are busy with cameras, can lose a youngster in a heartbeat. We recommend that parents with preschoolers stay with them when they meet characters, stepping back only to take a quick picture.

Character Hogs While we're on the subject of cameras, give other families a chance. Especially if you're shooting video, consider the perspective of this Houston mom:

One of the worst parts to deal with are the people with movie cameras who take about three minutes filming their child with Mickey, asking everyone else to move. A 35mm camera takes about two seconds.

Meeting Characters for Free

You can *see* Disney characters in live shows at all the theme parks and in parades at the Magic Kingdom and Disney-MGM Studios. Your daily entertainment schedule lists times. If you want to *meet* the characters, get autographs, and take photos, consult the park map or the handout *Times Guide* sometimes provided with it. If there's a particular character you're itching to meet, ask any cast member to call the character hotline and ask if the character is out and about, and if so, where.

At the Magic Kingdom Characters are encountered more frequently here than anywhere else in Walt Disney World. A character almost always will be next to City Hall on Main Street, and there will usually be one or more in Town Square or near the railroad station. If it's rainy, look for characters on the veranda of Tony's Town Square Restaurant or in the Town Square Exposition Hall next to Tony's. Characters appear in all the lands but are more plentiful in Fantasyland and Mickey's Toontown Fair. At Mickey's Toontown Fair, meet Mickey privately in his "Judge's Tent." Characters actually work shifts at the Toontown Hall of Fame next to Mickey's Country House. Here, you can line up to meet three different assortments of characters. Each assortment has its own greeting area and its own line. One group, variously labeled Mickey's Pals, Toon Pals, Famous Friends, or some such, will include Minnie, Pluto, Goofy, Donald, and sometimes Chip 'n' Dale, Daisy, and Uncle Scrooge. The other two assortments vary and are more ambiguously defined. The 100 Acre Wood Friends are mostly Winnie the Pooh characters, while Fairy Tale Friends include Snow White, assorted dwarfs, Sleeping Beauty, the Beast, Belle, Cinderella, Prince Charming, etc. Sometimes it's Villains (Captain Hook, Cruella DeVil, Jafar, et al.), and Princesses (Sleeping Beauty, Mary Poppins, yadda, yadda, yadda). In Fantasyland, Cinderella regularly greets diners at Cinderella's Royal Table in the castle, and Ariel holds court in her grotto. Nearby, check out the Fantasyland Character Festival by the lagoon opposite Dumbo. Also look for characters in the central hub and by Splash Mountain in Frontierland.

Characters are featured in afternoon and evening parades and also play a major role in Castle Forecourt shows (at the castle entrance on the central hub side) and at the Galaxy Palace Theater in Tomorrowland. Find performance times for shows and parades in the daily entertainment

schedule or *Times Guide*. Characters sometimes stay to mingle after shows.

At Epcot Disney at first didn't think characters would fit the more serious, educational style of Epcot. Later, characters were imported to blunt criticism that Epcot lacked warmth and humor. To integrate them thematically, new and often bizarre costumes were created. Goofy was seen roaming Future World in a metallic silver cape reminiscent of Buck Rogers. Mickey greets guests at the American Adventure dressed like Ben Franklin.

Although chance encounters with characters are less frequent at Epcot than at other parks, Epcot compensates by periodically bringing in characters by the busload, literally. Eight to ten times a day, a platoon of characters piles into a British double-decker bus and visits one of the World Showcase countries. When the bus stops, characters hop off and mingle, posing for pictures and signing autographs. Mickey, Minnie, Goofy, Chip and Dale, and Pluto are almost always on the bus, and are frequently accompanied by Baloo, Tigger, Eeyore, the Genie from *Aladdin*, Jasmine, Mushu, Timon, and Snow White. The Epcot handout map or *Times Guide* lists the buses' times and stops. If you position yourself at a scheduled stop a few minutes before the bus arrives, you can score photos and autographs before other guests figure out what's happening. In fact, the bus offers the easiest access to the most characters in one place in all of Disney World. However, once people in the immediate area get the drift, the characters are mobbed. In addition to the bus, character shows are performed daily at the American Gardens Theater World Showcase and at Guest Relations. Check the daily entertainment schedule or *Times Guide* for times.

Characters may be rarer at Epcot, but they're often easier to meet. A father from Effingham, Illinois, writes:

Trying to get autographs and pictures with Disney characters in the Magic Kingdom was a nightmare. Every character we saw was mobbed by kids and adults. Our kids had no chance. But at Epcot and Disney-MGM, things were much better. We got autographs, pictures, and more involvement. Our kids danced with several characters and received a lot of personal attention.

