

ONE-ON-ONE PLAYDATES

by Marsha Parrish

I am the mother of a 9 year old boy with Asperger's Syndrome. I have very simple goals in life for my son-for him to be happy, have friends, and a job he enjoys. I believe that these goals can only be attained by his having adequate social skills. Unfortunately, our children have a deficit in this area. I frequently say to friends "social skills are my #1 priority for my son- the "cognitive stuff" can always be taught. How often do we use calculus in our daily lives"? I have made this a top priority, and I have come to realize over the years that play dates have helped my son greatly improve his social skills and assisted him in making and keeping friends.

In the 1990's a social skills study was conducted at UCLA by Dr. Fred Frankel. The most important finding was that one-on-one play dates are the best way to build close friendships. A one-on-one play date is when your child invites only one guest over and plays with him/her in private. These play dates are the only time when children can get to know each other intimately without interruption. They also help your child maintain a continuing relationship with friends. One-on-one play dates have been shown to enhance self-esteem and make your child feel special. Your child is able to see that another child wants to play with him/her exclusively.

I have practiced this one-on-one play date theory over the past 4 years, and after much trial and error, I can provide the following tips from my experience:

- **HAVE LOTS OF PLAYDATES.**

I know it's time consuming, but studies have shown if you are able to schedule, on average, one play date every week for your child, tremendous improvement in social skills will occur.

- **MAKE YOUR HOUSE THE "FUN" HOUSE IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD.**

Buy the best games, snacks and toys. Is this bribery? Yes-but for a noble cause. I am on a mission to help my child have friends. I also tell myself that this is actually "behavioral". My son can be difficult to play with, he has difficulty losing, he usually wants to do very specific types of make-believe play, and sometimes he "melts down". If other children are being asked to put up with his behavior, external incentives are needed at my house. "

At a social skills seminar I recently attended, quite a few parents of children with social skills difficulties mentioned that they had purchased trampolines, and although they require a great deal of parental supervision, children love this activity. The parents reported that the trampoline worked to "lure" the neighborhood kids to our house. One parent even placed it in the front yard, where it became a "kid magnet" (this particular trampoline was apparently a slightly smaller one which was only three feet off the ground).

- **"SCOPE OUT" THE BEST CHILDREN IN YOUR CHILD'S CLASS FOR PLAY DATES**

Visit your child's classroom or volunteer for class parties in order to determine which children would make good playmates. There are always at least a couple of children in each class who have particularly tolerant personalities. Also choose children with the same interests as your child, i.e., dinosaurs, space, animals, etc.

There are a few children I consider my favorites, and I invite them over regularly, I have made my share of mistakes in choosing playmates, but keep trying: Invite a few new children every couple of months.

- IF POSSIBLE, "SHIP" THE SIBLINGS TO A FRIEND'S HOUSE FOR A COUPLE OF HOURS.

I am very lucky in this regard, as my son is an only child. Your goal is to have a one-on-one play date, and that is only possible without interference from siblings. Also, many parents have told me that the playmate ends up playing with the sibling, even if the sibling is older or younger, because the sibling is much easier to play with. This will also allow you to better monitor the play date.

- START WITH A SEMI-STRUCTURED ACTIVITY AND THEN LET THE CHILDREN DECIDE WHAT TO DO.

One of my favorite activities with which to start a play date is Play Dough. We have a "center island" in our kitchen, and I have lots of colors of Play Dough set out and ready to go, and a couple of the Play Dough kits handy. My son and I practice greeting the guest at the door and inviting them to play the first activity. Most children like Play Dough (or some craft activity), and the initial transition is smoothed. Also, a table or a center island allows the children to stand up while still playing in one spot, and this provides a great opportunity for conversation. The children can also converse while working on their project, and they don't have to have much eye contact while talking. Eye contact is difficult for my son, especially with people who are not family members. This helps disguise his poor eye contact.

- "HOVER" IN THE BACKGROUND, AND THEN STEP IN WHEN NECESSARY. Try to let your child do as much as possible by him/herself in the way of conversation and play. When you detect a disagreement, stand back for a couple of seconds and see if they can resolve it themselves. If not, step in as unobtrusively as possible, whisper a quick cue to your child, and disappear into the background again as soon as possible. If you see a true "meltdown", discuss the consequences ahead of time with your child, and enforce it.
- REHEARSE THE "RULES OF A PLAY DATE" AHEAD OF TIME.

These rules can be any reminders that are particularly applicable to your child, however, I use the rules outlined in Good Friends are Hard to Find just prior to the guest arriving:

- The guest is always right.

If there is an argument, such as the rules of a game, the guest is always right. This means that you will never have to get to the bottom of an argument, and that your child will learn that a good host bends over backwards to make a guest feel welcome. A good host puts his guest's wishes ahead of his own. Remember, your child has been warned about this ahead of time! (Obviously an exception would be if the guest has physically hurt your child or the guest does not obey you).

- If your child is bored, he/she suggests a change in an activity.

Rehearse ahead of time ways to suggest an activity change. An example might be, "Can we play ----- when it's my turn again?, or "can we play this for five more minutes and then play -----?". If your child is able to say this, (and remember you heard it because you are hovering in the background), be ready with the timer to help your child with the latter suggestion.

- Don't criticize the guest.

Explain that being polite will get your child what he/she wants without hurting the guest's feelings.

- Don't leave the guest alone for more than a few minutes.

If the guest wants to see your child's room, make it clear that your child will go up to the room with him/her, even if it means stopping an activity your child is presently engaged in.

- TRY TO GET THE GUEST'S PARENT TO DROP OFF AT YOUR HOUSE, SO YOU TAKE THE GUEST HOME.

This gives you control over a finite end to the play date. As we all know, things can deteriorate rapidly. I made the mistake once of having the other parent pick up the guest and they were 20 minutes late. Unfortunately this was 20 minutes too long, and during that time a great play date took a turn for the worse because of my son's "meltdown". If I had taken the guest home I could have foreseen that my son was getting tired and cranky, and ended the play date on a positive note.

- GET YOUR CHILD INTO A FORMAL SOCIAL SKILLS GROUP AND KEEP HIM/HER THERE.

I know this is not specific play date advice, however, this is where your child is going to learn many of the skills that can be practiced in your home during a play date. Social skills are very difficult to teach, so find an experienced social skills group teacher, and attend regularly. A seven-week social skills course is unfortunately not going to accomplish this. My son has been going to a social skills group almost weekly for 1.5 years, and the progress has been slow and steady. These are difficult skills for our children to learn and they take time. I envision that my son will need formal social skills training for years, and he may always need a professional with which to consult regarding these matters throughout his life.

Teaching my child to find and keep friends is the most important gift I can give him in life. I hope that he is able to live a life filled with friends.