



SERIES 1 · CONNECTION, SAFETY, AND BELONGING

Expanding the Circle

How adults can prepare accessible peer activities, coach manageable conflict, follow children's signals, and intervene when protection is needed.

CONNECTED CAREGIVER

Series 1 - Connection, Safety, and Belonging | 20-22 minutes

ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

Resources for Caregivers publications provide general educational and informational material informed by research, professional literature, and caregiving practice. Every child, caregiver, family, and situation is different. The ideas are intended to support awareness, reflection, learning, and informed decision-making; they are not a substitute for individualized medical, developmental, mental-health, educational, therapeutic, legal, financial, or other professional advice.

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AT A GLANCE

Estimated reading time: 20-22 minutes

Central idea: A playdate or shared activity gives children a place to try relationship skills with peers. Adults support that practice by planning for safety and access, following the children's signals, coaching manageable problems, and intervening directly when protection is needed.

In this publication, you will explore how to:

- 1 Prepare for shared play without scripting every interaction.
- 2 Build an inclusive Friendship Toolbox for communication, boundaries, regulation, help, and repair.
- 3 Choose among protection, structure, coaching, and observation during play.
- 4 Reflect afterward without grading the friendship or interrogating the child.

This publication includes small actions and questions for reflection.

PLAYDATE SAFETY COMES BEFORE SOCIAL PRACTICE

Before children meet, the responsible adults should agree on supervision, location, start and end times, transportation, who will be present, how to reach one another, bathroom and privacy expectations, food and medical needs, allergies, pets, media, outdoor access, and any activity-specific risks. Ask directly about firearms and other weapons, pools or open water, trampolines, medications, cannabis, alcohol, tools, and other hazards. Firearms should be unloaded and locked, with ammunition locked separately; if storage or any other condition is not safe, meet elsewhere or decline. A child should know how to reach a trusted adult and may ask to leave without first managing a social problem.

Prepare the People and the Place

Children begin learning about relationships at home. They experience listening, comfort, respect, boundaries, guidance, and repair before carrying those ideas into a wider social world.

Peers create a different kind of relationship. They are not responsible for parenting one another or meeting one another's needs. They bring their own preferences, cultures, communication styles, abilities, energy, emotions, and ideas.

During shared play, two children may want the same object. They may imagine different games, disagree about rules, need different levels of noise or movement, or misunderstand one another.

None of this automatically means that a child lacks social skills or that a friendship is failing. It means that two real people are trying to share time and space.

The adult's role is not simply to step back. It is to create safe conditions, understand each child's needs, and use the least intrusive support that fits the moment.

Big Idea: Friendship Makes Room for Difference

Healthy friendship does not require people to agree, enjoy the same activities, communicate in the same way, or solve every problem together.

It can involve learning to express an idea without controlling the game, hear another person's preference, invite without pressuring, and join, watch, or decline. Children may also practice taking turns when that fits, using materials side by side, changing a plan, choosing separate activities, asking for help, respecting boundaries, and repairing harm when possible.

Some disagreements can strengthen understanding. Others simply show that people want different things. A friendship can survive separate play, disappointment, a pause, or an ending.

Flexibility is useful, but it must be mutual. It does not mean one child should always yield, tolerate discomfort, mask a need, accept unwanted touch, share every possession, or remain in an interaction to prove resilience.

A Playdate Is an Invitation, Not a Milestone

Not every child wants a traditional playdate, and not every family can host one. Transportation, schedules, housing, cost, disability access, language, health, culture, and community safety can shape what is possible.

Shared time might instead be a short caregiver-attended visit, a meeting at an accessible park or library, a structured class, or parallel creative work. It might involve an appropriately supervised online activity, time with a cousin or mixed-age family group, or repeated brief contact in a familiar setting.

Some children prefer one person at a time. Others enjoy groups, need a predictable activity, want an adult close by, or require time to become comfortable. Solitary play can also be healthy and satisfying.

A playdate is one possible setting for connection - not a test, requirement, or measure of popularity.

Adults Prepare First

Before asking children to manage social differences, adults should manage the practical responsibilities.

