



# Perfecting the Play Date

TIPS AND TRICKS FOR A FUN PLAY DATE AT ANY AGE

By Jane Thomas

When did the “play date” pop onto the scene? My kids are entering the pre-teen phase and since they were babies I have been hosting, attending and coordinating play dates. When I was a kid I remember play dates consisting of riding bikes and roaming the streets with neighbors, there wasn’t such a coordinated affair with crafts, snacks and planned activities. These days a play date can run the gamut from a casual gathering to a fully coordinated day, over the years I’ve learned that some play dates require more effort than others depending on the age of the kids, reason for the play date and what you are trying to accomplish. I’ve compiled some helpful tips for hosting a successful gathering based on my experience over the past years that has included some really great play dates as well as some really bad ones too!

## The Toddler Play Date

Kids under the age of three don’t really know how to play together so when you get friends together at this age it is typically for two reasons, the moms want to hang out or you are babysitting. At this stage you may luck out with a group of happy go-lucky toddlers that all like to share toys and take turns but in most cases when you have more than a couple of toddlers together be prepared for the good and the bad.

### Location, Location, Location

This is a key factor for a successful play date. Pick a good spot. If you are inviting kids to your home be sure to set the ground rules, depending on the age you may want to use



gates to lock off certain rooms, if the kids are older make sure they know where they are allowed to tread (the play room) and where they are to stay out (your bedroom).

If you have more than three kids you may want to pick a neutral meeting spot like the park, beach, community pool or an activity-based place like Scooter's Jungle, Pump It Up or Jumpin Jammin.

### Timing

If you are coordinating little kids, an important rule of thumb is to respect the nap time.

### Know When to Be Involved and When to Give Space

You'll find with kids at this age that some interact fabulously together while others prefer to play independently. There is a certain balance when you are observing these play dates of when to give space and when it's time to get involved. It's a great idea to have some kind of painting exercise or holiday related craft ready to do when the kids get antsy.

## Elementary Aged

During these years kids are making friends based on who they click with and on their own terms. Still they are young enough that they need their parents to coordinate activities for them. It is a time when kids start making real friendships based on common interests and personalities. The early years of elementary school, before the homework is so daunting and extracurricular activities dominate, is the perfect time to help your child enjoy their new friendships.



## Middle & High School Years

### BEYOND THE PLAY DATE YEARS

At this point you are likely reminiscing about the early days and now you probably wish your kids wanted to spend more time at home with family than out and about with their friends. One of the best ways you as a parent can be part of your kids' lives is to make your house *the place to be*. If your child feels comfortable bringing friends over you will be able to keep an eye on what they are doing.

### Tips for a "fun" house!

- Have a stocked pantry – teens love to eat. Have a dedicated area for snacks and treats for your kids and their friends.
- Create a teen hangout. Convert an extra room into a comfortable and not too perfect place to lounge. Pull together an oversized tv, big sofa, pool or ping pong table and plenty of snacks
- Make sure everyone understands your house rules – kids shouldn't abuse the privilege of hanging out in your home.



## Make a Play Date Fun

### KEEP THESE ITEMS ON HAND

- **Crafts** – Hit Michael's to stock up on seasonal crafts.
- **Bubbles** – don't underestimate the joy of blowing bubbles!
- **Art supplies** – kids love to finger paint, color and draw.
- **Sidewalk chalk** – this is a great source of entertainment for kids of all ages.

