

## HAVING PLAY DATES

### ***Ahead of time:***

Walk through the house and get your child to name things they'd let visitors play with, as well as things that are "too special" to share, with the idea that the special things will be put away during the play date. If almost everything is "too special," then your child isn't ready for play dates at your home. Consider having them at a park or other neutral ground.

Choose friends especially carefully for the first few play dates because you want them to be good experiences. Try to invite someone your child plays with at school or elsewhere, someone your child talks about often, or someone you see doing things your child also likes.

*Hint:* if two parents get along well, it doesn't mean their children will too. If there is another parent you enjoy chatting with, that may need to be separate from a play date unless you're sure the children get along.

Find a good time of day. Some children want after-school play dates with classmates, but in reality they're too tired to truly enjoy them. Kids who nap after school need morning or day-off play dates.

Expect to stay with your child for at least the first few visits to anyone else's home. When you do the inviting, clearly invite the other parent to stay at your home for the entire visit.

Plan ahead with the other parent. Agree on start and end times (an hour is a good place to start), how to handle disagreements, and how to end the play date early if it's not going well.

### ***Day of the Playdate:***

Do a second "too special" walk through the house and put everything "too special" away where the children can't see it. Tell your child it will come back out after the visit.

Help your child choose some snacks to share.

Help your child think of a few things they can do together and collect those toys. If you're the visitor, you could bring a few small toys that aren't "too special" to share.

Have a few things you can offer if the children get stuck. A big batch of playdough is good, or lots of paper and crayons.

### ***During the playdate:***

Plan to be in the room with the children, even if you are off to the side.

Let the children play independently as much as possible. You only step in if needed.

You may have to step in to help with disputes. Start by asking questions: "What did you want?" "Did you like that?" "Should we make a list?"

If you have to redirect the activity or a behavior, you could start by saying, "At our house we usually do..." Visiting parents often hesitate to step in, and it will be easier for them to hear your ground rules. Then you could suggest something to do instead.

If you are the visiting parent, you could work with your own child in this way if the host parent has more lenient rules than you do or feels more hesitant to step in.

***When things go wrong:***

Most of us have play dates that don't go well. It's better to end them before one or both children are too upset, even if someone drove 30 minutes to make the visit. If you tried redirecting their behavior several times and the children are stuck in dispute, it's okay to suggest trying again another day. The other parent will thank you.