Talk with the other caregiver about:

- who will supervise and which other adults, siblings, or visitors will be present;
- where the children may play and which areas are off-limits;
- whether the gathering is caregiver-attended or a drop-off;
- start time, end time, transportation, and late-arrival or pickup plans;
- phone numbers and how a child can contact their caregiver;
- allergies, food restrictions, medications, health conditions, access needs, and emergency plans;
- pets and the child's comfort and safety around them;
- pools, water, trampolines, wheeled activities, outdoor spaces, and traffic;
- firearms, weapons, substances, medicines, tools, and secure storage;
- screen, internet, photography, gaming, and device expectations; and
- bathroom, changing, closed-door, and privacy rules.

Share relevant information without disclosing more of the child's private medical or personal history than the host needs to provide safe care.

If a child is not ready for a drop-off - or a caregiver does not have enough information to feel comfortable - stay, meet in a public setting, shorten the visit, or choose another plan. Politeness never requires accepting an unsafe arrangement.

Prepare the Environment

A small amount of environmental planning can prevent avoidable conflict without controlling the play.

The host family might:

- put away fragile, private, unsafe, or especially treasured items;
- explain which possessions are not shared before the guest arrives;
- offer a few open-ended, age-appropriate activities;
- create a quiet or lower-stimulation option;
- make water, bathroom access, seating, and communication supports clear;
- remove choking, strangulation, poisoning, fall, burn, and other hazards;
- supervise pets and separate them when needed; and
- plan a visible transition toward the end.

No child should be required to share every personal object. Put unavailable items away and make shared materials clear. This is easier than asking a child to defend a treasured possession repeatedly.

Avoid planning every minute. A familiar starting activity can reduce uncertainty while leaving room for the children to choose what happens next.

Prepare with the Child

Keep the conversation brief and collaborative. Instead of reviewing a long list of rules, ask what would help the child feel ready.

You might wonder together:

- “What are you looking forward to?”
- “Is anything making you unsure?”
- “Would you like an activity ready when your friend arrives?”
- “Are there belongings you want to put away?”
- “How will you tell me if you need help, quiet, food, or a break?”
- “What could you do if you want different games?”
- “How will you know when the visit is nearly over?”

Do not make the child responsible for the guest's happiness. A host can be welcoming without surrendering every preference or playing continuously.

For a visit elsewhere, establish a simple contact or exit plan. The child might use a word, text, gesture, or call that means “Please check in” or “I want to leave.” Do not require a detailed explanation before responding.

Revisit Familiar Tools Inclusively

Playful images such as listening ears, noticing eyes, helping hands, a calm body, kind words, and a wondering mind may be memorable for some children. Relationship skills, however, do not depend on hearing, seeing, speaking, using hands, or making the body appear calm.

Translate the toolbox into actions that fit the child:

- **Receive:** Attend to another person's message through words, signs, gestures, a device, demonstration, or behavior.
- **Notice:** Look for signals and context without assuming what they mean.
- **Ask:** Check a preference, meaning, or boundary.
- **Communicate:** Share an idea, need, limit, or feeling in an accessible way.
- **Regulate:** Use movement, quiet, sensory support, co-regulation, or a break.
- **Help:** Offer assistance and wait for consent when possible.
- **Get help:** Bring in a trusted adult when a problem is unsafe, repeated, confusing, or too hard.
- **Repair:** Attend to impact and take an appropriate action after harm.
- **Choose space:** Pause, play separately, or end the interaction.

Children do not need every tool in every moment. The point is to expand options, not test recall.

What Adults Learn Too

Adults sometimes respond to uncertainty with more instructions. Children may need something different: a safer setting, a shorter visit, a familiar activity, accessible communication, an exit plan, or confidence that help will be available.

Preparation is not about predicting every conflict. It is about removing preventable hazards and giving children real ways to participate, communicate, and leave.

ONE SMALL CHANGE

Before the next shared activity, ask the child:

“What would help this visit feel comfortable and safe for you?”

Choose one practical support together.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

- Is this gathering something the child wants, or something adults expect?
- Have the adults exchanged enough information to provide safe supervision?
- Can each child protect private or treasured belongings?
- Are the communication and regulation options accessible to everyone?
- Does the child know how to ask for help or leave?