At Disney-MGM Studios Characters are likely to turn up anywhere at the Studios but are most frequently found in front of the Animation Building, along Mickey Avenue (leading to the soundstages), and on New York Street. Mickey and his "friends" pose for keepsake photos (about \$14 each) on Hollywood Boulevard and Sunset Boulevard. Characters are also prominent in shows, with *Voyage of the Little Mermaid* running almost continuously and an abbreviated version of *Beauty and the Beast* performed several times daily at the Theater of the Stars. Check the daily entertainment schedule or *Times Guide* for showtimes.

At the Animal Kingdom Camp Minnie-Mickey in the Animal Kingdom is designed specifically for meeting characters. Meet Mickey, Minnie,

and various characters from *The Jungle Book* and *The Lion King* on designated character greeting “trails.” Also at Camp Minnie-Mickey are two stage shows featuring characters from *The Lion King* and *Pocahontas*.

Disney has several initiatives intended to satisfy guests’ inexhaustible desire to meet characters. Most important, Disney assigned Mickey and a number of other characters to all-day duty in Mickey’s Toontown Fair in the Magic Kingdom and Camp Minnie-Mickey in Animal Kingdom. While making the characters more available has taken the guesswork out of finding them, it has robbed encounters of much of their spontaneity. To address this, especially at the Magic Kingdom, Disney has put a throng of characters back on the street. At park opening there are enough characters on hand to satisfy any child’s desires. If you line up at one of the permanent character greeting venues, be aware that lines for face characters move m-u-c-h more slowly than do lines for nonspeaking characters. Because face characters are allowed to talk, they often engage children in lengthy conversations, much to the dismay of families still in the queue.

Character Dining

Fraternizing with characters has become so popular that Disney offers character breakfasts, brunches, and dinners where families can dine in the presence of Mickey, Minnie, Goofy, and other costumed versions of animated celebrities. Besides grabbing customers from Denny’s and Hardee’s, character meals provide a controlled setting in which young children can warm to characters. All meals are attended by several characters. Adult prices apply to persons 12 or older, children’s prices to ages 3–11. Younger than three eat free. For more information on character dining, call (407) 939-3463 (WDW-DINE).

Because character dining is very popular, arrange priority seating as far in advance as possible by calling (407) 939-3463. Priority seating isn’t a reservation, only a commitment to seat you ahead of walk-in patrons at the scheduled date and time. Even with priority seating, expect to wait 10–30 minutes to be seated. At very popular character meals like the breakfast at Cinderella’s Royal Table, you are required to make a for-real reservation and to guarantee it with a for-real deposit.

Character Dining: What to Expect

Character meals are bustling affairs held in hotels’ or theme parks’ largest full-service restaurants. Character breakfasts offer a fixed menu served individually, family style, or on a buffet. The typical breakfast includes scrambled eggs; bacon, sausage, and ham; hash browns; waffles or French toast; biscuits, rolls, or pastries; and fruit. With family-style service, the meal is served in large skillets or platters at your table. Seconds (or thirds) are free. Buffets offer much the same fare, but you fetch it yourself.

CHARACTER MEAL HIT PARADE

Meals			
Rank/Restaurant	Location	Served	Characters
1. Cinderella's Royal Table	Magic Kingdom	Breakfast	Cinderella, Snow White, Belle, Jasmine, Aladdin
2. Akershus Princess Storybook Breakfast	Epcot	Breakfast	4–6 characters chosen from daily: Belle, Jasmine, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, Esmeralda, Mary Poppins, Pocahontas, Mulan
3. Chef Mickey's	Contemporary	Breakfast Dinner	Minnie, Mickey, Chip, Pluto, Goofy Mickey, Pluto, Chip, Dale, Goofy
4. Crystal Palace	Magic Kingdom	Breakfast Lunch/Dinner	Pooh, Tigger, Eeyore, Piglet Pooh, Tigger, Eeyore
5. 1900 Park Fare	Grand Floridian	Breakfast Dinner	Mary Poppins and friends Cinderella and friends
6. Garden Grill	Epcot	Lunch/Dinner	Chip, Dale, Mickey, Pluto
7. Liberty Tree Tavern	Magic Kingdom	Dinner	Minnie, Pluto, Donald Duck, Meeko, Chip and/or Dale
8. Donald's Breakfastosaurus	Animal Kingdom	Breakfast	Mickey, Donald, Pluto, Goofy
9. Cape May Cafe	Beach Club	Breakfast	Goofy, Chip, Dale, Pluto
10. Ohana	Polynesian Resort	Breakfast	Mickey, Goofy, Chip, Dale
11. Gulliver's Grill	Swan	Dinner	Goofy and Pluto or Rafiki and Timon

