

Playdates

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The Benefits of Playdates

Relationship skills and emotional literacy are vital for your child's long-term happiness. Your child will learn some social skills at preschool or school, and in extracurricular classes. But even if those teachers are trying to prioritize social-emotional learning, they also have to focus on the learning goals for the program. The social interaction in a structured class just can't replace the essential social skill building that happens in one-on-one or small-group free play with peers.

So, when planning your child's activities, make sure to leave plenty of room for free, unstructured play with other children. Opportunities include: play-based preschool, lots of time at the park, nanny shares or home-based daycares, time with cousins or neighbor kids, and playdates. When children are allowed to just play together, without too much intervention from parents, they learn:

- Bids for Connection: How to invite another child to play, asking to join someone's play, how to notice that someone else is inviting them and how to join in.
- Sharing and taking turns, advocating for themselves, making space for other's needs.
- Collaboration: coming to an agreement on what game to play, and what the rules are.
- Teamwork – working together on a common goal, and negotiating when conflict arises.
- Empathy and social cues: how can you tell if they other child is having fun, or when they're not having fun, how you can be sensitive to that and adjust your play.
- Emotional regulation: how to stay calm when things don't go as you wished.

At a playdate, children can work on all these skills, as they engage in whatever activity captures their attention – playing with toys, pretend play, the playground, or digging in the sandbox.

How to Set Up a Playdate

You may meet families at preschool or school, in a class, at the park, in your neighborhood, or on social media. Pick a child with a similar temperament and/or interests to your child. Keep your eye out for who your child is connecting with, volunteer in their classroom to observe for this, or ask their teacher. Issue some invitations. If someone turns down an invitation, you can feel out whether they are just not able to do the specific thing you asked about but are still interested in connecting or whether they're just not interested. If so, don't take it personally, just move on.

Planning a Playdate – Tips for Success

Keep playdates short! For toddlers, start with 45 minutes to an hour. For preschool, an hour is plenty. Frequent short playdates with pleasant endings are better than infrequent, long, and cranky ones. Schedule for a time of day when both children are at their best.

Choose a location mindfully. Many parents may feel more comfortable if your first get-togethers are in a public place rather than at one of your homes. (Note: shy or anxious children may do best on their own familiar turf.) Choose somewhere that the children can play freely, since

that's the whole point! Choose a place where there won't be tons of other kids there – that can make it hard for your child to actually connect with the child you planned the playdate with.

Discuss expectations in advance. First, be clear on whether the parent will drop off or stay – for children under 4, usually the parent stays and for children over 6, it's usually drop-off, but there's a gray area in between *and* other parents might have other assumptions. So, be clear! Talk about illness rules – if anyone has signs of illness you'll re-schedule the playdate. Figure out what the ground rules are and how you'd like to handle discipline issues.

Activities for Playdates

Plan playdate activities that are engaging, are collaborative (like building a fort or playing with blocks), not competitive. If there are especially cool toys, try to have two of them so the children don't have to fight over them. It can help to have toys with many pieces (Lego) rather than single items (trikes). If your child has a hard time sharing their possessions, you could put away their most treasured toys or have the playdate somewhere on neutral territory.

Have an activity idea so that if the children aren't doing well, you have a new distraction to try: "hey – who wants to blow bubbles!" or "shall we make cookies?"

Snacks? If kids are squabbling, sitting down for a snack together can help shift the mood. But make sure you talked with the other parent in advance about what the snack plan was, and what kind of snacks work for their kid and what doesn't (e.g. no sugar, or avoid allergens.)

Plan an ending. How will you signal playtime is coming to an end? Maybe a snack, or a story, or a heads up that "we've only got five more minutes – what do you want to do before we're done?"

For the first few playdates, expect to be very hands-on, helping the children learn how to play with each other. As they become more independent, you can fade back.

What if it's not going well?

If they start to have a conflict, don't feel like you have to intervene the moment it begins. Small disagreements often work themselves out, and they learn problem solving and conflict resolution through the process. So, try sitting back and seeing what happens. Sometimes, they'll need help.

Ideas to try: Offer distractions – like changing activities or offering a new toy. Instead of telling them they have to share, it may be more helpful to say let's take turns – you can have it for one more minute, then it's their turn. If it starts escalating, I do an "if/then" – "if you keep fighting over the toy, then I'll have to put it away for today." If the children are heading toward hitting or biting, step in immediately. State firmly what is not OK, and tell them what to do instead.

When it comes to playdates with small children, it helps to go in with low expectations, and celebrate success however big or small it is. If the first playdate fails – at least you tried! And it doesn't mean every playdate with that child will fail – we all just have rough days sometimes. So, just think "well, they're learning new skills and they got to practice today some things that don't work well. That's a learning opportunity." And you know **what skills you can work on at home** to help give them a better chance of success next time.