Support Play Without Taking It Over

Observe with a Purpose

Adults do not need to narrate or correct every interaction. They do need enough awareness to recognize safety concerns, rising distress, exclusion, accessibility barriers, and requests for help.

Observe questions such as:

- Is everyone able to enter or leave the play?
- Are “no,” “stop,” and other boundaries being respected?
- Is one child consistently deciding while another yields?
- Can each child communicate in a usable way?
- Is the environment becoming too loud, crowded, physical, or unpredictable?
- Is this an ordinary difference, or is someone being targeted, controlled, or harmed?

Do not interpret quiet play as failure or high-energy play as success. Children may play collaboratively, in parallel, in changing pairs, or with substantial pauses.

Choose the Right Adult Role

Protect

Act promptly when there is physical danger, aggression, threats, coercion, humiliation, discriminatory behavior, repeated targeting, deliberate harmful exclusion, property damage, sexualized behavior, a meaningful power imbalance, or an ignored request to stop.

"I am stopping this. You said no, and the pushing continued. You do not have to work this out together."

Protection may require separating children, tending to injury or distress, ending the activity, contacting caregivers, documenting what occurred, or involving a school, program, clinician, or authority.

Structure

Change the environment when the problem is bigger than the children's current capacity.

- reduce the number of materials or participants;
- move to a quieter space;
- provide visual choices or a timer when useful;
- clarify which items are shared;
- separate high-energy and quiet activities;
- offer food, water, movement, or rest; or
- move toward an earlier ending.

Structure is not failure. Sometimes the best social support is environmental.

Coach

Offer just enough help when the disagreement is safe, reasonably balanced, and both children can participate.

"You want to build a zoo, and Amir wants a racetrack. Do you want help finding options?"

Possible questions include:

- What does each person want?
- What have you already tried?
- Is there a way to combine the ideas?
- Would taking turns work here, or would separate materials work better?
- Does anyone want space?
- Would you like one suggestion?

Do not require eye contact, spoken explanations, immediate calm, a joint discussion, compromise, apology, or continued play.

Observe

Remain nearby without entering when the children are safe and have workable ideas.

"I am close if anyone wants help."

The goal is responsive support, not maximum independence. Children are not strengthened by being left alone with a problem they cannot safely or accessibly manage.

Use a Scaffolding Ladder

Scaffolding means adjusting support so the next step is possible while preserving as much child agency as the situation allows.

Move up or down this ladder as needed:

- 1 **Wait briefly:** Give children time to respond when the situation is safe.
- 2 **Describe:** "Both of you are holding the same piece."
- 3 **Clarify:** "What does each person want?"
- 4 **Prompt options:** "Could you combine, alternate, find another, or play separately?"
- 5 **Offer a suggestion:** "I can bring another tray so each design has space."
- 6 **Set a limit or restructure:** "I won't let the pieces be thrown. We can move the activity or end it."
- 7 **Take protective control:** Stop the interaction when safety or power requires it.

Stepping back is not always the final goal. A child may need consistent support because of age, disability, stress, unfamiliarity, communication access, or the complexity of the interaction.

Let More Than One Solution Count

Adults often look for a cooperative ending in which everyone keeps playing, but other solutions can be healthy. Children might play side by side, divide materials, alternate leadership, choose a third idea, take a break, or move to another activity. They might also ask an adult to set a boundary, shorten the visit, or end the interaction.

Compromise should not mean that one child repeatedly gives way. Track patterns across time. If the same child always adjusts, the adult may need to change the structure or address a power imbalance.

Look Back Without Grading the Playdate

After the visit, allow time for food, rest, movement, quiet, or reconnection before asking questions. Some children need to decompress and may not want to discuss the experience.

Avoid beginning with "Were you good?" or "Was it a good playdate?" Those questions compress a complex interaction into a verdict.

Offer one invitation:

- What did you enjoy?
- Did anything surprise you?
- Was anything hard or uncomfortable?
- Did you want help at any point?

- Was there a tool or support that helped?
- Is there anything you want to be different next time?
- Do you want another visit, a different kind of visit, or no plan yet?

