

playdate politics

Organized playdates should be a source of fun, not stress—the key is communication. *by Lisa Arcella*



Karen Mason was thrilled when her 6-year-old son Dylan asked to have his friend Tommy over for a playdate. “We want Dylan to play with kids his own age and develop good friendships, and he has had other playdates that have gone really well,” she relates. “Everything seemed to be going great until Tommy got very excited and threw a wooden block across the room and it hit my son on the side of the head. Dylan started crying, and when I saw how close the red mark was to his eye I quietly took Tommy aside and explained that ‘We don’t throw toys in this house.’ Then Tommy started to cry too.”

When it was time for pick-up and before Karen could explain what had happened, Tommy blurted out that Dylan’s mom had yelled at him. “It was definitely icy after that, and, needless to say, Dylan has never been invited over to Tommy’s house,” Karen says. It’s sometimes very hard to know how to handle sticky things that come up on playdates.

Karen certainly isn’t alone. Navigating the politics of playdates isn’t always easy. Everyone is trying to negotiate their way through a territory where the rules of behavior and protocol aren’t always clear. But the experts say there are simple ways to create happy, successful, and fun-filled get-togethers.

TALK IT THROUGH

“Because playdates need to be made between parents, that initial talk is a perfect time to cover key issues,” says Sam Von Reiche, Psy.D., a licensed clinical psychologist and Certified Success Coach in Clifton, New Jersey. “If your son can become overly hyper at the bowling alley, and sometimes needs to be told to sit a game out, this is the time to inform the other parent.”

Of course, it takes a village to raise a child, and if your child is going to spend time at another kid’s house, supervised by that child’s parents, the parents need to have some basic authority transferred to them or they cannot protect your child’s safety and well-being. You want the other child’s parents to be able to break up a fight. Or say no if your child wants to eat something he’s allergic to, like peanuts.

DON’T FORGET, IT’S ABOUT PLAY

The main thing to remember is that playdates should be fun for kids and easy for parents, explains Anastasia Gavalas, author of *WING IT: 6 Simple Steps to Succeed as a Modern Day Parent*. Deciding on the best time to have a playdate is important. After school can be tiring for younger children, especially if they have school the next day. But, non-school days give kids ample time and flexibility to engage with friends and play freely. “Playdates can be great opportunities to help teach children how to interact positively and develop relationships,” says Gavalas. “If it feels stressful or tiring, then parents need to shift their focus. Kids don’t care about making everything ‘just right.’ They simply want to play and have fun.”

GETTING ALONG

There are those times when the adults are friends and would love for the kids to connect, but it just doesn’t seem to happen. “If the kids don’t like each other, then just forget the playdate,” says Donald K. Freedheim, Ph.D., a professor emeritus of psychology at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. “On the flip side, if the parents don’t get along, and the kids want a playdate, the parents should swallow their differences and arrange a date.”

Freedheim also notes it’s not always necessary to reciprocate if your child is invited to another friend’s home. “Life is not about 50-50, it’s about how things balance out in the long haul,” he explains. Having said that, “If a parent always entertains your child, and you rarely reciprocate, it is bad manners and bad karma combined.” And that’s also true when it comes to the finances of the playdate. “If another kid’s parents always pay your child’s way, and you don’t offer to do the same, it’s simply not so nice! And poor modeling for your child, who absorbs it all like a sponge,” says Freedheim. On a budget? Volunteer to drive the kids to dance class each week to even things up.

At the end of the day, navigating playdates may be a bit of work for the parents, but well worth it for your kids. ●