



Everyone wants an invite!

The Fun House

Why you want your home to be a friend magnet and how to make it happen. BY CHERYL LOCK

Every neighborhood has one: the home that all the kids appear to magically gravitate toward. Chances are it's not the biggest, the fanciest, or even the one with the spendy swingset in the backyard. If you ask your child what the huge draw is, she probably won't give you a numbered list of amenities. Though there may be times that you've done a silent fist-pumping "yes!" over the fact that your house isn't the chosen one, you secretly wish it were. And with good reason: Experts agree that being the hangout haven has huge benefits for your child and for your relationship with her. "As

your kid gets older and spends more time away from you, it's increasingly important for you to make an effort to really get to know her friends," says child and family psychotherapist Ava Parnass, coauthor of *My Feelings Are Hungry*. If your home is the place where the gang chooses to congregate, it gives you the chance to view your child in a social setting and to see different sides of her personality. "It also allows you to get an idea of how she interacts with other kids so you can help her manage social and emotional issues now and going forward," says Parnass. Not only do you get extra insight but also added credibility in

everything from the dispensing of rules to the serving up of advice.

So how do you make your house the place to hang? Roll out the welcome mat by making it clear to your child and her friends (and their moms) that you are happy to play hostess. Then check out these easy ways to be playdate bait.

The Just-Right Amount of Rules

Though 6-year-olds can, if left to their own devices, create epic chaos, kids thrive (and actually have more fun) when things are calm. So make a few clear,

The Must-Have List

You're not running a youth center, but if you keep these ultimate playdate essentials on hand you'll maximize the fun.

Extra sheets, blankets, and pillows for fort and hideaway building

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Puzzles and games with the pieces intact—it's a huge bummer when everyone agrees to play Monopoly and the money's gone missing

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Crafting supplies such as paper tubes and cereal boxes, crayons, markers, stickers, glitter glue, and blank paper

unbreakable house rules that everyone is aware of in advance. "Your child and his friends will be more comfortable if they know ahead of time what the guidelines are," says Stevanne Auerbach, Ph.D., author of *Dr. Toy's Smart Play, Smart Toys*. "Knowing exactly what's expected in an unfamiliar setting allows everyone to relax and have more fun," says Dr. Auerbach. But don't make it up as you go along. Every so often, create a do's and don'ts list with your child, being sure to include his thoughts and suggestions. Then count on him to help lead the others. When you overhear him reminding friends, "We can't start a new game unless we clean up this one," you'll know you've done a good job of instilling rather than dictating.

The "Being There" Balance

Nobody likes a hoverer, but you don't want to be an invisible mom either. While the kids are engaged in a heated game of Clue Jr., you don't need to hang out and give running commentary from the sidelines. Just make a point of spending some time joining the fun. Being a diner at the "restaurant," in the audience for a puppet show, or the goalie in a backyard soccer game will give the kids an opportunity to feel comfortable around you and get you a front-row seat for all the interpersonal dynamics. Don't wait to be asked. If you notice that things have gone south (shoving, bickering, and tattling are telltale signs), jump in with a positive suggestion that moves the play forward instead of a comment that involves admonishing the kids to get along better or pipe down.

The Amazing Activity Area

A great playroom isn't about real estate; it's a state of mind. You need space where the fun can unfold. "Unstructured play should be messy, creative, and free,"

says Dr. Auerbach. “Designate an area where the good stuff—art supplies, board games, books, and Legos—are easy to get to and just as easy to put away, then create a set of expectations that doesn’t get in the way of a good time.” Try to control your inner neat freak: It’s really not going to hurt the pillows from the bedroom if they spend the afternoon in the den. A good policy is to have the kids clean one room before moving on to the next; that way the clutter is always confined to the space they’re occupying.

The Outdoor Opportunities

Make your garage and backyard part of the fun circuit. Collect great gear—a dozen hula hoops that you’ve snagged at garage sales could be used for anything from a circus performance to an obstacle course. Having buckets of balls, safety cones, used tennis and badminton racquets along with a pop-up tent or two may make your house more popular than the one with the landscaping and the pool. The point is to keep things easy, safe, and multipurpose. Every so often check your outdoor space from a safety point of view. Be on the lookout for the usual suspects—lawn mowers and pools that aren’t fenced off—but also be aware of

hidden hazards, like harmful garden plants or chemicals or outdoor grill appliances that can be hard or sharp.

The Super Snack

Awesome grub that’s healthy and easy is part of the full-service playdate. Nobody has ever shunned a household for serving nutritious, fresh food, so stay away from the highly processed packaged treats. But keep it simple: A lot of kids are skittish about eating the unfamiliar—just because yours loves spinach doesn’t mean his buddy will be able to take a bite without gagging. Little guests haven’t developed the social skills to refuse what you’re offering without feeling awkward. Follow the cruise-ship model: Put out a spread. A platter filled with healthy eats (sliced apples, cheese cubes, pitas, and carrot sticks, along with a dip) will offer something for everyone and dial down the awkwardness factor.

If you really want to get five stars from the kid critics, then bake with them, suggests mom and food network star Ellie Krieger, author of *So Easy: Luscious Healthy Recipes for Every Meal of the Week*. Sending your guest home with a slice of delicious banana bread she helped bake will be a huge hit—and a natural, unforced way for you to stay in the mix. □



At what age do kids start taking their own bath? What about taking a shower? Is an 8-year-old too young? And how do I get started?

Actually, this is the perfect age. “Your 8-year-old needs a bit more independence and more privacy. If you can help him get both, it will make him feel good about himself,” says Julie A. Ross, author of *How to Hug a Porcupine: Negotiating the Prickly Points of the Tween Years*. To suggest the idea, Ross offers this little script: “I’ve been thinking about how grown-up you’ve become, and I wonder if you’d like me to show you how to run a bath or a shower.” Set some rules (never leave the room when the tub is filling). Then demonstrate how to manage the hot and cold taps (always turn hot water off first). Finally, stand back and let him take the plunge.