

Best Cruises for Kids:

1. Royal Caribbean. Ships: Anthem, Harmony, Allure and Oasis of the Seas
2. Norwegian Cruise Line. Ships: Norwegian Escape, Breakaway, Getaway and Epic
3. Carnival Cruise Line. Ships: Carnival Vista, Breeze, Dream and Magic
4. Disney Cruise Line. Ships: Disney Dream, Fantasy and Magic
5. Princess Cruises. Ships: Regal, Royal, Ruby, Crown and Emerald Princess

Despite great strides made by cruise lines in accommodating children on-board in recent years, choosing the best cruises for families with kids is still complicated. Where once it was a struggle to find ships that were kid-friendly, the challenge now is wading through the bevy of activities, kids clubs, family cabins and child-themed bells and whistles many ships offer to determine which cruise ships are best for your youngsters.

Some ships are still better for infants than others, and ditto for teens. Not all itineraries are created equal, either. (Alaska and the Caribbean are destinations that tend to be kid-friendly.) To make decisions even trickier, ships vary greatly, not just from line to line but within fleets, making some better than others in terms of on-board activities. We tend to recommend cruise lines' newer ships because the facilities were designed for families from the outset, not just adapted. They also tend to be the biggest ships, offering more space for fun activities, such as bowling alleys, elaborate water parks with massive slides, ropes courses, bumper cars and surfing and skydiving simulators. They're likely to have more dining options, family-specific accommodations and the latest brand-name partnerships.

The ships -- and cruise lines -- that follow are our top cruises for kids. That said, 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 a starting point as you narrow your choices for an unforgettable family vacation at sea.

1. Royal Caribbean International Ships

Anthem of the Seas, Harmony of the Seas, Allure of the Seas and Oasis of the Seas

Why

These ships, Royal Caribbean's largest, are ideal for families with kids of all ages, as well as multigenerational family groups. The Oasis-class ships have an impressive selection of family-friendly activities and entertainment -- four fantastic pools, 10 hot tubs, a 3D theatre, rock climbing walls, ice skating rink, two FlowRider surf simulators and a zip line -- and an array of family cabins to accommodate groups of varying sizes. And did we mention the ships' indoor promenades, which feature all manner of parades and special events? Anthem of the Seas takes it up a notch with SeaPlex (featuring bumper cars, roller-skating, video games and more), the first skydiving attraction at sea and the North Star, a London Eye-esque ride that takes passengers in a glass capsule 300 feet above the ocean .

A sizable amount of real estate is dedicated to the kids clubs on all of these ships, and the counsellors are some of the friendliest and most engaging in the business. Parents and grandparents can enjoy adults-only Solariums and a plethora of dining and evening entertainment options. With nursery care, after-hours fun in the kids clubs and in-cabin babysitting, adults can enjoy grown-up time in the evenings while kids play or sleep. (Voyager- and Freedom-class ships are also great choices for families.)

The Program

Royal Caribbean divides kids into Aquanauts (ages 3 to 5), Explorers (6 to 8) and Voyagers (9 to 11). Kids ages 12 to 14 can take part in "open mic" karaoke contests and rock wall challenges, while members of the oldest group (15 to 17) have their own toga parties and sports competitions. Both tweens and teens have access to a separate teen lounge, where they can come and go as they like. The Royal Tots and Royal Babies programs provide interactive



classes and activities (when children are accompanied by a parent) for children from 6 months to 36 months old, as well as drop-off babysitting services. In-cabin babysitting is available for children who are at least 1 year old.

Royal Caribbean's kids clubs are among the largest dedicated kids facilities in cruising. The children's section on Oasis-class ships has more than 28,700 square feet and is the largest of its kind. There's a toddlers-only splash pool, an arts and crafts workshop, a video arcade and computer stations. Oasis-class and Quantum-class ships also have a theatre and Science Lab, and teens will love the Fuel teen club and the Living Room, a coffeehouse-style hangout.

Kid-Friendly Features

Plenty of family staterooms and loft suites mean room for the family to spread out. There's even a Royal Family cabin that sleeps eight. The spa offers special treatments for teens. More than two dozen dining options, including casual eateries like a hot dog joint and a New York-style pizza joint, as well as a variety of upscale specialty restaurants, mean no taste is overlooked. Johnny_Rockets, the 1950s-style luncheonette, is always a kid magnet (and parents think it's pretty cool, too). Anthem of the Seas features an enormous family-friendly SeaPlex with bumper cars, roller-skating, a circus school, foosball and video games.

Excellent Broadway-style shows in the evenings will keep the older crowd engaged, while the DreamWorks experience offers character breakfasts, parades and meet-and-greets with Shrek and the Kung Fu Panda for little ones. There's a DJ Academy for teens, and budding artists will be thrilled with Royal Caribbean's partnership with Crayola, which brings all the newest and coolest art supplies on-board.

