



"It's better than taking them to a movie, because it's free and there's a big space for them to run around and have fun."

- Mrs Dawn Tan (left, with her three children)

Ikea customers treat store like giant playground. They jump on beds, eat, work and sleep here

Someone even used toilet bowl in showroom

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LIKE little godzillas going on a rampage, they run through showrooms shrieking, jump on beds and punch holes into leather sofas with Ikea pencils.

That's worse, some of the culprits are adults. With its free parking (at its Tampines outlet), drink re-fill, and one-hour child-minding service, Ikea is as much an adult's playground as it is for its children.

The Los Angeles Times reported on shoppers who frequent Ikea stores in China with no intention of buying anything, just to take advantage of the freebies.

When The New Paper on Sunday visited the Ikea Tampines store last Sunday, shoppers here came across as being not much different from those in China.

A store assistant, who has worked at the Ikea Tampines store for three years, said: "I have seen adults jumping on the beds. One bed broke, and we had to change the entire set, which cost \$699."

Once, she also had to scoop urine from a toilet bowl in a showroom.

She said with a sigh: "Chambermaid, salesgirl, cleaner... I'm all that in one."

Another store assistant, who has worked with Ikea for 10 years, said: "After weekends, it looks like a tornado had gone through the store."
Toys are strewn on the floor. Books on bookshelf displays have been chucked back haphazardly. Beds are a mess of pillows, quilts and bedsheeters. Walls are scuffed on. Packaging is torn.

The weekend carnage is so bad that 20 per cent more staff are mobilised on Monday mornings to clean up, said an Ikea spokesman.
"People get so comfortable here that they treat it like their home - only worse, because they don't clean up after."

Taking siestas

The New Paper observed some shoppers who looked like they were doing their office work while others lounged barefoot on sofas and took after-lunch siestas in armchairs.

Store assistants often have to remind people who buy takeaway food from the restaurant not to eat in the kitchen showrooms.

But their reminders often go unheeded.

Said the store assistant: "People know what Ikea's style is like. If they break something, we don't ask them how much they are going to pay. We ask them if they are hurt."

Taking advantage of Ikea's family-friendly concept were Mrs Dawn Tan and her children, aged 3 to 8.

Mrs Tan sat in one of the bedroom displays as her children climbed onto beds, crawled from one display into another and rocked on mini see-saws.

"At home, my children only have one bedroom set. Here, they get various different settings. It becomes their playground," she said.

Mrs Tan, who works as a fund-raiser for a charity organisation, said the family usually heads to Pasir Ris Park on Sundays, but it was raining that day.
She was upfront about not planning to make any purchases.

Mrs Tan wasn't the only parent treating Ikea like a giant playground. Others were leaving their children at the children's play area before heading for the exit.

There are no signs to indicate that only customers can use the play area facilities, so it's no wonder some people see it as a child-minding service.

The service is free and parents can leave their

children there for up to an hour. If they don't return by then, Ikea staff will give them a call.

A father, who wanted to be known only as Mr Mohd, 33, dropped off his two sons, aged 6 and 4, at the play area before leaving to meet his wife in Pasir Ris to run some errands.

"The children's play area has more facilities than the neighbourhood playground, and I know my children are well cared for here," he said.

Ikea takes all this in its stride.

Mr Lars Svensson, deputy store manager of Ikea Tampines, said: "We trust our customers and visitors, and they return that trust by acting in a responsible and respectable manner in our stores. We are happy when our customers are happy."

Having a blast

Their customers and their children - as many as 20,000 on a Sunday - are obviously having a blast at the store.

But it does not always translate into higher sales, as only three out of 10 shoppers end up buying something, said the store spokesman.

Mr Svensson was cool about this, saying: "Even if you don't buy anything the first time, second time or even fifth time, eventually there will be a need for something in your house, and then chances are you will buy from us."

Even when customers end up breaking items in the store, the management maintains its policy of letting customers try everything, so that they can be confident with their purchase decisions.

Mr Svensson said: "We are constantly striving to be better and to cut down on waste, but there is nothing in the numbers that will discourage us from continuing to trust our visitors. It is a win-win situation."

Retail consultant Lynda Wee saying that Ikea's concept of "experiential retailing" - letting the customer try before buying - is the way to go.

More so when more people are turning to online purchases instead of visiting stores.

Dr Wee said: "If retailers do not allow customers to try out the products, they are no different from online retailing, which provides competitive prices and product information only."
Agreeing, tax associate Adrian Koh, 27, who was shopping for furniture with a friend, felt the family-friendly concept will make people spend time in the store, increasing the chances of them making a purchase.



SOFA SO GOOD: This customer found himself a comfortable place to sit. Is he taking the chance to get some work done?



HAVING A BALL: The Ikea children's play area is very popular. Kids are only allowed to stay for an hour, but there can still be a half-hour wait on Sundays.