

## Mix it up

Multi-age groupings allow for a natural social context in which kids can hone their interactional skills, including conflict resolution. Older kids can keep an eye out for, and model social skills to, younger kids. They are also able to accommodate and flex to younger kids a bit more, which can allow for social interactions to flow more smoothly, with fewer hurt feelings. This creates a natural “zone of proximal development”, a term coined by psychologist and researcher Lev Vygotsky, to demonstrate what level of learning kids are capable of stretching into when provided a little external support and guidance.

## Know your child’s temperament

Not all children really love the experience of hanging around other kids. My older son loved playdates and my younger son was much happier to play by himself. Children who are sensitive will more easily be flooded out by perceived intensity in the social experience, whereas kids who are easygoing are likely to get more joy out of social situations. The higher the level of sensitivity, the more the child might struggle to settle in to a playdate, want to end it prematurely, or have difficulty managing big emotions or behaviour. Rather than stress them in such circumstances unnecessarily, it would be better to keep playdates to a minimum, provide lots of interaction with you, and when playdates are planned, really tailor them to the inclinations of the particular child.

## Keep it short and sweet

It’s always better to end things on a good note, rather than to make a panicked or frustrated exit. When planning for a playdate, think about your child’s energy level in terms of what they are typically able to cope with. Have they already had a long day at school? Are they a bit run down? Has it been an especially busy week? In these cases, keeping a playdate shorter is advisable. Also, if your child is very young, sensitive, or has more demanding developmental needs, shorter will also be better. Try starting with a one-hour playdate, and gradually extend once you get a sense of what your child can manage. The ups and downs of social dynamics are to be expected. That your child will always have the reserves to cope with them is not. Plan accordingly.

## Put away special toys

Since sharing isn’t often a thing brains younger than age five can handle, planning for a successful playdate includes allowing your child to have certain toys or belongings that are very dear to them as off-limits to playmates. Even older children might be unable to hang onto their emotions if things get too intense around a favorite item. Rather than tempt fate and have things become especially challenging, just side-step this altogether and put those special items away before the playdate begins.

## Be fully present

For children under three, you will have to be very involved in the play for things to go well. Expect to be on the floor, and alongside, as these little playmates get their feet wet in the world of social interaction. As they age, you will find that they will begin to manage on their own, but they will always love your involvement in some form and to some degree. Your younger kids might like you to play a game with them or provide ideas for activities. Older kids might want you to be on hand for a drive, or to make them a snack. My

10-year-old son and his friends often want to show me something they have built and even my 14-year-old son still wants a little bit of mom-time around his friends, and I am happy to be available.

## Be your child’s brain. For now

While the brain is still growing and developing, it is not reasonable to expect it to behave in the same way a mature brain would. The rules of adult social interactions do not apply to what our children should be expected to manage. The best way to show the brain how to engage socially is to give it repeated safe experiences through parental modeling, and initiating and supporting conflict management. This is to say that conflict resolution during a playdate is actually an *adult* responsibility, not a children’s one. Until the brain is fully grown and can manage all of the intricacies of social interaction, you need to be the mature brain upon which your child can rely.

## Make clear rules

As little brains work their way towards the level of maturation required to be capable of self-control, the best way to set up playdates for minimal conflict is to provide boundaries and limits. Set up the rules of sharing at the start and back those up during the playdate. Come up with (and explain) little catch phrases that you can easily pepper into the situation as required. *Good listening, kindness and respect, or sharing is caring* are all great examples that give kids the opportunity to take a breath and attempt to solve whatever the challenge of the moment is.

## No shaming and blaming

If things do get challenging during a playdate, there is absolutely no place for disparaging comments or accusation. The child is acting and behaving in this situation exactly as they *need* to due to the combination of the challenges of the moment and their developmental level. Period. As adults, we accept responsibility and step in to show the child a better way of resolving issues by saying things like: “I can see this is really hard right now – I am here and I will help you sort it out”, “It sounds to me like this isn’t working out. That’s no problem, I know exactly how to solve this”, or “It looks like you are having a hard time. I just finished making you a super yum snack so let’s move on from this game.” In each case, the adult models conflict resolution by taking the lead, directing the situation, and by coming up with an outcome that is fair for everybody. Adults also provide structure, not punishment, by setting limits (“this needs to stop” or “those are not words we use”), and by shortening and limiting the frequency of future playdates (not as a consequence but as something that you know works better for your child). The children’s only job is to observe the adult making it happen, to experience what outcome this leads to, and in that experience, to be regulated emotionally so they might be able to navigate tricky social situations down the road on their own.

Take heart and know that playdates don’t need to be the be-all-end-all of your child’s social existence. Regular life offers many experiences that meet your child’s social needs, but happy playdates are possible if you are present, ready to intervene, and structure events for success. The most important relationship your child will have, until they emerge into adulthood, is the one they have with you. Time with you will always take precedence over time with friends, and it is in the moments of capable modelling, social experiences, and the boundless love you share with your child that will teach her the most important life lessons about human interaction. •