

Plan a Great Playdate: Ten things you need to know to keep everybody happy.

By Michele Piazzoni

Although your child has probably been playing with other kids for a while -- in the sandbox, at day care, when you visit friends or relatives -- her social life as a preschooler will be even busier. Playdates become part of the routine, and your child may visit the homes of many kids she hardly knows. Personalities and play styles sometimes clash, but if you're prepared, you can help these get-togethers go smoothly.

- 1) Two's company.** Although it's important for kids this age to have opportunities to mix in larger groups, limit playdates to two children. An odd number almost always ensures that someone will get left out, and sharing a limited number of toys with several kids is bound to cause conflict.
- 2) Don't force it.** Playdates are obviously a good way for 3- and 4-year-olds to practice their social skills, but you shouldn't be concerned if they don't interact much at first. "Three-year-olds are used to parallel play and won't suddenly just give it up," says Loraine Dunn, Ph.D., an associate professor of early-childhood education at the University of Oklahoma, in Norman. Rather than pushing children to play with each other, let them progress at their own pace. Even when they're playing side by side, they can learn a lot simply by watching each other.
- 3) Keep it short.** A visit of one and a half to two hours gives kids enough time to play but reduces the likelihood that someone will get bored or cranky, says Janet Brown McCracken, an early-childhood educator in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Keep your child's regular schedule in mind: Skipping a nap to play with a friend could lead to a frustrating experience for everyone.
- 4) There's no place like home.** You don't have to take the kids to the park or the playground to have fun. Being at home is easier because you have the refrigerator, the bathroom, the box of Band-Aids, and plenty to do. If you have a backyard or a patio, set up a sand or water play area and put out a few balls, some plastic watering cans or buckets, or even paper and paints.
- 5) Leave your child only when he's ready.** Some children need to work up to being dropped off, especially if they don't know the other family well. You should certainly stay for the first playdate at a friend's house to help your child feel comfortable. After that, use your judgment. "Your child may get upset when you leave but become engrossed in play within five minutes," Dr. Dunn says. Karen Stemmler, of Jacksonville, Florida, pulls out a bottle of bubbles to blow whenever one of her 3-year-old son's friends arrives and seems a little anxious.
- 6) Encourage but don't expect kids to share.** Three- and 4-year-olds are still learning this skill, McCracken says, and having someone else on their turf who wants to use their stuff can be tough. If your child has a particularly hard time sharing a certain item, put it away before his friend arrives. Laurie Wirth, of Folsom, California, often suggests that her son's friends bring over some of their own toys or a bike to make it easier for the children to play together outside.
- 7) Have alternatives available.** If a conflict does arise over a coveted toy, it will probably resolve itself within minutes. Preschoolers have short attention spans and will get interested in another activity before long, says Nancy P. Alexander, director of the Northwestern State University of Louisiana Child and Family Network, in Shreveport. However, it's a good idea to have puzzles, modeling clay, or a simple board game on hand in case you want to divert the kids' attention.
- 8) Intervene but try not to interfere.** If the kids can't be distracted from fighting over the same toy, avoid dictating which child gets the toy for how long. It's better for them to learn how to compromise on their own. You might ask them questions, such as "How do you think you could work out a way so each of you has a turn?" or "Molly wants to play with it for a while too. Sarah, is that okay with you?"
- 9) Serve a snack.** This can often be the highlight of a playdate. Plan on something quick and simple, such as string cheese, granola bars, or apple slices, or make an activity out of preparing the snack. Mixing up

some instant pudding or vegetable dip helps kids learn to follow simple directions and can be completed quickly enough to hold their attention.

10) Give a warning before you wrap up the visit. Rather than abruptly ending a playdate, it's a good idea to let kids know when they've got five minutes left. Three- and 4-year-olds can certainly help with the cleanup but probably won't be able to do it all by themselves. Encourage the kids to clean up together, so that your child won't be left with the mess after his friend goes home.