

THE POWER OF PLAY

Edutainment centres are taking residence in malls across the capital, so we explore the concept to help you make learning fun

By *Tamara Clarke*

Families in Abu Dhabi are spoilt for choice when it comes to kids' entertainment but there's a new genre of attractions on the rise. Edutainment centres, places that seamlessly blend education and entertainment, are cropping up across the capital, but are they worth the hype?

CHILD'S PLAY

With an abundance of research on the subject and adaptation from top schools, it's safe to say that playing to learn is a bona fide educational strategy and Julie Engles, head of foundation stage at Amity International School, agrees.

"It is important to understand the connection between play and learning. Research shows that playing and exploring encourage children to develop their creative and critical thinking as well as their imagination.

"Play is critical to healthy brain development as it supports the establishment of brain function and neural connections. It is through play that children at a very early age engage and interact with the world around them," she adds.

Playing is also a great way to extend learning and support your kids at home. There's no need to reinvent the wheel or make distinctions between leisure and learning, simply give them the tools and resources to play.

"Play is how young children learn best," says Julie. "The optimum conditions for learning for young children exist when they have access to an engaging learning environment, skilful



JULIE ENGLES

adults who scaffold their learning and they are secure and confident enough to take risks."

IN THE CITY

That magical mix of requirements is why all roads lead to KidZania, the capital's new mini city for children where entertainment is king and education is a close second.

"KidZania is not only about fun, it's about learning," says Xavier López Ancona, president of KidZania.

"The number one reason why children will come to KidZania is to have fun and we want to keep that. We should always be thinking about how children can have fun but on the side, we're always trying to provide enrichment," he says.

It's a strategy that's observed from the moment kids step inside the city, which boasts state-of-the-art replicas of everything from a fire station to a hospital, a bank and an airport. The concept is simple – kids run the city by exploring professions, choosing a career, earning money (or KidZos in this case) and participating in the economy.

Xavier asserts that the joy of role-playing is common among kids around the world.

"All children love to imitate adults' lives and that's why they can come here [KidZania] to see what they want to be when they grow up – a doctor, an athlete, an engineer or a lawyer."

And that's not all. The little over 50,000 sqm scaled replica of a city

KIDZANIA

ORANGE WHEELS

KIDZANIA

is packed with more than 40 role-playing activities for children aged four to sixteen. Be forewarned though, the experiences inside these walls are as real as it gets, even when it comes to putting out a fire.

If the thrill of role-playing alone doesn't spark your kid's interest, don't worry. Perhaps interacting with recognisable brands like ADNOC, Pizza Hut and Krispy Kreme will pull them into the action – your kids, that is.

MAKING HISTORY

While the KidZania location in Yas Mall is new to Abu Dhabi, the brand has been present in the UAE for nearly a decade.

The new location bears the same name and has the same company culture whereby employees cheerfully greet one other with "Kai!" and a hand gesture (the first two fingers of the right hand splayed over the heart) but KidZania Abu Dhabi is no carbon copy.

The KidZania experience in the capital differs from that of Dubai with a neighbourhood area for toddlers, a daylight cityscape as opposed to nighttime and an expansive area that's spread across one level instead of two.

KidZania Abu Dhabi also hosts professions of the future like robotics, coding, animation and even a space centre for astronauts thanks to a partnership with the UAE Space Agency.

Tom McMenemy, general manager and governor of KidZania, expresses his excitement about having impactful corporate and government sponsors.

"We are very excited to have them [the UAE Space Agency] on board. They're a fantastic partner for us. The recent news of the first UAE national going into space is going to inspire kids all over the region massively and having them here is only going to help promote that even further – and that's what we want. We want to inspire children when they come inside the city."

With an engaging, fun learning environment and a curriculum that closely mirrors real life, KidZania and the kids of Abu Dhabi are ready for take-off! KidZania Abu Dhabi is now open and located on the ground floor of Yas Mall, visit: abudhabi.kidzania.com

WORDS BY WALLY

Orange Wheels by Ideacrate is an edutainment powerhouse as well. It's more than just an indoor play area. It's a place where kids can have free rein in a vibrant space while enjoying soft play, arts and crafts, climbing walls and role-playing. Orange Wheels offers youngsters, including those with special needs, the chance to explore, create, learn and develop in a fun, safe environment.

We sent our kid correspondent, Wally Clarke, to check out the newest Orange Wheels location in Al Raha Mall and here's what he had to say...

Hello there! My name is Wally and if you have kids aged three to seven, keep reading. This is the perfect place to drop your kids off when you need to do some shopping. It is in Al Raha Mall and if they need a trim they can get one at Orange Wheels because they have a salon there. It's also an educational place and fun! Some of the fun stuff you and your child can do is the little ninja maze, jump on the trampoline or playhouse. If you have an older child aged eight to 15, you can let them go to Orange Hub in Al Wadha Mall.

Visit: orangewheels.com