

How to Plan a Kid-Friendly Trip to Chicago

By **Dawn Reiss**

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SAVE TO MY LISTS



Planning to come to Chicago with your family? If you have kids under 16, here's what you need to know.



Riding bikes to pump water inside the Museum of Science and Industry's Idea Factory exhibit. — Photo courtesy of Carin Strindmark

Book a hotel with a pool in River North

It's important to find a [family-friendly hotel](#) with a pool, especially with active children who need to be worn out. My friend raved about the [Embassy Suites Chicago - Downtown](#) which is the heart of River North and offers living room-style suites. It was close to shopping, not too far from [Millennium Park](#), Navy Pier and a lot of other things. Plus, there's just a lot of great dining and kid-friendly touristy favorites like Ed Debevecs, Portillo's, Rainforest Café and "Rock-N-Roll" McDonald's. After having beers at Rock Bottom Brewery, which does allow kids until 5 p.m., I was pleasantly surprised by the quality of food at Weber Grill, the attentiveness of our waiter and the kid-friendly divider plates.

Another hit was Rick Bayless' XOCO, which offers reasonably priced Mexican food that is delicious. Even though there was a long wait for a table, the manager gave us free chips and guacamole after we opted for take-out.

Dine early or make a reservation days in advance

When it comes to dining, it's important to book dinner reservations in advance. Most places book up the ideal time slot of 6-8:30 p.m. days in advance.



Two boys play at the Museum of Science and Industry's Idea Factory exhibit. — Photo courtesy of Carin Strindmark

Find interactive activities

The last time I saw my friend she was sans children and husband, so I wasn't exactly sure where to take the boys who only spoke Swedish. But the [Museum of Science and Industry](#) seemed like a safe bet. Sure enough, they loved it, especially the interactive Idea Factory where kids 10-and-under can use squirt guns and plastic balls (like the kind you see in ball pits at Chuck E. Cheese) and build things with massive foam gears.

Another plus was the Swiss Jolly Ball, a giant pinball-like machine where a silver ball travels on a huge installation visiting a hotel, phone booth, bank, cows via a chalet, multiple trains, bus, boat and even a Toblerone elevator ride through Switzerland.

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The Swiss Jolly Ball at the Museum of Science and Industry

Get a Pass

Another big win was getting free museum passes from the Chicago Library. If you live in Chicago and have a public library card, take advantage of the "Kids Museum Passport," which offers free passes to every major museum in Chicago, some smaller ones and the zoo. The passes are checked out on a first-come-first-serve basis, so it's a bit of a crap shoot. I had to go to a nearby library since my local branch was out of the pass I wanted. It's good for up to two adults and two children, and at least one person must be under 18 for it to be valid. It covered the entry into the museum, but not the extras like going to see the U-505 submarine or coal mine. The pass is good for seven consecutive days, and it's a \$2 per day late fee for every day after that.

For those who don't know someone in Chicago, consider purchasing the Chicago CityPASS. If you plan on visiting three or more major attractions in Chicago, it's ideal. That's because the pass (\$94 for anyone 12-and-up) and children (\$79 for kids ages 3-11) saves money and time by allowing you to skip the wait lines and go straight in. It includes five attractions: the [Shedd Aquarium](#), Skydeck Chicago inside the [Willis Tower](#) (previously called the Sears Tower), the [Field Museum](#) and then a choice of the Museum of Science and Industry or 360 Chicago (formerly the John Hancock Observatory), the [Adler Planetarium](#) or the [Art Institute of Chicago](#).

While some people might have the mindset that museums are stuffy and old, like my friend's husband, who joked he originally thought he was only going to see framed pictures and stuffed animals, many museums, especially the ones in Chicago are world-renowned, very interactive and can take almost a full day to visit. So instead of opting for multiple museums, we went to Willis Tower and went out on the glass ledge on the 103rd floor.



Anish Kapoor's Cloud Gate aka "The Bean" at Millennium Park — Photo courtesy of Carin Strindmark

Check out Millennium Park

Another hit was stopping by the Millennium Park. Besides being free, kids (and adults) love "the Bean," a mirrored like sculpture—officially called Cloud Gate—that is interactive once you walk underneath it, like a fun-house of mirrors. After posing for some photos, we visited the Crown Fountain, two tall towers made of LED-backlit glass blocks that showcase massive faces. This video projections rotate and during summer months, spit water into a center plaza area. During warmer months there are tons of free concerts at the Pritzker Pavilion and during the winter there is ice skating in Millennium Park for a nominal fee.

Navy Pier, which is currently under construction for its 100th Anniversary in 2016, is usually a good bet with its Ferris Wheel, IMAX Theater, a horde of small vendors selling touristy souvenirs, an IMAX theater, the Children's Museum, Shakespeare Theater, boats and ships for Lake Michigan cruises, and the Crystal Gardens, a large indoor greenhouse-like park with palm trees and jumping water fountains.

Make sure to at least glance at the stained glass windows, including some by Louis Comfort Tiffany, inside near the end of the pier. Even though my friend's 5-year-old was bored, the 7-year-old love it.



Checking out stained glass windows at Navy Pier — Photo courtesy of Dawn Reiss

Even more tips

If had been warmer out, I would have taken them to one the kid-friendly beaches: Oak Street Beach, North Avenue Beach, Foster Beach, Montrose Beach and 31st Street Beach or 63rd Street Beach. On Wednesday and Saturday nights during the summer there are fireworks on Navy Pier.

Instead we did a little shopping. The American Girl Place still seems like a must for girls and the boys enjoyed the Disney Store and The LEGO store in Water Tower Place.

Even though my friend's sons didn't speak English, we quickly found a great way to communicate besides a smile, thumbs up or high five. It turns out they both loved the hand game of rock-paper-scissors, which seems to translate in any language.