Character dinners range from a set menu served family-style to buffets or ordering off the menu. The character dinner at the Magic Kingdom's Liberty Tree Tavern, for example, is served family-style and consists of turkey, ham, marinated flank steak, salad, mashed potatoes, green vegetables, and, for kids, macaroni and cheese. Dessert is extra. Character dinner buffets, such as those at 1900 Park Fare at the Grand Floridian and Chef Mickey's at the Contemporary Resort, offer separate adults' and children's serving lines. Typically, the children's buffet includes hamburgers, hot dogs, pizza, fish sticks, fried chicken nuggets, macaroni and cheese, and peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches. Selections at the adult buffet usually include prime rib or other carved meat, baked or broiled

Served	Setting	Type of Service	Food Variety and Quality	Noise Level	Character to Guest Ratio
Daily	★★★★★	Buffet	★★★	Quiet	1 to 26
Daily	★★★★	Family Style	★★★½	Quiet	1 to 54
Daily	★★★	Buffet	★★★	Loud	1 to 56
Daily	★★★	Buffet	★★★½	Loud	1 to 56
Daily	★★★	Buffet	★★½	Very Loud	1 to 67
Daily	★★★	Buffet	★★★	Very Loud	1 to 89
Daily	★★★	Buffet	★★★	Moderate	1 to 54
Daily	★★★	Buffet	★★★½	Moderate	1 to 44
Daily	★★★★½	Family Style	★★½	Very Quiet	1 to 46
Daily	★★★½	Family Style	★★★	Moderate	1 to 47
Daily	★★★	Buffet	★★★	Very Loud	1 to 112
Daily	★★★	Buffet	★★½	Moderate	1 to 67
Daily	★★½	Family Style	★★½	Moderate	1 to 57
Daily	★★★	Buffet/Menu	★★★½	Moderate	1 to 198

Florida seafood, pasta, chicken, an ethnic dish or two, vegetables, potatoes, and salad.

At both breakfasts and dinners, characters circulate around the room while you eat. During your meal, each of the three to five characters present will visit your table, arriving one at a time to cuddle the kids (and sometimes the adults), pose for photos, and sign autographs. Keep autograph books (with pens) and loaded cameras handy. For the best photos, adults should sit across the table from their children. Seat the children where characters can easily reach them. If a table is against a wall, for example, adults should sit with their backs to the wall and children on the aisle.

At some larger restaurants, including 'Ohana at the Polynesian Resort

and Chef Mickey's at the Contemporary, character meals involve impromptu parades of characters and children around the room, group singing, napkin waving, and other organized mayhem.

Servers don't rush you to leave after you have eaten. You can get seconds on coffee or juice and stay as long as you wish to enjoy the characters. Remember, however, that lots of eager children and adults are waiting not so patiently to be admitted.

When to Go

Attending a character breakfast usually prevents you from arriving at the theme parks in time for opening. Because early morning is best for touring and you don't want to burn daylight lingering over breakfast, we suggest:

1. Go to a character dinner or lunch instead of breakfast; it won't conflict with your touring schedule.
2. Substitute a late character breakfast for lunch. Have a light breakfast early from room service or your cooler to tide you over. Then tour the theme park for an hour or two before breaking off around 10:15 a.m. to go to the character breakfast. Make a big brunch of your character breakfast and skip lunch. You should be fueled until dinner.
3. Go on your arrival or departure day. The day you arrive and check in is usually good for a character dinner. Settle at your hotel, swim, then dine with the characters. This strategy has the added benefit of exposing your children to the characters before chance encounters at the parks. Some children, moreover, won't settle down to enjoy the parks until they have seen Mickey. Departure day also is good for a character meal. Schedule a character breakfast on your check-out day before you head for the airport or begin your drive home.
4. Go on a rest day. If you plan to stay five or more days, you'll probably take a day or half-day from touring to rest or do something else. These are perfect days for a character meal.

How to Choose a Character Meal

Many readers ask for advice about character meals. This question from a Waterloo, Iowa, mom is typical:

Are all character breakfasts pretty much the same or are some better than others? How should I go about choosing one?

In fact, some *are* better, sometimes much better. When we evaluate character meals, we look for:

1. The Characters The meals offer a diverse assortment of characters. Select a meal that features your children's favorites. Check our Character Meal Hit Parade chart to see which characters are assigned to each meal. With the exception of 1900 Park Fare at the Grand Floridian, most restaurants stick with the same characters. Even so, check the lineup when you phone to make your priority seating. A mom from Austin, Texas, writes:

We went to two character meals at 1900 Park Fare. We ate dinner there the night we arrived unaware that the characters would all be villains.

My four-year-old was a little scared of the witch from Snow White but amazingly kept his cool! Cruella De Vil, Captain Hook, and Prince John (from Robin Hood) were also there. My son asked the next morning if that witch was going to be at the theme parks, too. Needless to say, we did not ride the Snow White ride in MK! (The character breakfast was kinder and gentler.)

