

Caught in Between, But Not to Be Ignored

by
KEITH MILLER

Operators, suppliers, and independent research companies agree that tweens are a powerful and driven group of people—find out what the industry is doing to suit their amusement needs

They don't have jobs, but they command almost \$39 billion in buying power. They can't drive, but they're increasingly mobile. Most have never had any technology training, yet they show great savvy in the operation of consumer electronics. They're often the youngest members of their families, yet they exert great influence on the entertainment and purchasing decisions that their families make.

They are "tweenagers"—usually defined as kids between the ages of 8 and 14—and there is compelling evidence that amusement parks, zoos, and aquariums should take great care not to ignore them.

According to a May 2005 study titled "The U.S. Tween Market" by Packaged Facts, a division of MarketResearch.com and a recognized leader in the area of syndicated market research, there are now more than 29 million "tweens" in the United States. Statistics in the report show tweens have extensive access to personal technology devices and possess a surprising amount of buying power.

Packaged Facts says between one-quarter and one-third of tweens have a computers in their bedrooms, and about half say the Internet impacts how they spend their free time. In a study titled "mKids" by New York-based NOP Technology, 40 percent of 12- to 14-



Tweens at Crealy's Devon facility enjoy the slides.



Tween Talk

Austin Riggsbee is a 12-year-old tween from Raleigh, North Carolina, who has visited numerous parks and zoos in his short lifetime, including Cedar Point, Busch Gardens Europe, Kings Dominion, Carowinds, all four Walt Disney World parks, both Universal Orlando parks, SeaWorld Orlando, Wet n' Wild Emerald Pointe, Water Country USA, the North Carolina Zoo, and numerous family entertainment centers and museums. FUNWORLD asked Austin a few questions about his experiences at these facilities.



When you go to an amusement park, what are some of the things that you are interested in doing there? Rides are No. 1—thrill rides like roller coasters. Also, water rides like “Escape from Pompeii.”

What are some of the things that don't interest you? I really don't like [dark rides] that much, and the games cost too much. I really don't like 4-D rides because sometimes it's uncomfortable when they vibrate your seat or something, and I can't stand boring, short kiddie rides. The arcade games are my favorite thing at [FECs], then go-karts, then laser tag. I like mini-golf, but only at night.

Do you want to get wet in an amusement park? Only if it's hot.

Do you like to bring food with you or buy food? That's a good question. If the park doesn't have good food, then I'll bring my own, but if it's like Cedar Point or Busch Gardens, I'll buy my food if it's not too expensive.

What do you want to see when you go to the zoo? I like to see vicious stuff like tigers and lions. I don't like the little stuff, like birds.

Do you want to actually interact with the animals? Yeah, probably. It would be fun to do something like swim with dolphins.



Who do you usually go to the park or zoo with—friends, parents, relatives? A combination.

What electronic devices do you personally own? A cell phone, a video camera, a TV, a digital camera, an Xbox, and a GameCube.

Would you be interested in carrying a PDA at a park or zoo that gave you all kinds of information about rides and attractions? Yes. How long the line wait is would be the most important thing because you could walk a long way and then find out that it's an hour-long wait.

What would you like to see parks, zoos, and aquariums do for kids your age? I wish they had lower prices for kids. Also, more vending machines because the [restaurant] lines are so long. I wish they had different prizes at the games besides all of the stuffed animals.

I wish some parks were better at keeping the places clean—you see nasty cigarette butts all over and bubble gum stuck everywhere. And please clean the seats of the rides!