Accept “I don’t know,” “I don’t want to talk,” or a nonverbal response. Do not use reflection to extract gossip, diagnose the other child, force gratitude, or persuade the child to repeat an unwanted visit.

If the child reports harm, listen without blame, thank them for telling you, clarify only what you need for safety, and take responsibility for appropriate follow-up.

Offer Feedback That Protects Agency

When feedback is welcome, describe a real choice or action. You might notice that a child checked before helping, told an adult when a game stopped feeling safe, changed a plan after hearing another idea, chose a separate activity as a disagreement grew, or returned an item and asked how to repair the scene.

Do not praise a child for hiding discomfort, surrendering a boundary, entertaining a guest continuously, accepting harm, or forgiving before they are ready.

The adult can also reflect on the environment:

“I noticed the visit became harder when everyone was hungry. Next time I will plan the snack earlier.”

This locates responsibility where it belongs instead of treating every difficulty as a child skill deficit.

What Adults Learn Too

Adults may feel successful when a visit looks smooth. A quiet visit can conceal discomfort; a noisy disagreement can end in a thoughtful solution. Appearance does not tell the whole story.

Our measure is not perfect harmony. It is whether children were safe, had meaningful choices, could communicate, received support, and remained free to continue or stop.

ONE SMALL CHANGE

During one safe disagreement, begin at the lowest useful rung of the scaffolding ladder. If the children remain stuck or distress grows, add support promptly.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

- Am I close enough to notice harm without directing ordinary play?
- Is this a child problem, an environment problem, or an adult-responsibility problem?
- Does every child have a genuine choice to continue, change activities, or stop?
- Am I mistaking repeated yielding for flexibility?
- Can post-play reflection remain optional and private?

Build a Friendship Toolbox

Family Activity: Make the Tools Visible

Invite the child to create a Friendship Toolbox using a small box, basket, envelope, binder ring, communication-device page, or poster. The container is optional; the useful part is a set of accessible reminders.

If crafting, use age-appropriate materials and avoid small or detachable parts for children who may mouth them. The adult handles sharp tools. The child can decorate, dictate, select symbols, take photos of safe demonstrations, or use ready-made words.

Possible tool cards include:

- **Listen or receive the message**
- **Notice, then check**
- **Share my idea**
- **Ask before joining or helping**
- **Say no or stop**
- **Respect no or stop**
- **Try another idea**
- **Use separate materials**
- **Take a break**
- **Play separately**
- **Get an adult**
- **Check impact**
- **Repair with action**
- **End the visit**

Add tools that match the child's actual communication and regulation supports: headphones, a visual scale, movement, a quiet place, a break card, a speech-generating device, a caregiver check-in, or extra processing time.

Practice the toolbox during calm moments through pretend scenarios. Two people might want different games, someone might want to join ongoing play, or a child may not want to share a special object. The room could become too loud, a joke could hurt someone, or a person might continue after someone says “stop.”

Ask, “Which tools could fit?” More than one answer may work. For the last situation, make the protective answer explicit: stop the behavior and get an adult.

During real conflict, do not turn tool selection into a quiz. Offer the card, word, or support only if it helps.

Big Words, Clear Meanings

Scaffolding

Scaffolding means offering support that makes a next step possible, then adjusting that support based on what the child and situation require.

It may involve waiting, describing, demonstrating, offering communication access, suggesting choices, changing the environment, setting a boundary, or taking protective action. It is not a fixed march toward doing everything independently.

Flexible

Flexible means being able to consider or try a different path when it is safe and reasonable.

Flexibility might mean combining ideas, taking turns, changing materials, pausing, or playing separately. It does not mean ignoring a need, accepting harm, giving up every preference, or allowing another person to cross a boundary.

Storybook Connection

Talk and Work It Out by Cheri J. Meiners offers children simple language for expressing feelings and addressing disagreements.

After reading, explore where the strategies fit:

- Which problems could the characters discuss together?
- When might they need time apart first?
- When should an adult help?
- What if one person does not want to keep talking?
- What makes an apology meaningful?

Talking is one tool, not a universal requirement. Bullying, coercion, aggression, and meaningful power imbalances should not be treated as mutual conflicts for children to mediate. A child can seek protection without confronting the person causing harm.