A Michigan family didn't fare as well:

Our character meal at 1900 Park Fare was a DISASTER!!! Please warn other readers with younger children that if they make a priority seating and the characters are villains, they may want to rethink their options. We went for my daughter's fifth birthday, and she was scared to death. The Queen of Hearts chased her sobbing and screaming down the hallway. Most young children we saw at the dinner were very frightened. Captain Hook and Prince John were laid-back, but Governor Ratcliff (from Pocahontas) and the Queen were amazingly rude and intimidating.

The villains have abdicated 1900 Park Fare in favor of more benign characters, but you never know where they might show up next. Moral? Call before making priority seatings and ask which characters you'll be dining with.

2. Attention from the Characters At all character meals, characters circulate among guests, hugging children, posing for pictures, and signing autographs. How much time a character spends with you and your children depends primarily on the ratio of characters to guests. The more characters and fewer guests, the better. Because many character meals never fill to capacity, the Character-to-Guest Ratios found in our Character Meal Hit Parade chart have been adjusted to reflect an average attendance. Even so, there's quite a range. The best ratio is at Cinderella's Royal Table where there's approximately 1 character to every 26 guests. The worst ratio is at Gulliver's Grill at the Swan Resort. Here, there's only 1 character for every 198 guests. In practical terms, this means your family will get eight times more attention from characters at Cinderella's Royal Table than from those at Gulliver's Grill. Many children particularly enjoy meals with characters such as Snow White, Belle, Jasmine, Cinderella, and Aladdin. These "face characters" speak and are able to engage children in a way not possible for the mute animal characters.

3. The Setting Some character meals are in exotic settings. For others, moving the event to an elementary school cafeteria would be an improvement. Our chart rates each meal's setting with the familiar scale of 0–5 stars. Two restaurants, Cinderella's Royal Table in the Magic Kingdom and the Garden Grill in the Land pavilion at Epcot, deserve special mention. Cinderella's Royal Table is on the first and second floors of Cinderella Castle in Fantasyland, offering guests a look inside the castle. The Garden Grill is a revolving restaurant overlooking several scenes from the Living with the

Land boat ride. Also at Epcot, the popular Princesses Character Breakfast is held in the castle-like Restaurant Akershus. Although Chef Mickey's at the Contemporary Resort is rather sterile in appearance, it affords a great view of the monorail running through the hotel. Themes and settings of the remaining character-meal venues, while apparent to adults, will be lost on most children.

4. The Food Although some food served at character meals is quite good, most is average (palatable but nothing to get excited about). In variety, consistency, and quality, restaurants generally do a better job with breakfast than with lunch or dinner (if served). Some restaurants offer a buffet, while others opt for "one-skillet," family-style service where all hot items are served from the same pot or skillet. To help you sort it out, we rate the food at each character meal in our chart using the five-star scale.

5. The Program Some larger restaurants stage modest performances where the characters dance, head a parade around the room, or lead songs and cheers. For some guests, these activities give the meal a celebratory air; for others, they turn what was already mayhem into absolute chaos. Either way, the antics consume time the characters could spend with families at their table.

6. Noise If you want to eat in peace, character meals are a bad choice. That said, some are much noisier than others. Our chart gives you an idea of what to expect.

7. Which Meal? Although breakfasts seem to be most popular, character lunches and dinners are usually more practical because they don't interfere with early-morning touring. During hot weather, a character lunch can be heavenly.

8. Cost Dinners cost more than lunches, and lunches are more than breakfasts. Prices for any meal vary only about \$4 from the least expensive to the most expensive restaurant. Breakfasts run \$14–\$20 for adults and \$6–\$10 for ages 3–9. For character lunches, expect to pay \$18–\$20 for adults and \$10 for kids. Dinners are \$22–\$24 for adults and \$10–\$11 for children. Little ones two and younger eat free.

9. Priority Seatings/Reservations The Disney dining reservations system makes priority seatings for character meals up to 90 days before you wish to dine. Priority seating for most character meals is easy to obtain even if you call only a couple of weeks before you leave home. Breakfasts at Cinderella's Royal Table are another story. To get breakfast table at Cinderella's, you'll need our strategy (pages 281–285), as well as help from Congress and the Pope.

10. Homeless Characters Because of decreased attendance at Disney World, several character meals have been eliminated. Reconfirm all char-

acter meal priority seatings three weeks or so before you leave home, by calling (407) WDW-DINE.

11. Friends For some venues, Disney has stopped specifying characters scheduled for a particular meal. Instead, they say it's a certain character "and friends." For example, "Pooh and friends," meaning Eeyore, Piglet, and Tigger, or some combination thereof, or "Mickey and friends" with some assortment chosen among Minnie, Goofy, Pluto, Donald, Daisy, Chip, and Dale. Most are self-evident, but others such as "Mary Poppins and friends" are unclear. Who knows whom Mary Poppins hangs out with? Don't expect Dick van Dyke.

