

Play Dates — Learn During Play

Very young children often play side by side without actually playing with each other. Educators call it parallel play. It is a normal part of child development. As children get older, however, they must learn to play with other children. Learning to get along with others is just as important as learning to read and write.

Play dates can help pre-school children learn to interact in a small group. In fact, it is helpful to invite only one friend until your child learns some basic social skills. With a parent present, the children will learn how to play, share and have fun with others.

Plan a play date for your pre-school child.

- Let your child choose the friend.
- Limit the play time to 1 – 2 hours. Young children get bored, tired and cranky quickly.
- Ask the child's parent(s) to come for part or all of the time. You can chat while your kids play. This may be helpful for the visiting child. Children often feel insecure in new places. Parents make them feel at ease.
- Serve a snack about halfway through the play time. It is a nice break. Ask the parent if the visiting child has any food allergies or a favorite snack.
- Help the children learn to play together. Build something together with blocks. Set up a dollhouse, or make a road for cars and trucks.
- Do not let the kids watch TV or play on the computer. These activities do not help children learn social skills.



- Do not push the children to play together. It may take time for them to enjoy each other. That is OK. They still benefit from playing side by side.
- Hide your child's favorite toy, especially if you think he may not be able to share. Sharing is hard. Your child may not be ready at this time to share a favorite toy.
- Be prepared to step in and play if the children get bored, start crying or get cranky. It may be a good time to read a book. Small children are easily distracted.

You need to be near the children while they play. They will learn how get along and make choices from you. Give each of them plenty of praise for good behavior. Say things like, "Ellen, that was so nice that you shared the blocks with Jill." You will also need to be ready to settle disputes. Never allow children to hit each other or call each other names.

One play date rule is We will always respect each other. If one child hits another, use words to tell what you see. Find out what happened and help the children find a solution other than hitting. Briefly talk about what happened and how both children feel. For example, "John, I can't let you hit Bill. Look at how sad he looks because you hit him." Or, "John, I know that you want to play with the truck. Bill has the truck now. You can play with the fire-engine in a little while."

Children must learn at an early age how to get along well with others. Otherwise, they will have trouble making friends at school and in the neighborhood. Supervised play dates allow kids to learn and practice important life skills.

Call the Parent Help Line. We listen. We can find you help.
544-5808 or 1-888-727-5889 from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., 7 days a week.