2. Norwegian Cruise Line Ships

Norwegian Escape, Norwegian Breakaway, Norwegian Getaway and Norwegian Epic

Why

Norwegian's casual atmosphere makes it a great choice for kid cruises, particularly for families who don't want to be beholden to strict dining times and venues. Norwegian's newest ships, along with Norwegian Epic, offer all the mega-ship bells and whistles families have come to expect.



The Program

Norwegian's Splash Academy features separate activities for kids' ages 3 to 5, 6 to 9 and 10 to 12. Children can do arts and crafts, sing karaoke and play video games. Epic's facility has a jungle gym, plenty of room to roam and a cool interactive light-up dance floor. The two-story Splash Academies on Norwegian Escape, Breakaway and Getaway are the line's largest children's spaces at sea, home to high-tech games, a circus school and a small cinema. Entourage is a space for teens 13 to 17, and it has air hockey, video games, plush couches and flat-screen TVs. Entourage turns into a teens-only nightclub at night. Late-night group babysitting is available for a fee. While all ships have parent-child play areas and programming for babies 6 months to 3 years, only Norwegian Escape offers drop-off, extra-fee childcare for very small children in the Guppies Nursery.

Kid-Friendly Features

Popular activities throughout these ships include rock-climbing and rappelling walls, climbing cages, six bowling lanes and impressive water park areas. Epic has a 303-foot-long corkscrew tube and the Drainpipe, a 104-foot tube that empties into a giant funnel. Breakaway and Getaway have five multi-storey water slides, as well as The Plank, an 8-foot walk that extends off the edge of the ship and out over the sea. Escape offers the largest ropes course at sea, as well as the largest water park at sea. All four have two main pools, including a separate kid's pool.

Norwegian Epic hosts "Priscilla Queen of the Desert the Musical," a great show for kids of all ages. Epic also has 46 two-bedroom family villas that sleep up to six people, while Breakaway and Getaway have 20 two-bedroom villas.

On Escape, the Haven has two-bedroom family suites that sleep up to six passengers, and there are an additional 40 family mini-suites that feature bathtubs.

3. Carnival Cruise Line Ships

Carnival Vista, Carnival Breeze, Carnival Dream and Carnival Magic

Why

Carnival Cruise Line's Dream-class ships and its newest vessel, Vista, offer an array of on-board fun and do a great job accommodating kids of all ages, with separate clubs for the 2 to 11 set, tweens and teens. The ships offer a terrific variety of family activities and spaces, plus top-notch kids clubs. Families will make good use of two outdoor pools and SportsSquare; a multi-storey IMAX theatre (Vista only); and some of the largest at-sea water parks.

The Program

The fleet wide Camp Ocean entertains cruisers ages 2 to 11 with marine-themed activities and more. Camp Ocean occupies a large chunk of upper-deck real estate, while the tween and teen clubs are separate from the little ones on lower decks. Toddler's ages 2 to 5 (called Penguins) have sing-alongs and dabble in arts and crafts. Stingrays ages 6 to 8 get to design custom aquariums and take part in Pirate Game Night. Sharks ages 9 to 11 play music Jeopardy, design their own cruise ships and play sports like basketball and volleyball. Circle C pre-teens (12 to 14) and Club O2 teens (15 to 17) have their own spaces, and kids have access to regular dance and pool parties, special teens-only shore excursions and PlayStation and Xbox consoles.

Kid-Friendly Features

A huge draw for kids on all ships is Waterworks, an aqua park with a variety of water slides, sprayers, soakers and even a dump bucket. Kids can play in the pool, as well as SportSquare, an outdoor activity area with a mini-golf course, basketball courts and foosball tables, and the thrilling new SkyRide cycling attraction on Vista. A SplashZone (a tot-friendly section of WaterWorks with water sprayers and room for splashing) for younger kids also is on offer.

Watch movies outside on the Dream-class ships at the Seaside Theatre, a 22-foot jumbo screen. Breeze is home to the Thrill Theatre, a 3D-movie joint with "multidimensional effects" (think seats moving, wind blowing and even water splashing during films). On Vista, a huge Multiplex Lobby screens flicks in both an IMAX Theatre and a Thrill Theatre. Families can cavort on a deceptively scary ropes course or take part in Carnival's "Hasbro, The Game" show, a friendly competition and stage show with games as prizes.

The Dream-class ships also have more (and larger) cabin choices for families. Family Harbour, a collection of staterooms that can accommodate up to five cruisers, ups the ante on Vista, with access to an exclusive Family Lounge, free meals for kids at select extra-fee restaurants, one free night at the after-hours group babysitting in Camp Ocean and pint-size bathrobes. Teens are welcome in Carnival's spas. And the first Build-A-Bear workshop for Carnival is coming to Carnival Dream, and the program will be rolled out fleet wide by 2017.

