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Atlantic City casinos target a new non-gambling market: Children

By DONALD WITTKOWSKI Staff Writer | Posted: Wednesday, December 21, 2011 7:25 pm

ATLANTIC CITY — Eddie Valdes, 30, and Ricky Valdes, 24, stopped in at the Trump Taj Mahal Casino Resort last week with their 9-year-old brother, Nicholas, in tow.

Nicholas entertained himself by playing some noisy machines that had bright flashing lights and dispensed tickets for prizes.

“I like to win. It’s very nice,” Nicholas said in a soft voice barely audible above the cacophony of beeps, whistles and music blaring from the machines.

While most machines found in casinos are of the slots variety, Nicholas had fun playing some arcade-style games that are among some family-friendly attractions in a town better known as a gambling mecca for grownups.

Arcades, shuffleboard, pools and even an 18-hole miniature golf course help keep children occupied at the casinos, while the adults are having their own fun on the gaming floor.

Eddie Valdes and Ricky Valdes, of Union City, Hudson County, take turns watching Nicholas at the Taj Mahal’s arcade while one of them hits the casino floor.

“I wouldn’t go far from him,” Eddie Valdes said of Nicholas. “My other brother and I always keep an eye on him. We’ll alternate if one of us wants to gamble.”

Eddie Valdes joked that Nicholas is a regular at the Taj Mahal’s arcade. Nicholas insists on staying at one of the nearby casinos — for the Valdes family’s most recent visit, it was three nights at the Showboat Casino Hotel — so he can be close to the Taj Mahal, his brothers said.

“He likes coming to Atlantic City, because he knows the arcade is here,” Eddie Valdes said, laughing.

Although the family-style arcades may seem like all fun and games, they also serve a more serious purpose. Gaming executives said the arcades offer a safe haven for children, while keeping them out of trouble.

“Give kids some free time and they can get into mischief if they don’t occupy themselves,” said Tony Rodio, president and chief executive officer of Tropicana Casino and Resort.

Casinos risk fines if children wander onto the gaming floor and begin to gamble, a scenario commonly referred to as “tots on slots.” Many underage gamblers are caught in Atlantic City every year, often resulting in the casinos getting fined thousands of dollars by New Jersey gaming regulators. The arcades are a way for casinos to guard against that happening.

“Without a doubt,” Rodio said.

Tropicana is scheduled to open a new arcade-style attraction this weekend called the Family Fun Station. There will be pinball, Skee Ball and other games for children to play.

“We get asked all the time, ‘What is there for kids to do?’” Rodio said. “At Tropicana, we want to think of ourselves as a destination, full-service resort.”

Rodio noted the new arcade will complement the family attractions — including an IMAX movie theater — at The Quarter, Tropicana’s mall-like retail, restaurant and entertainment complex.

Globe Vending Co., based in Egg Harbor Township, will run Tropicana’s arcade. The company operates arcades and other family attractions at Trump Taj Mahal, Bally’s, Harrah’s Resort and Golden Nugget Atlantic City. Harrah’s has the most elaborate family center, including arcade games, a pool and hot tub, an outdoor tanning deck and 18 holes of miniature golf.

David Kleinschrodt, Globe Vending’s general manager, said the casino arcades are bustling this time of year because children are off from school for the holidays.

“It is a resort town. You’re getting a lot of families because of the Boardwalk and ocean,” he said. “Any time kids are off from school, we’re busy. The period between Christmas and New Year is busier than the summer.”

Although the games are for children, Kleinschrodt stressed that parents and grandparents often stay at the arcades. At the Taj Mahal’s arcade, for instance, there are seven chairs and a TV in a waiting area for adults.

“This is the best use of space,” Kleinschrodt said, pointing to the chairs. “This is where the parents hang out. Each one of our places has a parents’ lounge.”

Parents can’t simply dump young children and leave them unsupervised. Kleinschrodt said children 12 years and younger must be accompanied by an adult. Teenagers are allowed in the arcades without adult supervision.

“They’re teenagers. At that point, there have never been any problems behaving or not being able to stay on their own,” Kleinschrodt said. “The parents feel very comfortable leaving their older kids here alone. But they are with the younger kids. It’s a wholesome, very secure environment.”

Eddie Valdes said he feels confident that Nicholas is safe.

“He wants to stay here,” Valdes said. “He enjoys the action.”

Nicholas said his favorite game is a Skee Ball-like game called Fire Ball. He complained that the claw games were too difficult, but he had better luck at other games. He redeemed his winning tickets for a spinning top, a sticky ball, an airplane and some candy.

“We’ve been here for a vacation,” Nicholas said. “It’s fun. We’ll be back.”

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