

The New Playdate Playbook

Will your kid's next get-together end in smeared walls or smooches? Read on for the make-or-break rules for modern-day social situations.

BY DEBORAH SKOLNIK
PHOTOGRAPHY BY AMY MIKLER

Playdates used to be as simple as, well, child's play. That's because until not so long ago, that's all they were: a couple of kids spending a couple of hours together, stacking Legos or re-enacting their favorite cartoon episodes with stuffed animals while Mom (natch), a homemaker (natch again), looked on, filling the snack bowl as needed.

Fast-forward to today: Your kids' playmates are as likely to show up with an EpiPen as with an American Girl doll, and you might be driven from the neighborhood if anyone finds out you served the kids cheese curls instead of edamame.

Sending your child to someone else's home isn't exactly a carefree experience either. Is the mom (or dad, or the sitter...hey, who's supervising this playdate, anyway?) so focused on her iPhone that the kids could sneak off and give each other Chaz Bono haircuts? Are they playing video games that belong to an older brother—or, geez, with a title like *Mortal Evil Uprising IV*,

his parole officer? Nowadays, you've got to be ready to navigate a few tricky situations. Here's a heads-up from experts and moms in the trenches.

**—the—
SITCH** *Your child is begging for his pal to come over, but you work and have a babysitter. Is it OK if she's the one supervising the playdate?*

The Solution: First make sure your sitter is accustomed to hosting these dates, says Susan Callender, the founder of Oh My Gauche!, a firm offering manners classes for both children and adults, and an etiquette expert at the Bean City Kids program at the Boston Center for Adult Education, which holds occasional "Miss Manners" kids' teas. You'll also need the green light from the other mom—make a point of telling her that your sitter will be on duty, and let her decide if she's comfortable. If she isn't, say you'll have

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Mess SOS

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her child over on the weekend. (Or you just may luck out and she'll invite your kid to come over instead!)

—the—SITCH *The other mom is a cell-phone addict. How can you be sure she'll keep a close eye on the kids?*

The Solution: Offer to tag along or host, or else make up an excuse and politely decline the invite. You can't simply hope for the best or ask her in advance to hang it up. "It's going to come across as judgmental, and you just can't tell another adult what to do," warns etiquette guru Lisa Gaché, founder of Beverly Hills Manners, in California. In fact, if you feel like you need to make that request at all, then this mom's house is probably not the best, safest environment for your child.

—the—SITCH *You feel pressured to provide healthy foods on playdates—but here comes the ice cream truck.*

The Solution: Go for it! There's no reason you can't spring for a treat, says Gaché. A couple of exceptions: "Obviously, if it's a half hour before the other mom wants her child home for dinner, she'll be upset with you for spoiling his appetite," she says. And if you know the family is vegan or ultra-health-conscious, you may want to call the parents to get permission.

—the—SITCH *Your child's food allergies make you wary of playdates, period.*

The Solution: Try to see the playdate for what it is: "Just an hour or two at most at someone else's house, especially when kids are small," says Callender.



Make a plan for your child to get through that brief time safely. Give the other parent a list of what he can't eat, and even more important, pack him a really great snack to go, plus enough extra for everyone in the house to share, if they'd like. If your kid uses an EpiPen, pack it, too. Give the parent a brief lesson in when and how to use it (luckily, it's pretty simple) and leave it along with the instruction material. If your child eats only his own food, the chances it'll actually be needed are slim.

Punishing Pals?

It's not cool to give your kid's friend a time-out, experts say. Instead, redirect him—and keep an extra-close eye out so you can troubleshoot.

—the—SITCH *Your kid's friend is complaining because you don't have as many Wii games as he does.*

The Solution: "Smile and say 'You must have a fun house, and we do, too! But here, we like to do other things more,'" advises Gaché, whose firm offers manners classes for even small children. Then steer both kids toward the construction paper. If your guest won't switch gears after your best efforts, it's OK to call his parents and request an early

pickup. Explain that you couldn't make him happy, and why. "You and your child both deserve to have a pleasant experience," says Gaché.

—the—SITCH *You're a divorced dad, so you're the only one who's home. Do you need to tell other parents this up front?*

The Solution: Yep—especially if you'll be hosting a girl, says Tina Paone, Ph.D., a play therapist, mother of three, and founder of The Counseling

Center at Heritage, in Montgomeryville, PA. Many people are more hesitant to send their daughter to a home where she'll be supervised by a single dad, versus a single mom. "You can't take it personally," Paone says. If the other parent still seems uncertain, you can invite her to stay. Eventually, she may get used to the idea of leaving her child in your care—after all, there are almost 2 million single fathers in the U.S., and almost 1 in 5 kids under age 5 is taken care of by Dad while Mom works.

—the—SITCH *Not all the other moms know you're gay. Should you tell them?*

The Solution: If your partner isn't home, there's no need to launch into a TMI explanation. You can simply say something more along the lines of "My partner works in finance" or "I don't have a husband." If your significant other will be home, though, advise the other parent, says Callender. Some families have objections, and they may not feel comfortable letting their

child come over. No one's saying that's right—with 8 million to 10 million kids in the U.S. being raised by gay adults, that's a lot of small-minded shunning to do. You may lose their friendship, but you and your child will be fine.

—the—SITCH *A family's invited your child to go bowling. Do you have to send him with money?*

The Solution: If you can afford it, certainly offer the money, says Gaché. (She always hands it to the parents, so her kids can't lose it.) They may insist they're treating, and that's fine. If things are tight at your house, send what you can. If you can't send anything at all, and the other family treats your child to something extra-special, like a concert, help him write a thank-you note later on (really, a note should always be sent for this kind of big event). Host the other kid as soon as you can—you don't have to do anything extravagant, but the family will appreciate the reciprocation (and rest!).

—the—SITCH *Your child's playmate behaved like a brat the whole time she was over. Should you tell her parents about it?*

The Solution: If you didn't call for an early pickup, a blow-by-blow rundown of, well, every blow really isn't necessary. "This happens to us a lot, but with little kids, it can just be a one-off. I only say something if it happens more than once," says Robin Immerman Gruen of Chicago, mother of a 2- and a 5-year-old. Even then, says Lauren Wolpoff of Marlboro, NJ, mom of a 3-year-old, "there are ways to say something gently, like 'She wasn't quite her usual happy self—maybe she was feeling a little tired or had a big morning at preschool.'" The goal isn't to get the kid in trouble but to give her mom a heads-up that she's got a hot mess on her hands—or maybe just a kid who needs a short manners review when she gets home! 📞

Senior editor **DEBORAH SKOLNIK** always tries to play nicely with the other editors.



The Playdate Hall of Shame

Still wiping tears or picking up broken toys? It could be worse...

"The other mom sent me home with her copy of The Strong-Willed Child."

—Meloney Moore Goodman, Evansville, IN

"The little girl snuck into the backyard and hid there for ten minutes while we turned the house upside down."

—Amber Rodelander, on Facebook

"My toddler son decided to poop in the flowerpot out front that looked a lot like his potty. He took care of business so fast, I couldn't do anything but let him finish!"

—Christy Lanier, Bowling Green, FL

"A mom freaked out because of my daughter's Barbie dolls. She went on about how bad they are and told me I should've put them away before I invited other people's kids over."

—Heather McKenzie Carter, Miamisburg, OH

"A little boy punched my son real hard several times in the face, and the mom didn't say a word."

—Rosana Richardson, on Facebook

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