12. Oddities Character meals are odd affairs, with the name "character meal" implying you eat the characters. We have seen characters gnawed, but we haven't seen one devoured. Semantics aside, we refer to oddities that may confuse or disappoint you. In the confusion department, the Garden Grove Café at the Swan Resort changes its name to Gulliver's Grill for dinner. If you ask, Garden Grove Café/Gulliver's Grill will tell you that two characters attend each meal. What you need to know, however, is that they work alternating 30-minute shifts, so there is usually only one character in the restaurant at a time.

Many people unable to obtain a priority seating for the character breakfast at Cinderella's Royal Table reserve a table there for lunch or dinner. Unfortunately, neither lunch nor dinner is a character meal. Although Cinderella and Snow White have been known to appear during lunch or dinner, there's no guarantee. Finally, 1900 Park Fare at the Grand Floridian Resort trots out five characters for dinner but only four for breakfast. Conversely, the Crystal Palace features four characters for breakfast but only three for lunch and dinner.

Getting a Priority Seating at Cinderella's Royal Table

The character breakfast at Cinderella's Royal Table is extremely popular as this frustrated reader from Golden, Colorado, complains:

I don't know what you have to do to get a priority seating for Cinderella's [Royal] Table in the castle. I called Disney Dining every morning at 7 [a.m.], which was 5 [a.m.] where I live! It was like calling into one of those radio shows where the first person to call wins a prize. Every time I finally got through, all the tables were gone. I am soooo frustrated and mad I could spit. What do you have to do to get a table for Cinderella's breakfast?

Admittedly, the toughest ticket at Disney World is a priority seating for the character breakfast at Cinderella's Royal Table in the castle at the Magic Kingdom. Why? Cinderella's Royal Table is Disney's tiniest character meal restaurant, accommodating only about 130 diners at a time.

The only way to get a table is to obtain a priority seating through

Disney reservations. You must call (407) WDW-DINE at 7 a.m. EST exactly 90 days before the day you want to eat at Cinderella's. Reservations can be made 90 days in advance.

Here's how it works. It's 6:50 a.m. EST and all the Disney dining reservationists are warming up their computers to begin filling available seats at 7 a.m. As the clock strikes seven, Disney dining is blasted with an avalanche of calls, all trying to make priority seatings for the character breakfast at Cinderella's Royal Table. There are over 100 reservationists on duty, and most priority seatings can be assigned in two minutes or less. Thus, the coveted seats go quickly, selling out as early as 7:02 a.m. on many days.

To be among the fortunate few who score a priority seating, try the following. First, call on the correct morning. Use a calendar and count backward exactly 90 days from (but not including) the day you wish to dine. (The computer doesn't understand months, so you can't, for example, call on February 1 to make a priority seating for May 1 because that's fewer than 90 days.) If you want to eat on May 1, for example, begin your 90-day backward count on April 30. If you count correctly, you'll find that the correct morning to call is January 31st. If you don't feel like counting days, call (407) WDW-DINE, and the Disney folks will calculate it for you. Call them during the afternoon when they're less busy about 100 days before your trip. Let them know when you'd like your priority seating, and they'll tell you the morning to call.

To get a table, you must dial at almost exactly 7 a.m. EST. Disney does not calibrate its clock with the correct time as determined by the U.S. Naval Observatory or the National Institute of Standards and Technology, but we conducted synchronizing tests and determined that Disney reservation system clocks are accurate to within 1–3 seconds. Several Internet sites will give you the exact time. Our favorite is **www.atomic.time.net**, which offers the exact time in displays that show hours, minutes, and seconds. Once the Atomic Time home page is up, click on "html multizone continuous" and look for the Eastern Time Zone. Using this site or your local "Time of Day" number from the phone directory, synchronize your watch TO THE SECOND. About 18–20 seconds before 7 a.m., dial (407) WDW-DIN, waiting to dial the final "E" in "DINE" until 7 seconds before the hour.

Hang up and redial until your call is answered. When it is, you will hear one of two recorded messages:

1. "Thank you for calling the Disney Reservation Center. Our office is closed . . ." If you get this message hang up the instant you hear the words "Our office" and hit redial.

OR

2. "Thank you for calling the Disney Reservation Center" followed by a pause. "If you are calling to make a Priority Seating for any location

except Victoria & Albert's at the Grand Floridian Resort and Spa, please press 1 or remain on the line. For Victoria & Albert's, please press 2.

Be ready. As soon as you hear the pause, press 1. Your call will be answered momentarily by a Disney Reservations Center (DRC) agent. Don't get nervous if you're on hold for a bit. The worst thing you can do now is hang up and try again.

