

Planning a Play date

An important role parents play in their child's development is the teaching of social skills. During the preschool years the emphasis of social skills includes sharing, turn taking and not interrupting while others are speaking. Many children learn best by doing and these skills can be practiced in social situations such as during preschool, kindergarten and other extra-curricular activities. As children move from preschool into the elementary school years they build on their social skills and practice by choosing who they will eat lunch with and play together at recess. One way that parents can encourage children to practice social skills is to allow play dates in their home. A successful play date for both your child and the friend include the following:

Find out who your child would like to play with. Ask your child if there is one particular friend that he would like to invite over for a play date and allow your child to choose the friend.

One friend at a time. The play date will have more success for young children if there is only one friend over at a time. If your child insists on having more than one friend, consider meeting at a park with the friends and their parents instead of in your home.

Watch the time. There is a window of time where a successful play date can turn to disaster. Set up your child's play date for an hour to an hour and half, but no longer to start with. A play date that goes too long may end in disagreements and hurt feelings.

What to do during the play date. Encourage your child to decide on activities for the play date and only offer suggestions if your child asks for ideas. Some children struggle at the start of a play date deciding what to play and may need some ideas from you to get started.

Snacks included. First, find out from the parent if their child has any food allergies. Then part way through the play date, offer a fun and nutritious snack for the children to have a break. You and your child may want to discuss snack choices ahead of time so that your child has some input on what is served.

Where's the bathroom? Some children are shy and may not ask to use the bathroom. Start the play date off by showing your child's friend where the bathrooms are located and where the light switches are. Then he will be free to use the bathroom as needed.

Set limits on play space. Decide ahead of time with your child any rooms in your home that are acceptable for the play date as well as any rooms that are off limits.

When there is conflict. During the play date stay within listening distance so that you can check on how the play date is going. When conflicts arise, allow time for your child and her friend to sort things out on their own – another valuable social skill. If things don't seem to be improving, you may need to step in to encourage the children to sort out their conflict.

Saying Good-bye. Give the children a 10 minute warning that the play date is coming to an end. Have the children clean up the toys they were playing with and be ready when the friend's parent arrives. Be sure to thank the friend for coming over to play.

By following these ideas you will be setting your child up for a successful play date where he and his friend can have fun together and practice social skills in a supported environment.

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