



EXCLUSIVE SURVEY

Talk to the Animals

For a roarin' good time this summer, visit one of these top ten zoos.

BY KAREN CICERO

Sure, seeing animals is cool. But actually getting to *do* something with them—now that's amazing. So when *Parents* set out to find the top zoos in the country, we identified 50 where kids can pet and often feed the wildlife. Then we surveyed them to find out things like how many of the exhibits were at a preschooler's eye level, what kids could touch, and whether there were changing tables and stroller rentals. The upshot: Many zoos have built more interactive exhibits for young children and made their paths more stroller-friendly. You'll love the leaders of the pack.

ACTIVITY GUIDE

- Splash Zone
- Pony Rides
- Changing Table in All Restrooms
- Food From Home Permitted
- Daily Storytime
- Butterfly Garden or Exhibit
- Family Sleepovers

1 Feel Free to Touch! TAMPA'S LOWRY PARK ZOO

It's unbelievable how close kids can get to the animals here. In Wallaroo Station, the zoo's four-and-a-half-acre Australian-themed children's area, kids can brush a goat's fur, feed birdseed lollipops to parakeets, and walk down a path as kangaroos and wallabies hop in front of them. They can ride on a llama or, in another part of the zoo, a camel—which makes the pony treks seem almost trite. In Lowry's expanded Safari Africa exhibit, your family can climb up on a platform to offer one of the giraffes a snack. "Kids squeal in delight when the giraffe sticks out its 18-inch-long tongue to snatch a cracker," says Craig Pugh, acting director. Other cool animals that your children can feed: a white rhino, stingrays, and lorikeets.

Since Lowry Park is the only zoo in the country with an accredited preschool and kindergarten on-site, the staff is especially comfortable fielding questions from families. When your little kids need a break from the animal action, head to the playground or one of five rides including a kiddie coaster. And if you need to relax or nurse, there's even a "mommy stop," a shaded area with benches and child-size picnic tables.

\$19 for adults, \$15 for kids 3 to 11 (\$5 admission for all on May 17), extra for rides and animal feed, free parking; lowryparkzoo.com



I'm Hungry!

Nearly 20 zoos offer children the chance to give a giraffe a cracker or leafy greens. Stick your neck out and go to parentsmag.com for the complete list.



MARKO METZINGER, PROP-STYLING BY LAURIE RAAB

2 A Place to Play BROOKFIELD ZOO, ILLINOIS

The Hamill Family Play Zoo is the most awesome exhibit. Inside a hollowed-out tree, kids can dress up in animal and zoo-keeper costumes, make an art project, get their face painted, and pet a hedgehog, an armadillo, and other wildlife. On weekends in the summer at the Chicago-area park, they can release ladybugs in the nearby children's garden, or help harvest some of the crops. "We'll parade across the zoo with kids carrying the corn to the bison exhibit or the herbs to the area where monkeys live," says Stuart Strahl, Ph.D., Brookfield's director. "We try to make it as informal as possible. Kids need unstructured playtime."

\$24 for adults, \$18 for kids 3 to 11, includes all exhibits and all rides (free-admission days in the fall and winter), \$8 for parking; czs.org



As your family walks around, chances are you'll stumble across a "zoo chat"—there are about 300 of them a week—in which keepers answer questions about the different species on exhibit. Or you might see a zoo employee showing off a hissing cockroach or another small animal in a "critter cart." It's practically impossible to do everything in a day, but try not to miss the dolphin show, butterfly exhibit, and the traditional children's zoo, where kids can pet farmyard animals, take a spin on one of the country's largest hand-carved wooden carousels, and use telescopes in the playground to spy on the Mexican gray wolves in the distance.

3 Penguin Central ST. LOUIS ZOO

There's no zoo that showcases penguins better. At the entrance to Penguin & Puffin Coast, your family will see the Humboldt penguins in a setting designed to resemble the shoreline of Peru, complete with a 22-foot waterfall. Then you walk inside a chilly cove and watch three other species (the zoo has 91 penguins in all) as they swim or congregate above the water. "Even toddlers in strollers get a great view," says Louise Bradshaw, education director.

The playground is also ingenious. Kids can go down a clear tube slide that crosses through the river-otter exhibit, giving them a nose-to-nose view. Infants and toddlers have their own place to hang—the Cubs & Pups Pad in ZOOMagination Station, an indoor area with animal puppets and costumes. A sea-lion show, insectarium, and train tour are also big hits with kids under 8.

\$10 for everyone ages 2 and up, includes most shows and rides (always free admission to the ZOOMagination Station and some other exhibits), \$11 for parking; stlzoo.org



4 Double the Fun! PITTSBURGH ZOO & PPG AQUARIUM

Kick off your day in Kids Kingdom. Your little ones may come face-to-face with a reindeer or get licked by a white-tailed deer (yes, antibacterial soap is nearby). Kids can crawl underneath the meerkat exhibit and pop up in an acrylic dome just inches away from the animals. "The mammals like to sit on top of the dome, so parents get a picture of what looks like a meerkat on top of their kid's head," says Henry Kacprzyk, Kids Kingdom's curator. A bridge with an alligator below and a big playground with spider webbing round out the fun.

Save time to see the two-story shark tank in the aquarium and the Water's Edge exhibit, where children can walk down a 30-foot tunnel with polar bears swimming above and around them.

\$12 for adults, \$10 for kids 2 to 13, extra fee for kiddie rides, free parking; pittsburghzoo.com



Join the Party

Fisher-Price is throwing a free Little People musical show at six zoos this spring and summer to celebrate its 50th birthday. Kids will take home a goody bag with a DVD, activity book, and crown. For the tour dates and locations, go to littlepeople.com/birthday.

