

YOU'RE INVITED
TO THE PERFECT
PLAYDATE

Next Wednesday
2 pm to 4 pm

RSVP: Will's mom

No whining, no squabbles, no inappropriate toys. Here's how to host your kid's pals for a visit that's minimal muss and fuss and maximum fun.

BY KIM BATCLIFF

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If you're like most moms, your kid's playdates have become a major part of your social life—and hosting them can be a challenge. A few hours spent organizing games, serving snacks, and playing referee can test even the most mellow parent's nerves, so much so that you may sometimes wonder, "Is it worth the stress?" Yes! Playdates are great for kids—they're not only fun, they also teach valuable social skills.

"There are very few things more important for children between the ages of 2 and 5 than building relationships with kids the same age,"

says Parents advisor Sal Severe, Ph.D., author of *How to Behave So Your Preschooler Will, Too!* "They learn how to share, take turns, compromise, and make decisions. These are critical skills that will help prepare them for school."

So what can you do to help your next playdate run smoothly? For one, keep it short, particularly if you've invited a new friend or two. A good rule of thumb is one hour for 2- to 3-year-olds; one to two hours for 4- and 5-year-olds. "The longer kids are together, the more opportunity there is for conflict, and the better the chance that they'll wear you down," says Dr. Severe.

Second, don't expect to sit back and relax when you host a playdate. Your child's pals come with all sorts of temperaments—rowdy, demanding, whiny—and it's your job to keep them happy. Here, expert advice on how to handle eight common playdate personalities.



1 The Destroyer

THIS MINI WHIRLWIND blows in and dumps out every toy in the chest, plays with each for two minutes, then moves on to the bookshelf, the closet, and the dresser drawers.

SANITY SAVER: While your child may be excited by his friend's renegade behavior, chances are he's also a little uneasy, says Scott Brown, author of *How to Negotiate With Kids . . . Even When You Think You Shouldn't*. "Sit the kids down and explain the house rules: Say, 'No playing with new toys until you put the old ones away. No scream-



ing. No jumping on furniture.

I expect you to obey these rules. If you don't, you'll have to play outside.'"

Susan Gaines, a mom in Ormond Beach, Florida, runs playdates with military precision. "I set out the plan at the beginning and stick to it: 'At one o'clock we will play in the yard. Snacktime is at 1:45, then you'll sit down and do a craft,'" she says. "Wild kids need structure, or they'll trash your house."

2 The Picky Eater

YOU KNOW THE TYPE—this kid tells you she'll eat a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich only if it's extra chunky on sourdough with seedless raspberry jam and cut into T-Rex shapes.

SANITY SAVER: Give your finicky guest two choices—pasta with butter and Parmesan or a PB&J cut on the diagonal. If she refuses to eat, calmly offer her a drink of water or juice and let it go—she won't wither away if she skips lunch this once. Next time, ask her mom to pack a snack. What about the friend with a constant case of the munchies who spends more time rummaging through your refrigerator than actually playing with your child? Before the date, throw together a snack basket filled with Goldfish crackers, granola bars, and fruit. When she arrives, show her the stash and tell her she may choose one goody during her visit.

3 The Tattler

THIS KID REPORTS TO YOU EVERY TIME your child slights her in any way: "Sarah won't give me a turn on her scooter. Sarah ate all the pink animal cookies."

SANITY SAVER: Don't jump in and try to solve the problem for your child. "It's important for children to work through conflicts on their own," says Ken Rubin, Ph.D., director of the Center for Children, Relationships, and Culture at the University of Maryland, in College Park, and author of *The Friendship Factor*. "Help kids think through some strategies by asking them questions like 'What are the things you can say or do to get a turn on the scooter? What other toys can you play with?' Then send the kids off."

Anne Parsons, of Los Gatos, California, let her preschoolers take the law into their own hands. She made stop signs from red paper plates and Popsicle sticks. "If my daughter's guest is about to grab a toy, my daughter, Kate, can whip out the stop sign and say 'Stop!'" says Parsons. If that doesn't work, Parsons gives them Post-it "tickets" to stick on each other's shoes for good behavior. "This empowers kids to work things out for themselves," she says.