As soon as a live DRC agent comes on the line, interrupt immediately and say, "I need Cindy's, for May 1st, for four people, any available time" (substituting your own dates, of course). Don't engage in "good mornings" or other pleasantries. Time is of the essence. You can apologize later to the DRC agent for your momentary rudeness if you feel the need, but she already knows what's going on. Don't try and pick a specific time. Even two seconds to ask for a specific time will seriously diminish your chances of getting a priority seating/reservation. If you ask for a specific time and it's full, you probably won't have time to make a second request before all times are filled.

If the atomic clock thing seems too complicated (not to mention anal), start dialing (407) WDW-DINE about 50 seconds before 7 a.m. If the reservation center isn't open yet, you'll get a recorded message saying so. When this happens, hang up and call back immediately. If you have a redial button on your phone, use it to speed the dialing process. Continue hanging up and redialing as fast as you can until you get the recording with the pause. This recording verifies that your call has been placed in the service queue in the order in which it was received. If you were among the first to get through, a reservationist will normally pick up in 3–20 seconds. What happens next depends on how many others got through ahead of you, but chances are good that you'll be able to get a priority seating. Bear in mind that while you're talking, other agents are confirming priority seatings for other guests, so you want the transaction to go down as fast as possible. Flexibility on your part counts. It's much harder to get a seating for a large group; give some thought to breaking your group into numbers that can be accommodated at tables for four or even tables for two.

All priority seatings/reservations for Cinderella's Royal Table character breakfast require a credit-card deposit (not guarantee) of \$10 per adult and \$5 per child at the time of the booking. The name on the booking can't be changed after the priority seating is made. Priority seatings may be canceled with the deposit refunded in full by calling (407) WDW-DINE at least 24 hours before the seating time.

While many readers have been successful using our strategies, some have not:

[Regarding] reservations for breakfast as Cinderella's castle. I did exactly what you suggested, five days in a row, and was unable to get through to an

actual person until after 7:15 each day (although I was connected and put on hold at exactly 7 a.m. each time). Of course, by then, all reservations were gone (this was for the first week in May, not a peak time).

On most days, a couple of hundred calls slam Disney's automated call queuing system within milliseconds of one another. With this call volume, 1/20 of a second or less can make the difference between getting and not getting a table. As it happens, there are variables beyond your control. When you hit the first digit of a long-distance number, your phone system leaps into action. As you continue entering digits, your phone system is already searching for the best path to the number you're calling. According to federal regulation, a phone system must connect the call to the target number within 20 seconds of your entering the last digit. In practice, most systems make the connection much faster, but your system could be pokey. How fast your call is connected, therefore, depends on your local phone system's connection speed, and even this varies according to traffic volume and available routing paths for individual calls. Distance counts too, although we're talking milliseconds. Thus, it takes just a bit longer for a call to reach Disney World from Chicago than from Atlanta, and longer yet if you're calling from San Francisco.

So, if you're having trouble getting a priority seating at Cinderella's Royal Table using the strategies outlined earlier, here are our suggestions. Make a test call to (407) WDW-DINE at 7 a.m. EST a couple of days before you call in earnest. Using a stopwatch or the stopwatch function on your watch, time the interval between entering the last digit of the number and when the phone starts to ring. This exercise will provide a rough approximation of the call connection speed at that time from your area, taking into account both speed of service and distance. For most of you, the connection interval will be very short. Some of you, however, might discover that your problem in getting through is because of slow service. Either way, factor in the connection interval in timing your call to Disney. Phone traffic is heavier on weekdays than weekends, so if you plan to call reservations on a weekday, conduct your test on a weekday. Finally, don't use a cell phone to make the call. The connection time will usually be slower and certainly less predictable.

Though this is one of the most widely used sections in this guidebook, we're amazed that anyone would go to this much trouble to eat with Cinderella . . . atomic clocks, split-second timing, test calls . . . yikes!

As a postscript, we've found it's often easier to get through to reservations if you call on Saturday or Sunday. Presumably, folks don't mind calling at the break of dawn if they're up getting ready for work but object to interrupting their beauty rest on weekends.

If You Can't Get a Priority Seating If you insist on breakfast at Cinderella's but can't get a priority seating, go to the restaurant on the morning you wish to dine and try for a table as a walk-in. This is a long shot, though possible during the least busy times of year. There's also a fair shot at success on cold or rainy days when there's an above-average probability of no-shows. If you try to walk in, your chances are best during the last hour of serving.

If none of that works, consider this suggestion from a Providence, Rhode Island, mother of three:

We were not able to get [priority seating] for Cinderella's breakfast at the castle, so we booked a character breakfast at our hotel and then lunch at [Cinderella's Royal Table] for later in the week. This way our kids were able to eat with Mickey one day and see the inside of the castle a few days later. Incidentally, getting the [priority seating] for lunch at the castle was easy.

