

Ensuring Your Child's Safety on Playdates

By Susie Kohl

EACH FALL WE E-MAIL PARENTS a document that describes our Child Safety Program. It outlines basic steps we take to ensure our students are safe at school. Here we highlight some specific concerns about the safety of our children when they're not at school.

Parents often ask me questions about sending their children on playdates. Understandably, they wonder about allowing their children to go into the home of a family they don't know well, even when the family is a member of the Meher Schools community.

The steady stream of requests to arrange playdates poses special challenges for parents. They want their children to have friends, but ensuring responsible supervision for their children is their highest priority. Although as teachers we often discuss children's social interests with parents, *we are not in a position to evaluate the safety of situations outside of our school*. As you know, our school cannot protect Meher Schools children during the hours they are not on our campus. And so it is up to parents to make sure their children are safe, even on playdates with children they have met at our school.

Still, children's independence should be explored, ideally gradually, with parents staying visible and readily available to guide, help, and protect. I know how bewildering this challenge can be. In this mobile age when parents may not have the support of extended family nearby, making connections with others is important.

At the same time, our busy lives in an urban environment often keep us from getting to know people in our community well. That is why we want to suggest important guidelines for responding to requests for your child to visit or stay in a friend's home. Here are some guidelines that, as a parent, and as a teacher who has dealt with a wide variety of family social situations, make good sense to me:

- *Do not allow your child to go alone on a playdate or overnight in a home where you do not know the parents, siblings, and the environment well.* No matter how delightful the invitation, the reality is you are entrusting your child to this family's care. It makes sense to be certain you are fully aware whom your child will encounter (parents, older brothers and sisters, people who come into the home) during a visit *without you present*. You also need to find out who will be supervising your child while you are away. In other words, you should know the family well and feel unhesitating, comfortable, and certain about your child's safety.
- *Set up playdates as family social events.* Start by having a family playdate where members of your family socialize with members of the playdate family. When families get together, children aren't pressured to venture alone into unfamiliar settings. Casual socializing with other parents also allows you to get to know family members, their lifestyles, and their home environments. Establishing careful patterns with your children when they are first exploring independence builds a context for safety in the future. In early adolescence, requests for time away from home multiply. Using thoughtfulness and care now creates a foundation for social guidelines in the future.
- *Make a plan for communicating with your children when they are away from home.* Don't feel awkward about calling to speak with children at someone else's home. You can let the host know ahead of time that you will be phoning. Make calling a condition of sending your child on a sleepover. When you do call, check in to see whether your child is happy and

whether your help is needed. In addition, teach children how to call you—and encourage them to contact you if they feel uncomfortable.

- *Check Megan's List online* (www.meganslaw.ca.gov). Information on the identity and whereabouts of registered sex offenders is now available to you by the individual's name, city, or zip code at this Internet site. Megan's List is not intended to further punish child offenders but to provide helpful information so that parents can make informed decisions about their children's activities, such as playdates. In light of this, it is up to parents to learn of known child offenders. You now have the ability to protect your children from unsupervised contact with people who have a known history of child sexual abuse. We recommend that you refer to Megan's List periodically. Other valuable information about maintaining child safety is also available at the Megan's List website.

We appreciate your willingness to join us in our ongoing concern for child safety. Thank you for considering this information carefully.

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