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Your Complete Guide to Playdates



The Rules of Engagement Keep the Numbers Low

At any age, the least risky move is to host a one-on-one. This way there's no fear of anyone getting left out. Also, the fewer kids the better the chance for quiet, independent play. There are some exceptions: Babies really don't play together anyway -- it's usually about parents -- so more can be merrier. As the kids get older (after about age 4) they can usually handle a few more friends in the fray. But be prepared: the more children around, the more involved you'll have to stay.

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Only Drop Off When Ready

Plan on sticking around if your child is under 3. At this age, playdates are social events for both kids and adults. Most older kids like a drop-off (especially if it's with a family they know well). Some kids take a while to warm up to being left at another family's home. Often, it's just a matter of hanging around until your child feels totally comfortable.

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Don't Overstay

The smaller the child, the shorter the playdate should be. An hour is ideal for babies and toddlers, but most preschoolers can easily handle two to three. When in doubt subscribe to the maxim: Leave 'em wanting more.

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Be the Best Guest

- Make sure you're always on time for drop-off and pickup.
- Offer to bring snacks, especially if little Oskar has dietary issues or is just plain picky.
- Insist on helping with cleanup.
- Make sure your child says "thank you for having me," as soon as he's old enough to talk. And, of course, you should do the same.

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Be a Perfect Host

- Let your child put away one or two toys he doesn't want to share. Everything else is fair game.
- If the other parent isn't staying, make it a point to get emergency-contact information.
- Ask if your guest has any food allergies or other health issues.
- Check the other mom's comfort level with TV and computer use.

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3 Crowd Pleasers

Have some activities ready in case the natives get restless, or to do simply if you want to be known as awesome.

Dance!

What kid doesn't like to wiggle when the beat starts thumping? Have the children kick off their shoes, then crank up the tunes. Bump it up a notch by turning the music on and off and shouting "Freeze!" when it stops.

Have a scavenger hunt!

For toddlers, hide plastic blocks, tennis balls, or mini stuffed animals in a room and give helpful clues. Challenge older kids to find things around the house and yard. Pick items in plain sight. Some ideas:

- Hands on a clock
- A birdhouse
- Baby pictures of the host
- 3 yellow leaves

Fold!

Origami is fun for all ages. Try a paper puppy that even toddlers can tackle with a little bit of help:

1. Fold a square piece of paper in half to form a triangle with creased edge at top.
2. Fold top two corners down to form ears.
3. Fold top layer of bottom point up to make space for the nose.
4. Draw in eyes, nose, and a tongue.

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Perfect Playdate Treats

- **Yogurt Parfaits:** If the kids are old enough, let them layer their own fruity yogurt concoctions. Provide different flavored yogurts, a selection of fresh and dried fruit, and granola.
- **Face Crackers:** Give kids round crackers spread with either peanut butter or cream cheese. Make silly faces using cut-up grapes and dried fruit, with shredded carrots for hair.
- **Fruit "Pizza":** Mix together softened cream cheese with jelly or honey, then spread over small pocketless pita bread. Top with apple, banana, and kiwi slices.
- **Go Fish:** Give each child a long, skinny pretzel stick with a dab of cream cheese on the end. Let them go fishing in a pond of Goldfish crackers. Remember, no double dipping!
- **Cereal Jewelry:** Let the kids string together Cheerios, Froot Loops, or any other ringed cereal on thin licorice ropes (or string). Knot the ends and proudly wear the edible necklaces.

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No-Cry Bye-Byes

- If you're hosting, start the transition before the parent arrives, by giving a 10-minute and then a five-minute warning.
- Make cleaning up part of the fun by having the kids count how many toys they can put away, race against the clock, or sing a cleanup song.
- If you're on pickup duty, grab your child's things and challenge him to get ready by the count of 30. Try to get his playmate involved in cheering him on.

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The Fairness Doctrine

Make a good-faith effort to alternate locations. By the time your child is in kindergarten, he and his pals will be aware of whose turn it is to play host -- and will act as enforcers. Until then, if you find yourself taking your kid to friends' homes a lot, you'll need to step up.

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The Other-Parent Trap

Every once in a while you may get stuck with a mom or dad who drives you completely, totally nuts. You'll meet The Unreciprocators, The Sick Child Bringers, and, of course, The "What's One More?" type who jauntily drops off the cousin or a sibling. Although it's tempting to move to a new state, there are easier ways to make things work.

If a parent has the nerve to come over with a coughing, contagious child, then you should have the guts (and the right) to say, "I'm really sorry, but I can't have a sick kid over. I just don't want to risk having Zach catch something."

If a parent asks to drop off an unexpected extra, try, "Next time I'll plan to include all the kids, but I can't do it today." Or you can tell the other mom that it would be fine if she's willing to stick around and help supervise things.

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Q&A: Playdating Dilemmas

We asked Melissa Leonard, a certified etiquette consultant in Harrison, New York, to give advice on these common predicaments.

Q. That kid was a brat, and I don't want him to come back. What should I do?

A. Anyone can have a bad day, so take the "three crummy playdates and you're out" approach. If you're ready to give up, avoid making future plans by saying something like, "Our schedule is crazy at the moment. Can we touch base at a later date?" If you say that enough, all but the most socially inept person will get the message.

Q. Should I report a little guest's bad behavior at pickup time?

A. Nobody likes a tattletale, so let the small stuff go. But most of us want to know if our child hit someone, bit someone, intentionally broke something, or had a major meltdown. If that's the case, diplomatically say: "It was great, but we just had a little incident...." Then give the other parent a brief explanation of what happened.

Q. Speaking of naughty kids, is it okay for me to give a visitor a time-out?

A. Sorry, but that's not a good idea. Disciplining is always reserved for the behaviorally challenged kid's parents. If there's a tussle, though, you can get involved with a simple statement like, "Hands to yourself. We have a house rule against hitting." If that doesn't calm things down, create a diversion as in: "It's snacktime, everyone!"

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