5 Kid-Level Exhibits FORT WAYNE CHILDREN'S ZOO, INDIANA

This park was designed for little ones. Near the entrance is Indiana Family Farm, where children can peek into the chicken coop, brush the goats, and pump water into a trough. The 20-foot-high tree house in the Indonesian Rain Forest has an entrance that only small kids can fit through. Over in the Australian-themed area, children can burrow into a tunnel and pretend to be wombats or ride in a log boat to get a look at Eastern gray kangaroos and dingos. When the new African Journey opens on June 6, there will be child-size caves, close encounters with lions, and a chance for families to feed the giraffes.

There are at least four "creature features" daily, when keepers talk about the animals they care for. Healthy children's meals and low-cost wagon and stroller rentals make your outing even easier.

\$12 for adults, \$8 for kids 2 to 14, free parking; kidszoo.org



6 A Toddler Hangout SAN ANTONIO ZOO & AQUARIUM

It has the first children's zoo especially created for the 5-and-under set.

Young explorers get their own entrance to Kronkosky's Tiny Tot Nature Spot, stone lily pads to hop on. From there, the only problem is what to do first: Dig up carrots to feed the guinea pigs? Look for animal tracks? Dress up like a vet? Or splash in a small stream (while you relax on the nearby beach)? Stop what you're doing around 2 P.M., when the flamingos are fed shrimp—the snack that makes the birds pink.

Older kids will like the Africa Live! exhibit, where they can watch hippos and crocodiles swim underwater. They'll also enjoy feeding lorikeets nectar and seeing the Bear Grottos.

\$10 for adults, \$8 for kids 3 to 11, \$1 extra for the butterfly exhibit, free parking; sazoo-aq.org



7 Baby Boom CINCINNATI ZOO & BOTANICAL GARDEN

Kids flock to the nursery in the children's zoo. That's where staff care for and feed the infant animals—some of them in diapers. "We just had a newborn cheetah and a penguin in the nursery, and most likely we'll have different animals in there this summer," says Thane Maynard, executive director.

Other family faves: a walk-through turkey cage, a glass bubble that lets kids poke their heads inside the manatee exhibit, and a trek over to the Wildlife Canyon to see a red-haired Sumatran rhino wallow in the mud. Call ahead to register for a stroller safari, where you and your toddler get a guided tour from a naturalist, or a Family Night Hike, on which children can see bats and feed armadillos, aardvarks, and other animals that are most active after dark.

\$13 for adults, \$9 for kids 2 to 12 (free on July 15), \$7 for parking; cincinnatizoo.org



Get in Free

If your family has a membership to your local zoo or aquarium, you may receive free or discounted admission when you visit one out of town on vacation. Check out aza.org for the money-saving details.

8 Your Kid's Favorite Critters—and More SAN DIEGO ZOO

There are 4,000 animals to see. Your plan of attack: Hop on the skyride or half-hour bus tour, and then linger at a few of the unique exhibits, such as the ones with giant pandas and the elephants. Only three other American zoos (in Atlanta, Memphis, and Washington, D.C.) have black-and-white pandas, and thanks to a platform, your kids can get what's arguably the best look at them in San Diego. Afterward, check out the adjacent discovery center, where little ones will have a blast climbing into a panda den and pushing buttons to learn about the animals.

In the Elephant Odyssey exhibit, opening in June, families can watch eight of these African animals get cared for—from pedicures to weigh-ins. Kids can also watch the animals play in the mud. Don't leave without stopping by the children's zoo. Out of the 200 animals, about 45—including meerkats and wombats—have received special training so staff can take them out to meet the kids.

\$29 for adults,
\$19 for kids 3 to 11, free
parking; sandiegozoo.org



9 Backstage Pass HOUSTON ZOO

Trainers are the rock stars here. Throughout the day, families can peek in on them teaching new behaviors to the lions, giving the elephants a bath, or, in the children's zoo, feeding the fruit bats and pelicans. "The most interesting activities here usually take place behind the scenes," says Rick Barongi, the zoo's director. "It's one thing to tell kids about how these animals are taken care of—and it's far more memorable for them to watch it up close."

Under the Butterfly Stage, there's a morning storytime and a chance to touch small animals like chinchillas and snakes, as well as the Zooper Challenge, a game show that uses child volunteers. And if you have thrill seekers in your household, don't miss crawling through a tunnel in the piranha aquarium.

\$10 for adults, \$6 for kids 2 to 11, \$2 per carousel ride, free parking; houstonzoo.org



10 Act Like a Monkey BRONX ZOO, NEW YORK CITY

The children's zoo is a blast. Kids learn about the motions and defenses of animals by pretending to be one. They can sit inside a heron's nest, try to jump as far as a frog does, pop out of a prairie-dog burrow, climb into a turtle shell, or crawl through an otter log. "It's pretty cool because the real animals they're imitating may be watching them," explains Robert Cook, Ph.D., general director.

Another must-see: Congo Gorilla Forest where your family can get an up-close look at 20 of these animals, babies included. Also catch the Madagascar! exhibit (especially if your family loved the lemurs in the DreamWorks movie); take a 20-minute monorail ride around Wild Asia to see tigers, elephants, and rhinos; and stop by the reptile house to visit the 100-year-old snapping turtle.

\$27 for adults, \$21 for children 3 to 12 includes all exhibits and rides, \$12 to park; bronxzoo.com



Scrub-a-Dub-Dub

Elephants bathe in the tub (okay, a giant pool) for families to see at these five zoos: Cincinnati, Houston, Indianapolis, Lowry Park, and San Diego.



VISIT US! Get a list of our runner-up zoos at parentsmag.com.