Neither lunch nor dinner at Cinderella's is a character meal, but Cinderella or Snow White sometimes looks in (no guarantees). Even without characters, a meal in the castle costs a bundle, as this Snellville, Georgia, mom points out:

We ate at Cinderella's Castle to fulfill my longtime dream. The menu was very limited and expensive. For three people, no appetizers or dessert, the bill was \$100.

And no alcoholic beverages, either. Alcohol isn't served in the Magic Kingdom.

Other Character Events

A campfire and sing-along are held nightly (times vary with the season) near the Meadow Trading Post and Bike Barn at Fort Wilderness Campground. Chip 'n' Dale lead the songs, and two Disney films are shown. The program is free and open to resort guests (call (407) 824-2788).

Ice Cream Social At 3 p.m., the Garden Grill in the Land pavilion at Epcot hosts an Ice Cream Social. The cost is \$6.99 per person, plus tax and tip, for both children and adults. Mickey gets sticky with the kids (a lot of autograph books get chocolate-coated at this event). Usually uncrowded, it's a great break on a hot day and an easy way to see Mickey.

Wonderland Tea Party Although the name of this enchanting soiree is enough to give most boys hives, it's nevertheless available at the Grand Floridian's 1900 Park Fare restaurant, Monday–Friday, at 1:30 p.m. for about \$29 per child (ages 3–10). The program consists of making cupcakes, arranging flower bouquets, and having lunch and tea with characters from *Alice in Wonderland*. Reserve up to 90 days in advance by calling (407) WDW-DINE.

Baby-Sitting

Childcare Centers Childcare isn't available inside the theme parks, but each Magic Kingdom resort connected by monorail or boat, each Epcot resort (BoardWalk Inn and Villas, Yacht and Beach Club resorts), and Animal Kingdom Lodge have a childcare center for potty-trained children older than three. Services vary, but children generally can be left between 4:30 p.m. and midnight. Milk and cookies, and blankets and pillows are provided at all centers, and dinner is provided at most. Play is supervised but not organized, and toys, videos, and games are plentiful. Guests at any Disney resort or campground may use the services.

CHILDCARE CLUBS*			
Hotel	Name of Program	Ages	Phone
Animal Kingdom Lodge	Simba's Cubhouse	4-12	(407) 938-4785
Contemporary Resort	Mouseketeer Clubhouse	4-12	(407) 824-1000 ext. 3700
Dolphin	Dinner Camp	4-12	(407) 934-4241
Grand Floridian Beach Resort	Mouseketeer Club	4-12	(407) 824-1666
The Hilton	All About Kids	4-12	(407) 812-9300
Polynesian Resort	Neverland Club	4-12	(407) 824-2000
Swan	Dinner Camp	4-12	(407) 934-1621
Yacht and Beach Club Resorts	Sandcastle Club	4-12	(407) 934-7000
Wilderness Lodge & Villas	Cub's Den	4-12	(407) 824-1083
Wyndham Palace	All About Kids	All	(407) 812-9300

* Childcare clubs operate afternoons and evenings. Before 4 p.m., call the hotel rather than the number listed above. All programs require reservations.

The most elaborate of the childcare centers (variously called "clubs" or "camps") is Neverland Club at the Polynesian Resort. The rate for ages 4-12 is \$10 per hour per child.

All clubs accept reservations (some six months in advance!) with a credit-card guarantee. Call the club directly or reserve through Disney central reservations at (407) WDW-DINE. Most clubs require a 24-hour cancellation notice and levy a hefty penalty of \$15 per child for no-shows. A limited number of walk-ins are usually accepted on a first-come, first-served basis.

If you're staying in a Disney resort that doesn't offer a childcare club and you *don't* have a car, you're better off using in-room baby-sitting. Trying to take your child to a club in another hotel via Disney bus requires a 50- to 90-minute trip each way. By the time you have deposited your little one, it will almost be time to pick him up again.

Childcare clubs close at or before midnight. If you intend to stay out late, in-room baby-sitting is your best bet.

Kinder-Care Learning Centers also operate childcare facilities at Disney World. Developed for use by Disney employees, the centers now also take guests' children on a space-available basis. Kinder-Care provides services much like a hotel club's, except that the daytime "Learning While Playing Development Program" is more structured and educational. Employees are certified in CPR and first aid. Kinder-Care is open Monday–Friday, 6 a.m.–9 p.m., and Saturday and Sunday, 6 a.m.–6 p.m. Accepted are ages 1 (provided they're walking and can eat table food) through 12; \$10 per hour, per child. For reservations, call (407) 827-5437 or (407) 824-3290.