4 The Toy Hog

HE'S SALINTERS IN LIKE HE OWNS THE PLACE, hoards your child's favorite toys, and refuses to share. You've had to officiate so many times, you're beginning to feel like an NFL referee.

SANITY SAVER: "It's okay if your child doesn't want to share certain toys," says Dr. Severe. "Let him pick two or three things that are off-limits and put them away before the playdate. But tell him that if he takes them out during the visit, they're fair game." To diffuse sharing squabbles, put out toys that kids use together, such as blocks or Play-Doh. Another tip: Consider buying two of the same highly coveted toy or costume.

5 The Chatty Cathy

THIS FRIEND THINKS SHE'S HERE TO SPEND QUALITY TIME WITH YOU. "Mrs. Tanner—look at my somersault. Hey, Mrs. Tanner, did I tell you my third pet hamster died?" After you've given her your undivided attention for half an hour, you sneak away to clean up the kitchen and she starts calling, "Mrs. Tanner, where are you? Time for red light, green light!"

SANITY SAVER: "This child is simply craving adult attention," explains Dr. Severe. "You might say, 'I'm busy now. You need to play with Tommy,' or, 'Tell Tommy about your pet hamster instead.'" Suggest activities your child and his pal can bond over. Say: "Would you kids like to build a tower? I'll get out the blocks, and you two can play by yourselves." Some children just need to be helped along.

6 The Teen Wanna-Be

SHE HAS FOUR OLDER SIBS and is constantly exposed to age-inappropriate pop culture. Her favorite TV show is *The O.C.*, and she has a crush on Ashton Kutcher. You're terrified that after spending an afternoon with this precocious preschooler, your impressionable cherub will be more interested in Paris Hilton's belly-

button ring than in Dora the Explorer's backpack.

SANITY SAVER: Don't panic. "The best strategy is to divert their conversation into more age-appropriate topics and suggest a fun activity to get them moving," says David Elkind, Ph.D., author of *All Grown Up and No Place to Go*. Set up a karaoke contest with hairbrushes as microphones and tapes of your daughter's favorite tunes. Keep a dress-up box filled with thrift-store gowns, flea-market jewelry, and costume-shop wigs, and organize makeovers or stage a fashion show. If these ideas don't work, you may want to encourage your child to make friends with someone who isn't so precocious.

7 The Pint-Size Rambo

THIS KID ARRIVES PACKING A TOY PISTOL. He never leaves home without his Power Rangers, and he proceeds to bend your daughter's Barbie at the waist and—Bam! Bam!—use the doll as a submachine gun. What to do if you've declared your home a weapons-free zone?

SANITY SAVER: Use humor to get your no-gun message across. Set up a mock airport-security checkpoint at your front door. A lint brush makes the perfect scanner. Wave it over his body and say, "Sir, I'll have to ask you to leave your gun in this plastic bin for the duration of this playdate." If you know about Rambo's penchant for guns, you can also ask his parents not to let him bring weapons to the playdate. Come up with a fun superhero activity that doesn't involve weaponry. Break out the glitter and cardboard tubes and ask, "Can we make Red Ranger a special glowing red-light saber that he uses to help people?"

8 The Mom Who Won't Leave

THE ISSUE HERE ISN'T YOUR CHILD'S FRIEND, BUT RATHER HIS MOTHER. You assume that since the kids are a bit older, this is a "drop-off" playdate. But after you've invited his mom in for a few minutes of small talk and a quick tour of your house, she plants herself at your kitchen table and doesn't budge for the next two hours.

SANITY SAVER: Tactfully say, "I'll bet you have a ton of errands to run, and since the kids are playing so well, you're welcome to leave him with me and pick him up in a couple of hours." When you schedule the next playdate, suggest that since the kids don't need constant supervision, it might be nice to take turns. Tell her, "I'll watch them at my house this week, and next time, you can host the playdate. That way we can both get a little break." □

