

The World is Your Classroom: Educational Opportunities at Epcot

by Keely Hutton, PassPorter Guest Contributor

The acronym EPCOT means many things to many people. To Walt Disney and his Imagineers, EPCOT meant a utopian society of the future, or **Experimental Prototype Community Of Tomorrow**.

To visitors, who love to see and do it all, Epcot means 300 fun-filled acres to explore, or **Every Person Comes Out Tired**. To visitors who love to shop, EPCOT means dozens of unique boutiques and stores from around the world to peruse, or **Every Pocketbook Comes Out Thinner**. But to me, an educator and mother of two, Epcot has come to mean something more.

With Epcot's focus on exploration, innovation, and imagination, it is easy to understand why people perceive it to be an educational park. However, with this common perception comes the belief that Epcot is geared solely toward teenagers and adults. This belief leads many parents of young children to bypass the park during their visit to Walt Disney World, for with its wealth of hands-on learning opportunities available in advanced subjects, Epcot does appear to cater to more mature audiences.

But what about Piglet-size guests, who may not yet meet the height requirement of Mission Space or understand its use of centrifugal force to simulate lift-off? Are there educational attractions to be found at Epcot for younger minds? The answer is YES. But, as wise, old Rafiki so eloquently said in *The Lion King*, to find them, "You must look beyond what you see."

When touring with tots, the key to finding teachable moments is to remember what skills your child is normally focused on outside of Epcot. For instance, the average pre-schooler is not ready to identify the differences between sea mammals and fish, but they are at the perfect age to grasp the concept of number sequencing. While exploring *The Seas with Nemo and Friends*, children can practice counting by climbing into the gaping jaws of a shark. No, I am not encouraging you to toss your child into Epcot's 5.7 million gallon aquarium to pry open the mouth of a brown shark. There is a perfectly safe way to count a shark's teeth. In Bruce's Sub House, the resident Great White lives by the motto, "Fish are friends, not food," a motto that seems to extend to children. Kids can crawl into the giant replica of Bruce, and while hanging out among his rows of pearly whites, count how many teeth

make up his ink-inducing smile. Parents - have your cameras ready; this is a wonderful photo op.

Once you've sharpened your child's number skills, "just keep swimming" over to the Observation Deck for some practice in recognizing similarities and differences. Bait your children with a fun challenge found swimming in the coral reef, by matching the marine life to the pictures provided at each exhibit for a "righteous" game of I Spy.

After exploring early education in "the big blue," make your way over to Journey into Imagination for a lesson on the five senses with Figment. Here, children take a whimsical ride through several "labs" that demonstrate the important role our senses play in our imaginations. Vividly colorful images, melodic and raucous noise and sometimes pleasant, sometimes unpleasant scents effectively demonstrate our use of sight, sound and smell to explore the world around us. The sense of touch is highlighted through the fun, hands-on experiments found in the What If Labs at the end of the ride.

Fortunately for guests, taste is only discussed on the ride, providing a less potent experience for that sense. However, if your child is thirsty for a more "tongues-on" experience, head over to Club Cool to taste test samples of soft-drinks from around the world. For an example of what bitter tastes likes, daring guests should try the soft drink, Beverly from Italy. This, too, would be a good time to have your cameras ready. You won't want to miss the hilarious puckers that this taste-test produces.

With senses alert and imaginations primed, it's on to The Land, where lessons on the four seasons, the life cycle of plants, and the five food groups flourish. Upon entering the pavilion, children's eyes are immediately drawn to the five colorful balloons hanging from the ceiling. This is the perfect time to learn about the four seasons. Encircling a large balloon that represents Earth, you'll find a yellow balloon representing summer, an orange balloon for fall, a blue balloon for winter and a green balloon for spring. To take this teachable moment to a higher level, use this opportunity to discuss why each color best represents each season.

Next we head downstairs. If your little one does not quite make the height requirement for the popular ride, Soarin', take them on the gentle 14-minute boat ride, Living with the Land, where they can witness the life cycle in a variety of plants while gliding through The Land's four experimental growing areas. If all this learning and good food is making you hungry, how about a quick break for lunch at The Land's counter service, Sunshine Seasons, where the five food groups and nutrition are on the menu?

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If your little ones are still hungry for more, take them for a walk around World Showcase. The amazing architecture found in each of the eleven countries encircling the lagoon provides a wonderful opportunity to have an international scavenger hunt for shapes. While searching for triangles, circles and squares, take some time out for arts and crafts. KIDCOT stations are sprinkled throughout World Showcase and offer children a chance to talk with cast members from each country and create craft projects to keep as souvenirs. This interaction also gives little globetrotters the chance to learn some basics in foreign languages. Ask cast members to sign autograph books and write "hello" in their native language, and by the end of the day, your children will be on their way to becoming multilingual.

As night falls, there's no better grand finale to an enjoyable day of exploration and education than a lesson in the "Wonderful World of Color." Pint-sized pirates and princesses can identify a rainbow of colors in their jaw-dropping splendor while watching Illuminations: Reflections of Earth. Reds, blues, greens, yellows, purples and whites light up the sky and your child's imagination during this 13-minute firework spectacular. On our last trip, my six-year old son swore he even saw black fireworks in the sky over World Showcase Lagoon. Who was I to argue? At Disney, anything is possible.

So when visiting Walt Disney World, if you're traveling with young children, include Epcot in your plans. For whether you are two or ninety-two, Epcot is a park that, to me, means a playground of fun-filled, interactive learning opportunities for ALL ages, or ...

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About The Author: Keely Hutton is a mother of two, writer of children's books, teacher of English and fan of all things Disney. When she is not planning her next Disney vacation or in front of her computer or class, she can be found at the local karate dojo, working out the stress brought on by a tough day of revising.

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