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MARDI GRAS IS A FAMILY AFFAIR

Despite the Naughty Reputation, Mardi Gras is a Family-friendly Celebration

New Orleans, LA – It might not be apparent from a balcony on Bourbon Street, but outside of the French Quarter, Mardi Gras is largely a family affair. Children frolic the streets in their favorite costumes, extended families picnic on the grassy median, and mothers hold their young ones on tall ladders to see over the crowds. Walk the two-mile stretch of St. Charles Avenue from Napoleon to Lee Circle during a parade and it would be hard to argue that Mardi Gras is anything other than a family-oriented celebration.

Among locals, Mardi Gras traditions and favorite parade spots are passed down from generation to generation and many families have been returning to the same corner for decades. Visitors are always welcomed and while the crowds may be thinner during the weeknights, by the final four days of Mardi Gras, St. Charles Avenue is packed with ice chests, chairs, ladders, stereo systems and barbecues.

“Ninety-nine percent of Mardi Gras is a family celebration. It’s a time when grown-ups can act like kids and it’s extremely wholesome and remarkably safe,” says Arthur Hardy, Mardi Gras expert and publisher of *Arthur Hardy’s Mardi Gras Guide*.

Fat Tuesday is a great time for costuming and it’s not uncommon to see entire families dressed as chickens, pirates, cowboys, superheroes or comical cartoon characters. The party usually starts just after the crack of dawn and in between passing parades, costumed characters prance down the streets to show off their outfits. Throughout the season when krewes like Zulu, Iris and Orpheus roll down St. Charles Avenue, children are often singled out by riders and given stuffed animals, footballs, blow horns, whistles, rubber balls and spears.

Not only is Mardi Gras a suitable event for families but children actually play important roles in the celebration itself. In fact, if one were to watch a passing parade, they might be surprised to find that half of the participants are children and teenagers. In the krewes, there are *pages*, young boys that serve and ride with the king and queen, and *maids*, usually high school-aged girls that wait on lists for up to ten years to ride. In between the passing floats, middle and high school marching bands set the beat while young dance schools shake a leg down the route.

Finally, just a ferry ride across the river from downtown, Blaine Kern’s Mardi Gras World is a great place for families to take a peek behind the scenes and learn more about float-making. Blaine Kern, who is also known as “Mr. Mardi Gras,” is the largest float builder in the world and produces 80 percent of the floats that roll in New Orleans. Visitors can see artists and can wander through warehouses filled with props and floats.

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