4. Disney Cruise Line Ships

Disney Dream, Disney Fantasy and Disney Magic

Why

Disney ships are ideal for families with kid's ages 4 to 11, as Disney has the best facilities, dining schemes and programs for this age group. Disney Cruise Line has done a lot more to



accommodate tweens and teens -- but its ships still hold the most appeal for the younger set. We prefer the line's biggest ships, Disney Dream and Disney Fantasy, and the completely refurbished Disney Magic, though Disney Wonder can be a great choice, as well.

The Program

Disney takes a separate-but-together approach to its kids programming, mainly to accommodate siblings and friends traveling together. The Oceaneer Club and Oceaneer Lab allow children ages 3 to 12 to access the same spaces but with programming geared toward each younger and older children. (The age groupings are suggestions, not requirements, and children may participate in any of the activities offered.) On all three ships, the Oceaneer Club offers several themed play areas, including Andy's Room (from "Toy Story"). On Fantasy, you'll find Monsters Academy (inspired by "Monsters, Inc."), while on Magic you'll encounter Marvel's Avengers Academy, a S.H.I.E.L.D. command post where kids can interact with the Avengers through a virtual game. A new addition to Dream is a replica of the Millennium Falcon from "Star Wars." Here, young ones can play pilot in a cockpit and learn lightsabre techniques from a Jedi Master.

The Oceaneer Lab has an Animator's Studio and a mini sound studio. On Dream and Fantasy, you'll find Magic PlayFloors that allow kids to use their feet to play interactive games. There is a for-fee nursery available to care for little ones, ages 6 months to 3 years.

These ships also have a kids club, Edge, dedicated entirely to tweens ages 11 to 14, with video games, karaoke and computers. The teen club, Vibe (for cruisers ages 14 to 17), has modular furniture and a coffee shop feel.

Kid-Friendly Features

Mickey's Pool, for the youngest cruisers, is on one side of the ship, and an adults-only pool is located on the other, with Donald's Pool in the centre for families or general use. The popular AquaDuck waterslide is a big hit with families on Fantasy and Dream, while the AquaDunk thrills on-board Disney Magic. On Fantasy and Magic, the AquaLab has sprayers and geysers perfect for the smallest passengers. Other great facilities include the Walt Disney Theatre, which features live shows featuring favourite Disney characters; the Buena Vista Theatre, which screens first-run movies; and D Lounge, which presents interactive activities for kids and parents.

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 industries nicest. Disney's ships also hold a cool "Pirates of the Caribbean" deck party, complete with fireworks and Jack Sparrow rappelling off the ship's funnel. Disney Fantasy celebrates Star Wars Day at Sea (through spring 2017). All three ships feature the Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique, where children are transformed into princesses, pirates, knights and sea captains.

Explore Disney Cruises

5. Princess Cruises Ships

Regal Princess, Royal Princess, Ruby Princess, Crown Princess and Emerald Princess

Why

Princess' ships include expansive programs, facilities and accommodations for parents and children. Princess' newest and largest ships, Royal and Regal Princess, have even more great additions for families, including expanded kids club spaces, more dining options, a batting cage and laser shooting range, a bigger pool deck with a water and light show and poolside cabanas.

Further, as part of the expansion of its partnership with Discovery Communications, Princess is revamping the youth spaces on several of its ships to include lively, modern decor. Although only some ships are receiving physical renovations, the programming itself, which includes fun and educational activities -- think science experiments and destination-immersive pursuits -- has rolled out fleet wide.



The Program

Dubbed Camp Discovery, the rebranded kids' clubs include The Treehouse (formerly Pelicans) for ages 3 to 7, The Lodge (formerly Shockwaves) for ages 8 to 12, and The Beach House (formerly Remix) for ages 13 to 17. In addition to activities that inspire learning, children, tweens and teens will find story time, video game tournaments, movie nights, Skee-Ball play, scavenger hunts and themed parties on the agenda.

Kid-Friendly Features

On Grand-class ships (Ruby Princess, Crown Princess, Emerald Princess), there are two large pools that are suitable for families (Calypso Reef and Pool and Neptune Reef and Pool), and there's a splash pool dedicated to kids. Royal and Regal Princess have outdoor play areas with a jungle gym for kids ages 3 to 7, and another for teens with a teens-only hot tub and space for outdoor parties.

Movies under the Stars is the line's huge outdoor movie theatre that plays poolside features on the top deck after the sun sets. The 300-square-foot screen broadcasts kid- and teen-friendly movies, as well as fun-for-the-whole-gang blockbusters, and live sporting events and awards shows. Another cool offering: Parents are welcome to attend the Jr. Chef@Sea Program, a hands-on chef-led cooking class that takes place in a shipboard kitchen, alongside their budding-chef kiddos.

Princess offers an Adventures Ashore tour program with shore excursions appropriate for families. Plus, the line's Discovery at Sea program features special excursions and activities inspired by programming such as Shark Week. For example, families can embark on a search for Big Foot on select Alaska sailings (a la "Finding Bigfoot") or enjoy "Shark Week" programming in cabin TVs.

Information courtesy of Cruise Critic Family cruising review