



## The new playdate playbook

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If a video game seems questionable, check with the other parents before you say yes.

### Story highlights

Sending your child to another's house for a playdate is no worry-free experience

Aim for a balance of healthy foods and treats during playdates

Tell other parents if you're not comfortable with just Dad overseeing the sleepover

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, shooting hoops or playing a board game while Mom (natch), a homemaker (natch again), looked in from time to time, filling the snack bowl as needed.

Fast-forward to today: Your kids' playmates are as likely to show up with a BlackBerry as with their baseball-card collection, and you might be driven from the neighborhood if anyone finds out you served the kids chips instead of edamame.

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Sending your child to someone else's home isn't exactly a worry-free experience either. Is the mom (or dad, or the sitter... hey, who's home, anyway?) so focused on Facebook that your 9-year-old and her pal are using the oven unsupervised to make s'mores? Is your middle-schooler playing video games that belong to his pal's older brother -- or, geez, with a title like *Mortal Evil Uprising IV*, his parole officer? Be ready to navigate a few modern-day situations! Read on for the new rules to set you straight.

**The Sitch:** Your child's old enough to stay home briefly, and often does. But is it okay to leave her and her playmate home while you dash to the dry cleaner?

**The Solution:** Take the kids with you, or save your errand for another time, says Ava Parnass, a child and family psychotherapist in New York City. "The other parent expects you to be there and be in charge," she says. "You want to make sure that no one's feelings get too hurt if there's a squabble." There are also safety considerations -- among them, a pal might not be as familiar with your home's setup as your own child is.

Risa Miller\*, of Fanwood, New Jersey, is still feeling guilty because while she was in the backyard, her daughter's 9-year-old pal decided to microwave some mac and cheese. "She reassured my daughter that she cooked all the time at her home. But our microwave is higher up than at her house, so it's trickier to reach. The girl spilled hot pasta on her wrist and ended up with a burn that required three visits to the doctor."

**The Sitch:** Your daughter's playmate whips out her cell and starts texting other friends while your kid twiddles her thumbs.

**The Solution:** "Simply say 'Jane, since you're here on a playdate, you guys are going to play,'" recommends Tina Paone, Ph.D., a play therapist, mother of three, and founder of Counseling Center at Heritage, in Montgomeryville, Pennsylvania. As for complaining to the friend's mom later, "I wouldn't, if the child quickly put the phone away," says Lisa Gaché, founder of Beverly Hills Manners, in California. "But if it happens on her next visit, then at pickup, you could say to her mom, with a smile, 'Maybe next time the girls can find an activity that doesn't involve them being on the phone.'"

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**The Sitch:** You feel pressured to serve only ultra-healthy foods on playdates, even though your kid prefers potato chips.

**The Solution:** Aim for a balance, like Joan Schwartz\* of Scarsdale, New York, does when her 11-year-old daughter, Hannah, has a friend over. "I first put out something healthy, like cut-up fruit, and tell the girls they can have chips after they've finished that," she says. "The other mom will know I tried to get something nutritious in them, and sometimes the kids are so full after the healthy snack that they don't ask for anything else."

**The Sitch:** You've accepted a sleepover invite for your daughter, not realizing that only her pal's divorced dad will be home. You're not OK with it. What to do?

**The Solution:** "Call and say 'I'm sorry, and this is about me and not you, but I just don't feel comfortable with a man supervising an overnighter,'" says Paone. Offer to host the girls at your place instead, if you can, or ask to turn the sleepover into a "late-over," where your daughter stays only till bedtime. In the future, always ask who'll be on duty before you say yes to a sleepover.

**The Sitch:** You have strict TV limits at home. Is it OK to ask other parents not to allow the kids to veg out in front of the tube or video-game screen?

**The Solution:** Either turn down playdates at houses where the TV always seems to be on or -- more sensibly -- keep your lip zipped and let your child go. "If you make a request about the television, it will sound judgmental," says Paone. "Besides, it's not like you're sending your kid over there every day, and part of letting him grow up a little is releasing some control."

If you really object, rather than saying so outright, you can hint around, like Sandra Pierce\* of New York City does. "I'll say something beforehand to the mom about how nice it is outside and how my sons really love to play football in the yard," she confesses. Or offer to host at your place, as Phil Corwin of Bellmore, New York, does. "I can't dictate to other parents, but I can make them happy. Most parents are more than happy to dump their kid at your place." Well said, Dad!

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**The Sitch:** Your 12-year-old loves to play "Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare" on his Xbox. You're OK with it (you blasted plenty of "Space Invaders" as a tween) but you're nervous about letting his pals play, since it's rated Mature and contains violence. (Fun violence, but violence.)

**The Solution:** Find out if the guest has the game himself. If he does, problem solved. If not, ask what his family rules are and make your decision based on that. You can always edit your kid's video titles the night before the playdate. That way, your child won't lose face when Mom heeds her own Call of Duty and confiscates the game in front of his friend. Explain why you're doing it, so he (hopefully) understands.

**The Sitch:** You're a gay parent, but not everyone knows it. When someone asks about your wife or husband, will your answer cost your kid pals?

**The Solution:** Mitch\*, a Manhattan dad who has an 8-year-old son with his partner and runs the blog [gaynycdad.com](#), offers a humorous response: "I reply 'I am the wife!' The other parent can ask me more if she wants," he laughs. Of course, some gay parents prefer to be more circumspect. If your partner isn't around, you can just say "I don't have a wife" or "My partner is at work, yes," says Susan Callender, an etiquette expert at the Bean City Kids program at the Boston Center for Adult Education.

If your significant other will be home, though, advise the other parent in advance, she adds. Some families still 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 snubbing to do -- but as parents, they have that right. You may lose their friendship, but you and your child will be fine.

[Parenting: Most common discipline mistakes parents make](#)

**The Sitch:** A family has invited your child to go to a Justin Bieber concert with their kid. Should you pay for your kid's ticket?

**The Solution:** If you can, offer the money, says Gaché. "Do it with a big smile and say 'Thank you so much!' so they're not offended and think you're doing it because you're worried they can't afford it," she adds. They may insist they're treating, and that's fine. If things are tight at your house, send what you can and be sure to help your kid write a thank-you note later on. Try to host as soon as you can, too.

Sharon Webb of Palm Springs, Florida, told us on Facebook that when another mom treated her son to two Disney events in two days, she watched all her kids in return. We're sure her son's mom appreciated the reciprocity (and rest!).

[Parenting: When you can't stand your kid's friend](#)

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