

Profitable Hospitality Members-only Resource

How to make your venue more family-friendly

Making your restaurant appealing to families with children is about so much more than just offering any old kids' menu.

If you want to attract customers and avoid bad PR there is plenty you can do to come out on top.

Waiters that are welcoming, larger tables, clean high chairs, prompt service, a friendly atmosphere and entertainment options are all important considerations when it comes to creating an atmosphere that will attract families to your establishment and help spread good word of mouth. Not all of these will be suitable or even possible, but the important thing is to send a message that children are welcome.

What you put on your kids' menu is very important too of course. Chicken nuggets and fish and chips won't cut it with an ever-growing number of parents who want healthier options on the table.

Consider the following when it comes to creating a child-friendly café or restaurant:

1. The menu

Never before have parents been more aware of the nutritional needs of their children. When they spend day after day, week after week finding and making healthy meals to serve at home, the last thing they want is to go out and find the only options on the menu for their kids are deep fried and void of anything nutritious.

Offering smaller, simpler versions of the dishes on your main menu will impress parents and likely please little ones too. With smart planning, items such as grilled chicken can be offered on the kids menu as a grilled chicken burger and on the adults menu as a grilled chicken salad.

A children's menu must include healthy options. Offer fries on the side instead of with meals to keep everyone happy and try food that can be dipped, poured or constructed to make it fun and interactive.

Colourful plates and eating utensils are also appealing as is food on skewers.

The Armory Wharf Café in Sydney is a well-known family-friendly restaurant with a contemporary menu for adults and fun items for kids such as 'Make-Your-Own Tortillas', 'Man on the Moon Pizza' and 'Mini Arancini Balls with Rainbow Slaw'.

2. The staff

Make sure your front of house staff are welcoming to children. First, get them to acknowledge their presence. Too many waiters (and adults generally) ignore kids or at worst treat them as pests, so this simple gesture will help win you points.

Get them to talk to children directly and respectfully, ask parents if they can help get high chairs or prams organised, point out the children's menu, hand out colouring pencils or books and pass on information about entertainment options.

Also make sure any spills or breakages are easily forgiven and promptly cleaned up.

3. Entertainment

Good old fashioned colouring pencils and books are still a hit with young children and parents, and send a strong message that children are welcome at your establishment. A small box of simple toys (non-musical/non-noise-making to avoid disturbing other customers) and books will also go a long way. The novelty of something new to play with or read can go a long way with kids.

If you have the space you could also consider creating a play space for children with cushions, books, toys, blackboards and chalk. Make sure any crayons or pencils you provide are washable and cushion fabrics are easy to remove and clean. Also be aware of any potential choking hazards if you do offer toys.

4. The tables

Try reserving larger tables for families with children to give them room to move and avoid glasses and utensils getting knocked over. The more space they have the more comfortable they will be.

5. Service

Children aren't great at waiting so make sure their meals are served with the first food to hit the table, whether that's with the adult entrees or share plates or mains.

Avoid cries of "where's mine?" and help keep parents relaxed and happy by serving babycinos and drinks to children before or with the adults' orders. Most parents won't be able to enjoy their drinks until their children have been served too.

6. Add fruit

Easy to provide and a hit with parents and kids alike, fruit is a great option for a kids menu and an easy way to send a healthy message. At Ikea's in-store cafes, the kids menu includes a piece of fruit, usually an apple. Even McDonalds offers fruit as part of their kids' meals these days.

7. Be careful with 'kids eat free'

Free food for kids is a popular tactic used to attract families, but often the kids' options are cheap and unhealthy. If you want return customers, you'll need to offer free healthier options too.

8. Promote positive actions

Be sure to share the actions you've taken and the changes you've made to welcome families to your establishment. Statements such as "12 months ago our most popular kids meal used to be nuggets and chips, but since our menu changed it's now the grilled chicken burger" or "we're giving away more than 100 apples a week" are great examples that people will often remember. Furthermore, the media loves real numbers and comparisons, and the story can be told again and again on your website, social media and marketing material.

9. Experiment and learn from your mistakes

Some menu items will work well, others will not. Be willing to change, adapt and keep customers in the conversation – they will guide you and applaud your commitment to making their children feel welcome.

By taking as many of these suggestions on board as possible, your establishment will be a hit with families and children alike and give you the best chance at a big and loyal clientele.

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