



A Parent's Guide to Play Dating Wins

A Parenting Guide Brought to You By: The Hangout Spot, LLC.

Playdates. For families with typically developing children, playdates are not events parents stress over much because, for the most part, they come as naturally as blinking. Children are invited to other kids' houses, they reciprocate the invitation a few weeks later, and play just happens - naturally. However, there is another side to playdates- a side that is filled with fear, stress, and what-ifs. This is the experience often dreaded by families of children with social skills deficits. For these children, playdates are not easy or abundant, particularly if they engage in problem behaviors or other behaviors perceived to be "odd" by their peers. As a result, peers may avoid the child, excluding him or her from events and in some cases, saying or doing mean things. Discouraged parents witnessing their child's repeated social failures enter "protector mode." The common solution, chosen in an effort to safeguard the child, is to further socially isolate him or her for fear of continued social failure. So, instead of taking the child to that playground during busy hours, the parent opts to take him or her when it's empty or not at all. Parents experience fear of problem behaviors interfering, fear of being judged, and fear of exposing their child to more failure, thereby making the alternative of sheltering their child more appealing.

Playdates do not have to be that stressful. Just like anything else, playdates can get easier with practice, preparation, and consistency. Sounds simple when phrased this way, but it takes work and proactivity. Unlike typically developing children, children with social skills deficits require playdates with increased structure, oversight, and facilitation, especially in the beginning. If your child engages in problem behaviors that interfere with his or her ability to interact with others, the first step is to get help to stabilize, reduce, and replace those behaviors with more functional, safer ones. Seeking help from a Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) is a good place to start. A BCBA is a certified, independent practitioner providing behavior analytic services that focus on skill acquisition and problem behavior reduction. This professional can also help to structure and facilitate future playdate success, once dangerous behaviors are reduced. But, what if you can't access a Behavior Analyst for some reason? Does this mean that you can't help your child and that all hope is lost?

No. Absolutely not. Below we've detailed ten steps for playdate success:

1. Keep it short. Less is more! Instead of focusing on the length of the playdate, focus on the quality. Remember, if your child has experienced social failure in the past, it's better to schedule a shorter "get together" that is successful, rather than a longer one that is not. Pay attention to the amount of time your child can be around peers without detrimental problem behavior occurring. If you aren't sure how or what the "just right" amount of time is, request this information from your school, or pay close attention to the natural environment- during recess, playtime, around young family members, or

even at the local playground. Select a timeframe for the playdate that is just below the behavioral threshold. If your child can only handle being around other kids for forty minutes, schedule a playdate for thirty minutes. This duration can be increased as your child demonstrates repeated successes over time.

2. *Limit the number of children.* With each child that is added to a playgroup come additional social nuances that must be interpreted and responded to. The complexity of group interactions increases very quickly and can become overwhelming for a child who is still learning social skills. Start by inviting just one friend to attend playdates until the experience is successful for both participants several times in a row. Then, systematically add one peer to the group at a time, teaching your child the skills he or she needs to navigate the larger social setting along the way.
3. *The more structure, the better.* Underscore structure. If your child engages in problem behaviors when he or she has to wait or has nothing to do, a playdate without structure is destined to fail. Identifying an activity with a defined sequence of events will keep your child busy and increase the likelihood of playdate success. For kids who struggle with sharing, structure the playdate around an activity in which each child has his or her own items but is doing the same thing, for example a craft activity. Both children can sit at a table together, allowing for plenty of social interactions, but the demand of sharing is virtually nonexistent. Ahead of the playdate, be sure to gather information about the playdate partner. What does he or she like? What does he or she dislike? Does he or she have any allergies? Information gathering will help identify common interests (or disinterests) the children may share, thus allowing you to structure playdate success.
4. *Avoid activities that focus on conversation.* Your child does not need to be talking throughout the duration of the playdate to have fun. Yes, some language is important, but playdates that are activity, game, or play-based take the stress off of language, increasing the likelihood of success, particularly if conversation is not yet your child's strong point.
5. *Skip the winning and losing.* If your child has not yet mastered the art of graceful losing, don't fret. Plenty of playdate activities avoid winners and losers, thus eliminating the competitive contingencies that can sometimes create conflicts. Instead of video games, sports, or board games, consider an activity like arts and crafts or building blocks.
6. *Practice unfamiliar activities.* Once you've identified some common interests and activities the children will participate in during the playdate, practice! Simulate the experience from start to finish with your child before the playdate happens. Review the rules, model expected behavior, roleplay the activity, and praise success! Most importantly, make it fun! The more practice your child gets before the actual playdate, the more fluent and natural it will be.

