



	
<h2>Piloting Playdates</h2>	
<h3>Parents at the helm!</h3>	<p>by dr. vanessa lapointe, r. psych, phd</p>

Teaching children to get along with others, resolve conflicts easily, pick up on social cues, and understand the complex dance of human interaction is important for many parents. Indeed, there has been an ever-increasing focus on socializing children at younger and younger ages. This has resulted in a culture that does not find it peculiar to host a group of two-year-olds for a birthday party, to insist four-year-olds should master the art of sharing, and to place a high value on time spent with “friends”.

Enter the modern playdate: a scheduled event lasting an hour or more, where parents supervise, and give shape to, activities that are meant to cultivate friendships and teach social skills and conflict resolution strategies.

Unfortunately, sometimes playdates go sour even with the most easy-going of children. Somebody is pushed, a toy isn't fairly shared, one child's interests don't match up with the other's, and the whole thing begins to get a little messy. Parents step in to remind kids of rules, insist on equal time with the favorite toy, or encourage a change in activity. This lasts for a little while and then it all goes sideways again, with parents stepping in once more to run interference. The children become increasingly disenchanted with each other and invariably somebody wants to go home early.

Sound familiar?

The motivations for the playdate appear rooted in the belief that parents have to get their children started on understanding the social world early so they don't lag behind. After all, what parent wants their child to be socially awkward or left-out? This is well-intentioned enough, but a closer look at what the science of child development has to say about all of this reveals some surprising information that may have you rethinking your vision of a playdate.

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THE MECHANICS OF THE PLAYDATE

Consider the following fundamentals as part of playdate planning.

The need for diverse social exposure

The human brain requires certain conditions to grow optimally. One of the most foundational of these is that it thrives when immersed in a relational world. That is, being in the presence of others is important. However, ensuring that this experience does not become too sanitized, rigid, or limited is key. I am reminded of a birthday party I once attended for a colleague's 11-year-old son. Unlike a typical kids' birthday party with a large group of same-aged children getting together, whole families, neighbors, and colleagues were invited. There were children of all ages, along with grown-ups, young and old. The kids loved it! A natural and diverse grouping of humans is more along the lines of what we were meant for, and is the kind of relational world that grows human brains in the best possible way.

The long road to self-regulation

Children were not meant to parent other children. When children struggle with big feelings and become dysregulated, nature has set it up so that the child's relationship with their special big people (parents, caregivers, teachers, etc.) is what provides the calming antidote. As the big people step in during these challenging moments to soothe the child, neuroplasticity allows for their brain to eventually figure out how to calm themselves and manage impulses. And yet, with our intense focus on socializing our children, we can sometimes push them into one another's arms at times when we should be pulling them into ours, and they miss out on the opportunity to develop those regulatory neural connections.

Managing the mix of conflicting ideas

Renowned psychologist Dr. Gordon Neufeld refers to the frontal and prefrontal cortex as the “mixing bowl” of the brain. It is where two seemingly opposite ideas can coexist for the purpose of allowing insight and impulse control. For example, the idea, “I really want to play with that toy,” alongside the idea, “If I steal it away from my friend she will be sad,” prompts the child to either come up with a sharing solution or ask an adult for help. And while the brain can begin to take on this kind of thought-mixing somewhere between five and seven years old, even then it is only at lower levels of intensity that the brain will be able to manage. When the thoughts become too emotionally charged – “It is my MOST favorite toy and I REALLY want it back!” – the mix will fall apart along with any self-control. For kids younger than age five, this is out of reach for them entirely, and it is up to the adults to manage it.

Ready (or not) to engage?

Social awareness as a thing does not even exist until about age three. One- and two-year-olds engage in what is called “parallel play” and aren't fully aware of each other's motives within the play situation. They have little to no understanding of complex social interactions, like turn-taking and sharing. Between three and four years of age, kids start to reference each other a lot more in their play and will begin to have some incipient understanding of each other's intentions and role in the play. Even still, they will require a lot of adult support to manage intensified interactions effectively.

If the conflict comes too often or feels too big, kids will quickly become overwhelmed and the interaction will no longer be enjoyable or manageable.

This doesn't have to mean the end of playdates! Rather, these concepts are meant to provide a solid foundation from which big people can work to create social play opportunities that are realistic for developmental stage, that nurture growth, and that keep conflict minimized and happiness maximized for everyone.

PLAYDATES THAT RUN SMOOTHLY

Keep your expectations realistic and set things up for success.

Allow for parallel play

Knowing that very young kids are scarcely aware of other children, altering expectations, and rethinking a playdate as a more structured, adult-designed event can make it more enjoyable for all. Maybe this is a time for you to enjoy coffee with your parent friend while regularly checking in on the kids playing separately, rather than thinking of it as a playdate, *per se*. Also be aware that your child's chronological age is not the only determinant of their developmental level. David Loyst, M. Sc. (SLP), an autism consultant, says when it comes to playdates, “it doesn't matter how tall your child is, it's how tall their brain is”. For kids with developmental exceptionalities or big life challenges, it may be a little longer before they are able to interact with other children on the same level as those in the same age group.

“Multi-age groupings allow for a natural social context in which kids can hone their interactional skills, including conflict resolution.”



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