



## Best Family Ships

Reprinted from Cruise Critic--by Carolyn Spencer Brown

Choosing the best cruise for your family is a lot more complicated than it used to be. Some ships are better for infants than others, and ditto for teens, and not all itineraries are created equal (Alaska and Caribbean are super destinations that tend to be kid-friendly). Add to the mix the fact that ships vary greatly not just from line to line but within fleets -- and that some are better than others in terms of onboard accouterments (we tend to recommend cruise lines' newer ships because these vessels' facilities were designed for families, not just adapted).

Onboard programs and facilities have taken a wide leap, particularly in the past few years. A few interesting evolutions:

The biggest, most important trend: Because kids' developmental stages really do vary drastically, some cruise lines divide them into groups of 3- to 5-year-olds and 6- to 8-year-olds, rather than lump 3- to 8-year-olds in one program.

Teens-only programs incorporate a range of shipwide options, from spa treatments to shore excursions.

Programs have been created in conjunction with popular companies that market to kids, such as Crayola, Coca-Cola and Fisher-Price.

In the accommodations arena, the hottest new concept is family suites -- and many cruise lines building new ships have designed those vessels to incorporate this type of stateroom design.

Entertainment achieved a major pinnacle with the launch of Disney's two ships, but there are numerous productions -- not to mention in-cabin television channels -- designed to distract across the board.

Onboard activities have become as important as shore excursions, if not more so. Cruise lines are creating new attractions (rock climbing walls, believe it or not, are passe!) ranging from elaborate water parks to movie matinees.

Special menus for tykes are offered in a variety of dining venues.

Compiling these picks was a bit like splitting hairs: Picking the best isn't simply a matter of settling on a cruise line but also looking at ships in particular (vessels can vary widely within fleets). "The newer, the better" is often a useful mantra for choosing a family-friendly ship ... but not always. Though Holland America as a cruise line did not ultimately wind up in our list of recommendations, ships that feature HAL's brand-new teen area Oasis (such as Ryndam) really do offer something special and unique. (Alas, while the facility is fabulous, this particular example didn't make it to our list of recommendations, because that's pretty much all there is.)

And while these are the ships -- and cruise lines -- we've picked, we will conclude with this caveat: You know your family's tastes and preferences better than we ever could. By no means are they the only ships to consider: Think of them as just a starting point.

Want to nominate your family's favorite ship? Send it along -- with an explanation of why -- to [editor@cruise critic.com](mailto:editor@cruise critic.com). We'd love to hear from you!

### Best Overall

Royal Caribbean's Voyager-class ships (Voyager, Adventure, Explorer, Navigator and Mariner of the Seas) and Freedom-class ships (Freedom of the Seas and Liberty of the Seas)

Why: Rock climbing walls, ice skating rinks, miniature golf and roller blading are more innovative ways to tire out your kids than, say, a basketball court or pool games (though these ships do have pretty fantastic pool areas, not to mention the usual basketball courts). And did we mention the ships' indoor promenades, which feature all manner of parades and special events? Plus, Freedom and Liberty of the Seas both offer the FlowRider, the industry's first surf park at sea.

The Program: What we like about Adventure Ocean in general is that it subdivides kids and teens into smaller age categories. For instance, Aquanuts (ages 3 - 5) may engage in activities like storytime and "toilet paper soccer;" Explorers (6 - 8) can play backwards bingo, make their own surfboards, and take part in adventure and science activities; and Voyagers (9 - 11) play foosball and capture the flag as well as undertake science experiments ranging from earthquakes to hailstorms. Even the teens are divided into two groups: Navigators (12 - 14) take part in "open mic" karaoke contests

and rock wall challenges; the oldest group (15 - 17) are so cool they don't have a kitschy name, and have their own toga parties and group skate session.

The Facilities: With 22,000 square ft. they're among the largest dedicated kids facilities in cruising. There's a toddlers' only splash pool, arts and crafts workshop, video arcade and computer stations. The company is redesigning its teen facilities to include Fuel, a nightclub; the Living Room, a coffee-house style hang out; and a bank of Internet-connected computers (discounted per-minute rates are vastly less than those paid by adults).

Other Nifty Features: Johnny Rockets, the 1950's-style luncheonette, is a kid magnet (and parents think it's pretty cool, too). Royal Caribbean is also one of the few cruise lines to provide activities, at no charge, for the under-3 set: The line is partnered with well-known child-oriented companies like Fisher Price and Crayola.

Notes: One downside, fleetwide, is that main restaurant dining still adheres to the traditional format: assigned times and tablemates. While some families may prefer it, others with restless youngsters (of any age) may not be as fond of long dinner hours. On the plus side the top-deck buffet is open at night, and Cafe Promenade, with sandwiches and pizza, operates on a 24-hour basis.

Or...

Carnival's Conquest-class ships (Carnival Conquest, Glory, Valor and Liberty)

Why: Carnival's Conquest class may lack the flash of Royal Caribbean's Voyager class, but offers a marvelous all-around alternative, with a special and successful focus on teen travelers.

The Program: Carnival divides kids into four age groups with strong edu-tainment offerings incorporated throughout. Toddlers (ages 2 - 5) play "Fun Ship" bingo; dabble in arts and crafts such as sponge painting, coloring and drawing contests; and have sing-alongs. Juniors (6 - 8) play Disney trivia, paint t-shirts and participate in games throughout the ships. Intermediates (9 - 11) have talent shows and scavenger hunts. Teens (12 - 17) have access to regular disco evenings, special teens-only shore excursions, and PlayStation 2 and Microsoft Xbox consoles.

