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Top Tips for a Successful Playdate

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Interaction and play with peers is essential for social and emotional development in the preschool years. Learning to communicate, play and develop friendships is an important life skill. Some children learn to socialize with other children easily while others need more support and systematic practice to learn to make friends. Parents play an integral role in supporting a child's development of social interactions with peers. One of the best ways to facilitate social skill development is to invite another child over for a "playdate."

Why Have A Playdate?

Today's children are exposed much earlier to group learning experiences than previous generations. Many children go to day care or nursery school at the age of three. Although these environments can provide valuable social experiences, preschoolers also benefit from one-to-one play with a peer.

A preschool is a sensory-rich environment, and some children can be easily overwhelmed by the noise and tumult of a classroom. A child who is experiencing some social difficulties may more fully enjoy his nursery school experience once she has had some playdates with classmates.

Also, children are a curious mix of strengths and skill areas. A child may be a whiz on the playground equipment but need support to share toys or to communicate with peers. Inviting another child over can help both children continue to develop motor, communication and play skills. For example, a youngster may more readily attempt to try a new slide if a peer ventures down it first. Tasting a new food, playing a novel game or exploring a sandbox may all be accomplished more easily if a peer leads the way.

Two's a Company, Three's a Potential Disaster

Invite one friend over to play at a time. This allows children to get to know each other and interact more easily. Adding an extra child to the mix often leads to

someone feeling left out. Your child may find playmates in school or your neighborhood. If she goes to a preschool you may ask the teacher to suggest a youngster from the class to invite to a playdate.

You may want to invite a child to your home who shares similar interests with your youngster. At other times you may extend an invitation to a child who has different strengths than your own. For example, with some adult facilitation, you may help your child who loves dramatic play, join forces with a child who has amazing playground skills. Each may come away from the encounter with new abilities. Sometimes a peer can open up new horizons in a way no adult can.

Keep Them Wanting More

Keep initial playdates short. It is better for the children to end their playtime wanting more. Strive to end the visit on a positive note.

Some children, particularly 3 year olds, may initially need a parent or special adult to accompany them on first playdates in order to feel comfortable in new surroundings. Some preschoolers may be able to have an after-school play session, while others may need to plan these excursions on unscheduled days, weekends or after a nap. Individualize the program to accommodate a child's particular needs, and you are halfway down the road to success!

Stay Within Earshot

Stay in close proximity to the children during a playdate, because it is difficult to get back on track when children have experienced serious difficulties. Some children need adult facilitation and support to play with peers, particularly if they are new friends. As the play evolves the adult will facilitate less and can stay in the background, ready to provide assistance if needed.

Reinforce the children as they are playing nicely together. Give specific praise such as, "Nice job taking turns" or "Good job sharing the bike." Nonverbal praise works well, too, such as using a "thumbs up" sign to let your preschooler know you saw her share her toys.

It Takes a Plan

A planned playdate is a successful one. Talk to your child about what will happen when his friend arrives. Discuss sharing toys and putting away items that are too hard to share. Talk with your youngster about taking turns with a friend to pick the next activity.

Plan several different types of activities. Present a sensory-based experience

such as playing with Play-Doh, Silly Putty or clay. Encourage the children to create a picture using rubber stamps or a collage out of a variety of materials. Take the children outside to gather up leaves and jump into them.

You may incorporate some motor activities into your play by using your own equipment such as hula-hoops, bikes or wagons. Stop by a nearby park to allow the children to let off steam on your way home. Perhaps you and the children can gather up snacks and go for a walk.

Have an alternate plan when children need to slow down and shift gears. If the activity gets too rambunctious inside your home you may move to outdoor play. If children have trouble calming down for indoor play, turn the lights off, put a blanket over your kitchen table, and read them a story in the "tent." If interest in pretend play has waned, take out large rolls of brown paper and help the children draw each other's silhouettes.

Pull out some novel toys and let the children come up with a plan to use them. For example, strategically leave out a suitcase and the preschoolers may decide to go on a trip. Leave several kitchen chairs set up in two rows or in one long row and they may go for a car or train ride. A toy doctor's bag, bandages and stuffed animals can provide a great deal of entertainment!

Let Them Eat Cake (Or Crackers, or Fruit...)

Snack time offers a superb opportunity to facilitate interaction between children, both verbally and nonverbally. Check first with your visitor's parents about food allergies. Then let the children work together to prepare a special snack.

Your young chefs may enjoy taking turns shaking a covered container to make instant pudding. They might want to try making a "trail mix" by combining interesting goodies such as cereal, bite-sized crackers and raisins and stirring them together. Or they may delight in making sandwiches and then using cookie cutters to cut them into interesting shapes.

Motivating the Reluctant Player

Some children have a difficult time playing with peers and may require some specific intervention strategies. For example, encourage nonverbal as well as verbal interaction. You might bring out some edible bubbles and have one child blow them and the other try to catch them in her mouth! Take them on a wagon ride and have them face each other to encourage conversation. The youngsters can also take turns pulling each other.

Try a collaborative art project such as ball painting. Put practice golf balls in a

box with paper and paint and have the children hold the box and move it around to create a picture.

Encourage 4-year-olds to play games together. You may try old favorites such as "Memory," "Don't Break the Ice" or "Topple." These types of games organize the child and provide a structure, allowing some children to more successfully play with a peer.

Picture This

Take pictures during the playdate! Make copies for your child as well as for your visitor. The pictures will help your child talk about the special activities the youngsters shared and help her relate the events to other family members. Other special projects such as the pictures they created, will also remind the children about the playdate.

A Final Note

To quote Bette Midler, "You've gotta have friends..."

However acquiring them can be a daunting task for a young child. With your support and some well-organized playdates, the good times will roll. Your child will thank you!

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