In-Room Baby-Sitting Three companies provide in-room sitting in Walt Disney World and surrounding tourist areas, including the International Drive/Orange County Convention Center area, the Universal Orlando area, and the Lake Buena Vista area. They are **Kid's Nite Out** (a Kinder-Care company), **All About Kids**, and the **Fairy Godmothers** (no kidding). Kid's Nite Out also serves hotels in the greater Orlando area, including downtown. All three provide sitters older than age 18 who are insured, bonded, and trained in CPR. Some sitters have advanced medical/first-aid training and/or education credentials. All sitters are screened, reference-checked, and police-checked. In addition to caring for your children in your guest room, the sitters will, if you direct (and pay), take your children to the theme parks or other venues. Many sitters arrive loaded with reading books, coloring books, and games. All three services offer bilingual sitters.

Special Programs for Children

Several programs for children are available, and while all are fun, they're somewhat lacking in educational focus.

Let the Kids Play Pirate This program originates at the Grand Floridian and is open to all Disney resort guests ages 4–10. Children don bandannas and cruise to other resorts on Bay Lake and the Seven Seas Lagoon, following a treasure map and discovering clues along the way. At the final port, kids gobble a snack and locate the buried treasure (doubloons, beads, and rubber bugs!). The two-hour cruise operates Monday and Thursday and costs \$29 per child. Reservations can be made up to 120 days in advance by calling (407) WDW-DINE.

Magic Kingdom Family Magic Tour This two-hour guided tour of the Magic Kingdom is for the entire family. Even children in strollers are welcome. The tour combines information about the Magic Kingdom with the gathering of clues that lead the group to a character greeting at tour's end. Definitely not for the self-conscious, the tour involves skipping, hopping, and walking sideways as you progress from land to land.

BABY-SITTING SERVICES

Service Name/Phone	Hotels Served	Sitters	Minimum Charges	Base Rates Per Hour
Kid's Nite Out (407) 827-5444 kidsniteout.com	All Orlando, WDW hotels, and WDW area hotels	Male and Female	4 hours	1 Child \$14 2 Children \$16 3 Children \$19 4 Children \$21
All About Kids (407) 812-9300 all-about-kids.com	All WDW hotels and some outside WDW	Male and Female	4 hours	1 Child \$11 2 Children \$12 3 Children \$13 4 Children \$14
Fairy Godmothers (407) 277-3724	All WDW hotels and all hotels in the general WDW area	Mothers and grandmothers	4 hours	1 Child \$12 2 Children \$12 3 Children \$12 4 Children \$14

There's usually a thin plot, such as saving Wendy from Captain Hook, in which case the character at tour's end is Wendy. The tour departs daily at 10 a.m. Cost is \$25 per person, plus a valid Magic Kingdom admission. The maximum group size is 18 people. Make reservations up to one year in advance by calling (407) WDW-TOUR.

Disney's The Magic Behind Our Steam Trains You must be 10 or older for this three-hour tour presented every Monday, Thursday, and Saturday. You join the crew of the Walt Disney World Railroad at 7:30 a.m. as they prepare their steam locomotives for the day. Cost is \$40 per person, plus a valid Magic Kingdom admission. Call (407) WDW-TOUR for information and reservations.

Birthdays and Special Occasions

If someone in your family celebrates a birthday while you're at Disney World, don't keep it a secret. A Lombard, Illinois, mom put the word out and was glad she did:

Extra Charges	Cancellation Deadline	Form of Payment	Things Sitters Won't Do
Transportation Fee \$8 Starting after 9 p.m. + \$2 per hour	24 hours prior to service when reservation is made	VISA, MC, AmEx, Discover Gratuity in cash	Transport children in private vehicle. Take children swimming. Give baths.
Transportation Fee \$8 Starting after 9 p.m. + \$2 per hour	3 hours prior to service	Credit card to hold reservation	Transport children. Give baths.
Transportation Fee \$12 Starting after 10 p.m. + \$2 per hour	3 hours prior to service	Cash or Travelers checks for actual payment. Gratuity in cash.	Transport children. Give baths. Swimming is at sitter's discretion.

My daughter was turning five while we were there and I asked about special things that could be done. Our hotel asked me who her favorite character was and did the rest. We came back to our room on her birthday and there were helium balloons, a card, and a Cinderella 5x7 photo auto-graphed in ink!! When we entered the Magic Kingdom, we received an "It's My Birthday Today" pin (FREE!), and at the restaurant she got a huge cupcake with whipped cream, sprinkles, and a candle. IT PAYS TO ASK!!

An Ohio mom celebrated her child's first haircut at the Magic Kingdom barber shop:

The barber shop at the entrance of MK makes a big deal with baby's first haircut—pixie dust, photos, a certificate, and "free" mouse ears hat! (\$12 total).