The Facilities: At 4,200 square feet, the facilities range from an arts and crafts center to a soft play area, a computer lab to a video wall. The littlest cruisers have their own enclosed wading pool. Unlike most cruise lines that wedge the teen disco into a corner of the overall kid's area, Carnival's Conquest-class ships feature their teen discos on the main promenade alongside "adult" bars and lounges.

Other Nifty Features: Teens are welcome in Carnival's spas; Carnival's program accepts children as young as 2, while other lines start at the age of 3.

Best for Younger Kids

Disney's Disney Magic and Disney Wonder

Why: First let us qualify what we mean by younger -- in this case we're talking about families with kids in the 4 to pre-teen range, and Disney has the absolute best set-up, facilities, dining schemes and programs for this age group.

The Program: Disney got it right from the beginning when it divided kids into categories that spanned just a couple of years. At the Oceaneer Club (ages 3 - 7), for instance, a separate schedule of events is planned for 3- to 4-year-olds and 5- to 7-year-olds, with some overlap during the day. The Oceaneer Lab (8 - 12) has plans for 8- to 9-year-olds and 10- to 12-year-olds, also with some overlap. Other features include the Flounders Nursery for the up-to-3 set (note: there's an hourly fee) and Aloft, a club for teens in the ships' faux funnels.

The Facilities: The pool areas on both ships are basically identical. Mickey's Pool, for the youngest set, is located on one side and an adults-only pool is located on the other, with Goofy's Pool in the center for families in general. Other great facilities include the Walt Disney Theater, which features shows and movies, and Studio Sea, which presents interactive activities for kids and parents.

Other Nifty Features: We like the champagne breakfast at the adults-only Palo's, and Disney's unique rotating dining system in which you change restaurants every night -- yet keep the same servers and tablemates throughout. The bath and a half in most staterooms allows folks to shower in one while someone else is using the toilet in the other. Castaway Cay, Disney's private Bahamian island, is one of the nicest in the industry.

Notes: Disney is not as good a choice as some for those families with young babies. While Flounder's Reef is a well-designed nursery for babies and toddlers, there is a \$6 per-hour fee, and you must reserve time slots in advance.

Or...

Princess Cruises' Caribbean Princess, Crown Princess and Emerald Princess

Why: This ship was designed with families in mind, from Caribbean Princess' all-Caribbean, all-the-time itineraries to all three of the aforementioned ships' expansive programs, facilities and accommodations for parents and children.

The Program: We love the activities offered to Princess Pelicans (ages 3 - 7), including arts and crafts like painting their own t-shirts, and a variety of games. Pirateers (8 - 12) are entertained with scavenger hunts and science programs geared to the region (learning about coral reefs, for instance). Princess offers an Adventures Ashore tour program with shore excursions appropriate for families. Off Limits (13 - 17) features dance parties, shipboard Olympics and karaoke.

The Facilities: The Fun Zone is 10,000 square ft. There's a splash pool dedicated to kids, and the ship offers family suites.

Other Nifty Features: Princess' Personal Choice Dining program gives folks the opportunity to choose between traditional cruise dining (same table, same time each night) or flexible, restaurant-style eateries (eat any time); The "Movies Under the Stars" pool-side cinema features kid-friendly matinees.

Notes: Group babysitting is offered at \$5 per hour.

Best for Multi-Generational Families

Norwegian Cruise Line's Norwegian Jewel and Norwegian Pearl

Why: We'll be honest: The real reason we like Norwegian Jewel and Norwegian Pearl for families is because of Freestyle Dining: the most comprehensive "eat when you want and with whom you please" program in the industry.

The Program: Kids Crew is a very well rounded program, even if it lacks some of the more innovative touches of other cruise lines.

The Facilities: The Splashdown Kids Club features a play gym, movie theater, computer center, and arts and crafts area. There's also a video arcade. Teens can hang out in the Underground, a club with a juice bar and touch-screen jukebox. We loved the separate splash pool for young tykes and private hot tub, too -- no grown-ups allowed!

Other Nifty Features: Several of the ships 10 restaurants are perfectly suited for kids -- such as the Garden Cafe buffet and the Blue Lagoon (a corner of the buffet area actually features a separate station just for kids with child-friendly dishes (chicken nuggets, French fries, pizza) and tyke-sized tables and chairs. We also applaud this new

ship's embrace of family-friendly accommodations -- interconnected cabins feature heavily, and in many categories from insides to suites.

Notes: Freestyle Dining, while emphasizing a wide range of restaurants from sushi to steak and Spanish to French, also allows for a traditional cruise dining scenario if folks do want to regulate mealtime.

Or...

Crystal Cruises' Crystal Symphony and Crystal Serenity

Why: These ships offer good enough if not state-of-the-art facilities and programs with the thought that multi-generational families are traveling in order to spend time together; when needed, the kids program and facility are more likely to be created personally for young passengers.

The Program: Fantasia (ages 3 - 7) offers activities such as games, arts and crafts, and planned outings (diving for pennies in the pool); Waves (8 - 17) features Sony PlayStations. As part of the program, kids are also invited on age-appropriate ship tours where they could go backstage, for instance, or visit the galley and decorate their own pastries.

The Facilities: The facilities are retro in the sense that there's little of the high-tech trimmings and activities that you'll find on other cruise lines, but counselors tend to incorporate the ship's spaces into many activities. There is a video arcade, and spaces for computer games and arts and crafts.

Other Nifty Features: There's a Junior Cruisers' menu -- and parents can request custom-made items, too.

Notes: The ship offers private babysitting; fees vary.