

Tips for Parents by Susie Kohl

Playdates Require Sensible Guidelines

This is a follow-up to “Ensuring Your Child’s Safety on Playdates.”

LAST WEEK WE PUBLISHED an article on playdate safety that I wrote several years ago. We want to ensure that parents use sensible guidelines when allowing their children to visit someone else’s home. We share ideas about this subject because the notion of children needing to have playdates is relatively recent.

According to *Wikipedia*, the word playdate is a late-20th century invention. When I first heard someone allude to making a playdate for her young child, it sounded like something artificial. Before the term was created, children just went to each other’s houses to play. Parents knew the families of their children’s friends and could generally assume that they held the same values.

Of course, with the complexity of parent schedules, children’s enrichment activities, and the general hectic pace of life, get-togethers with other families have to be pre-planned—one more thing on a parent’s to-do list. The closest experience to the free play of neighborhoods in the past is our playgrounds in the afternoon. When parents work all day and pick up their children from daycare in the late afternoon, they often confess that they don’t have time to get their children together with classmates. Weekends are for family time.

Much has been written about the potential awkwardness of playdates when people don’t know each other and the casual relationship of two children is put under parental scrutiny. One mother reported that her four-year-old daughter and playdate partner fought the whole time they were at the park, making it hard to know what to say. As children get older and feel confident visiting a schoolmate’s house alone, other factors come in to play. One mom said, “I had no idea the parents were letting nine-year-old boys watch R-rated movies when they got together.” She didn’t know the family and never thought to ask about their entertainment choices.

Of course, playdates can also be wonderful. Many parents make friends because their children like to spend time together. As people get to know each other through their children, a sense of community develops among parents whose children are in the same class. Families socialize and even go on vacation together, and children form lasting bonds. One delightful aspect of these relationships is that they so often involve people of different ethnicities and geographic backgrounds. Families who don’t have extended family nearby create solid support systems. As children get older, however, and spend time alone at other homes, we again feel it’s important to for families to be clear with each other about guidelines.

At The Meher Schools or any school, parents shouldn’t assume that families have the same attitudes about computer use, the appropriateness of television and movie choices, or supervision. Children may be left with an older sibling or uncle who thinks letting children use a computer by themselves or watch a movie aimed at adults is cool. Though it may seem awkward to ask about issues that imply another parent lacks judgment, parents are ultimately responsible for their children’s safety and emotional well-being. Learning to bring up these practical concerns without judgment is an important skill to develop now. In middle school and high school, parents have to join with other parents to set limits.

That doesn’t mean that people have to change their lifestyles for their children to have a social life. They only need to agree on what will happen when the children are at each other’s houses.

One mother made an agreement with her neighbor not to let her son watch TV at her house, and the boys remained friends for years while maintaining this parameter. Through our children we can learn to accept that people have different values and learn to communicate openly about them, a process that expands our own thinking and provides children with modeling of how to do that too.

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