Trouble in Smalland

Activity One – read the article, paying attention to your pronunciation and intonation and then answer the questions which follow.

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A Cheap Date, With Child Care by Ikea

By MICHELLE HIGGINS

IKEA'S inexpensive, contemporary furniture has attracted shoppers for years, but a different kind of bargain is luring deal hunters to the Swedish retailer as the economy struggles to recover.

Over-stretched, money-conscious parents are using the store's supervised play area as their personal baby-sitting service.

James Rotino, a single father, has become a regular at the store in Brooklyn. He takes his 5-year-old son, Vincent, to Ikea once a week after school heading straight for the free Smaland play center, where children who meet the height requirement (roughly 36 inches to 50 inches, depending on the store) can romp around in a pit full of plastic balls, watch videos, read books, play with puppets - sold at Ikea of course - or work on craft projects under the supervision of Ikea employees for up to an hour and a half.

While Vincent plays at Smaland - commonly referred to as the ball room - Mr. Rotino reads the paper or takes a walk among the aisles, but he rarely buys any of Ikea's home furnishings. “We get hot dogs or something and that's it,” he said. The free baby-sitting, he added, “gives me a little bit of a break and it makes my kid happy.”

The idea behind Smaland, of course, is to distract the children for long enough to let parents shop, possibly spending more than they would if their children were jumping on the display beds or whining about being bored. But recently, stores say, more parents like Mr. Rotino have begun to frequent Ikea for the playtime itself, depositing their children at Smaland and plopping into a display couch for an hour of peace and quiet, and then leaving without ever buying a thing.

Ikea estimates that Smaland attendance has jumped roughly 20 percent so far this year in its stores

in major American cities. The company has 37 stores in the United States and 297 worldwide.

“Lately, we've seen an increase in a lot of new parents,” said Yumiko Whitaker, public relations manager for Ikea's Orange County stores in California, where some have been spotted dropping children off at Smaland and then heading to Ikea's cafe with their laptops for its free wireless. “They're getting out of the house and we're providing an environment that gives them a break.” Moms or dads who time it right visit on days that Ikea is offering one of its free breakfast promotions and score bacon and eggs for the family, too.

“We certainly hope they'll purchase some Ikea products,” said Mona Astra Liss, the director of public relations for Ikea in the United States. “But if they don't, we still feel satisfied we introduced them to Ikea.”

This low-pressure retail strategy, combined with Ikea's reputation for selling low-priced furniture, seems to be working. While many of the nation's home furnishing retailers have been suffering from sales declines, and some, like Costco's two Home stores, are closing, Ikea has made a profit.

Kristy and Matt Hall of Jersey City make regular visits to the Ikea stores in Elizabeth and Paramus, N.J., with their 2-year-old son, Murphy. “It's a very creative way to get a night out and see if you can capture a little social life,” said Ms. Hall, who writes a travel blog called Two and a Half Travelers, where she has recommended the store as a rest-stop for families on road trips. “We've been doing it since he was born.”

Because Murphy is too small for the ball room, the evening usually begins with a stroll through the aisles, using one of the strollers provided by Ikea, then a visit to the children's section so Murphy can play with the toys, and eventually a stop at the cafe for Swedish meatballs or ice cream. For the adults, the goal is to get a table in the part of the cafe adjacent to a small play area where Murphy can entertain himself while they keep an eye on him and catch up on the day's events.

Every so often, an announcement is made over the store's speaker system. “They say, come into the ball room to pick up your child,” Ms. Hall said. When that happens, she said, “My husband and I look at each other and say, 'I can't wait till he can go into the ball room!'

Comprehension Questions :

1. How tall does a child need to be to go to Smaland play area ?
2. What can they do there and how long can they stay.
3. What does Mr Rotino do while Vincent plays ?
4. What is the idea behind smaland according to the article ?
5. What are stores saying at the moment about Smaland ?
6. By how much do stores estimate that smaland attendance has increased the year the article was written ?
7. What do the parents do while the kids play ?
8. What is the PR statement about this ?
9. Is this a good strategy for IKEA ?
10. Why do Mr and Mrs Hall go to IKEA ? What do they do there ?
11. What do they think when they hear announcements to pick up kids ?
12. What is the overall tone of the article ?

Activity Two : Role Plays.

You are responsible for PR for a new French store. The store is the first in France to introduce the children's play area. You have to explain the concept in a press conference.

Last week there was an accident in the play area of your store. Some drinks were spilled and as noone cleared up a boy slipped and broke his arm. A child was injurred. You have to reprimand the person responsible for clearning.

A child was left four the whole day in the store and noone was able to locate his parents. You have to talk to them at the end of the day when they come to pick up their little boy.

Your store has decided to close the play area because parents have been abusing the system and using it for daily childcare. You announce your decision to the press.

Your store is the first in France to use a new system of tagging parents. They set off an alarm if they leave the store without their children. You explain the system to the press.

You are responsible for a new project in France. Arts and crafts workshops for children aged ten and above. These workshops are organized free on wednesdays afternoons as a way of showing people how to use IKEA materials. You explain the concept and conditions to the press.