7. *Put “hard to share” items away before the playdate starts.* Sharing is hard. And, sharing our most favorite toys is even harder. To minimize the risk that problem behaviors will occur when a playmate attempts to share a favorite toy, allow your child plenty of time to play with that toy before the playdate starts- enough time that your child begins to lose interest. Then, proactively store these items in a different playspace, so they are out of sight and out of mind. If your child has a case of “mine” syndrome and is possessive of everything in the house when another child is near, then consider meeting in a more neutral location, such as the park or library.
8. *Set up a schedule and warn before each transition.* Of course, the schedule should be individualized to ensure successful interactions, but as a rule of thumb, we suggest starting with time for the playmate to play his or her game for a designated period of time, which you will have already practiced with your child. Then, transition to playing your child’s selected game for the same period of time. Follow playtime with a preferred snack and, if your child has developed cooperative play skills, end with a collaborative project. Give the children forewarning before each transition. You may even consider using a timer as visual support.
9. *Provide parent support.* You’ve gotten this far, but your work is far from over. It’s not enough to just set up a playdate for the ideal length of time around a structured activity. Chances are your child will need some additional facilitation and support during the actual playdate. Don’t leave the children alone to navigate play independently. Instead, supervise from close proximity, observing closely for signs that social interactions are breaking down. Be prepared to jump in as soon as a conflict is brewing to prompt appropriate behaviors and support accordingly.
10. *Provide feedback when play is done.* When all of the children have left, take the time to reflect with your child. Provide specific praise on what your child did well. Did he offer toys to the friend? Did she give a compliment? Did he stay in the play area? Identify one skill that needs improvement and provide feedback on what your child could do differently next time. Before the next playdate, role play through similar scenarios, sabotage the natural environment to create opportunities for practice, and praise your child whenever he or she demonstrates this skill in the future!

Now that the steps are broken down, hopefully mission playdate is no longer mission impossible. Will it take planning, practice, and persistence? Absolutely! The most important thing to remember, however, is that the obstacles along the way are learning opportunities, both for you and your child. Not experiencing them at all and giving up on trying is the most detrimental barrier for your social learner because without social opportunity, social learning cannot happen. You can learn all the social rules and memorize many scripts for interactions, but these strategies will rarely prepare a social learner to navigate social nuances in the real world. True mastery can only be achieved through repeated exposure, practice, and teaching

actual social opportunities. When social opportunities are not falling in your child's lap, work to create them.

About the Authors

Justyna Balzar, M.Ed. BCBA LBA (CT) and Meghan Cave, M.Ed. BCBA LBA (CT) are the Co-Founders and Chief Executive Officers of The Hangout Spot, LLC, coming soon to Fairfield County as Connecticut's first center using the **fundamentals** of science to foster social smarts by providing instruction in a safe, fun, inclusive "home away from home" environment. The Hangout Spot is a behavior analytic social skills development center where we believe that all children have a right to meaningful relationships with others. We strive to eliminate barriers to friendship and empower children to be socially successful across the lifespan using the principles of Applied Behavior Analysis. Everything we do is rooted in research, empirically validated, and proven to work. We conceptualize critical, previously considered "tricky to teach" skills through a scientific framework. In doing so, we achieve socially significant change for our clients, by providing the support they need to develop real connections with other people beyond our walls.

To learn more and follow our grand opening, visit www.thehangoutspotllc.com, and connect with us on Facebook or Instagram @thehangoutspotllc.