What We Hope You Will Discover

Shared play can introduce children to ideas, interests, strengths, cultures, bodies, communication styles, and perspectives different from their own.

Curiosity can make those differences interesting. Clear boundaries can make exploration safer. Adult support can make participation more accessible. Separate choices can preserve respect when preferences do not align.

Another person's idea does not erase the child's own. The child also does not have to adopt every new idea. Friendship can include influence without requiring sameness.

The Connected Caregiver Principle

A useful principle is:

Every Disagreement Is an Opportunity to Practice Friendship

A safer, more accurate version is:

A Manageable Disagreement Can Be an Opportunity to Practice Relationship Skills

When children are safe, relatively equal in power, willing to participate, and supported as needed, a disagreement may invite them to listen, communicate, adjust, set a limit, create options, or repair.

Not every disagreement should be prolonged, solved together, or converted into a lesson. Some require an adult decision. Some reveal incompatibility. Some call for space. Some involve harm and require protection. Sometimes the most skillful outcome is ending the interaction.

The goal is not to raise a child who approaches every conflict with endless flexibility. It is to support someone who can recognize choices, care about impact, protect boundaries, seek help, and participate in repair when repair is safe and possible.

Try This for Two Weeks

When a disagreement occurs, pause only long enough to assess it:

- 1 **Safety and power:** Is anyone harmed, frightened, trapped, targeted, outnumbered, or unable to participate? Has “no” been ignored?
- 2 **Capacity:** Can the children communicate and regulate enough to use a tool?
- 3 **Support:** Would structure, coaching, separation, or direct protection help?
- 4 **Choice:** Is continued interaction genuinely optional?

Then choose the response rather than automatically waiting:

- **Protect** when harm or power requires it.
- **Structure** when the setting is creating the problem.
- **Coach** when children want help with a manageable disagreement.
- **Observe** when they are safe and have workable ideas.

Afterward, reflect on your support:

- Did I notice the child's signal?
- Did I offer too little, too much, or useful help?
- Was the environment accessible?
- Did the same child carry the burden of flexibility?
- What should the adults change next time?

The aim is not less adult involvement. It is better-matched involvement.

ONE SMALL CHANGE

Add two easily overlooked cards to the Friendship Toolbox:

“Get an adult” and **“Choose space.”**

Practice when and how the child can use them.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

- Does the toolbox include protection and boundaries as well as cooperation?
- Are its words, pictures, and actions accessible to this child?
- Do I describe flexibility as mutual rather than obedient?
- Can a disagreement end without a friendship ending - or without a friendship forming?
- Do adults review their own planning and support instead of grading the child?

WHERE THESE IDEAS FIT

Rooted at Home provides a foundation in conversation, consent, boundaries, and repair. *Public Spaces* extends belonging and participation into shared community settings. *The Big Step* considers how relationships, preparation, access, and partnership support school transitions. Read together, this package provides broader context and helps caregivers choose where to explore a particular idea more deeply.

Key Takeaway

Children can practice relationship skills during playdates and other shared experiences, but they do not practice alone. Adults arrange safe environments, exchange important information, make participation accessible, watch for power and harm, and offer support that fits the moment.

Within those boundaries, children can try listening, asking, declining, combining ideas, playing side by side, changing plans, taking space, seeking help, and repairing with action.

Success is not a conflict-free visit. It is a gathering in which each child remains safe, respected, able to communicate, and free to participate or stop - and in which adults accept responsibility for the conditions children cannot manage themselves.

Learn · Connect · Grow

LEARN

What is one idea from this publication that you want to remember?

CONNECT

What did this publication help you notice or reconsider about the person in your care, your relationship, or your circumstances?

GROW

What is one small, safe, manageable action you may try, practice, or pay attention to next?

Research Foundations and Further Reading

- 1 American Academy of Pediatrics. [5 Questions to Ask Before a Playdate](#). Current guidance for discussing supervision, health needs, pools, trampolines, firearms, media, and pets before a child visits another home.
- 2 Skene, K., O'Farrelly, C. M., Byrne, E. M., et al. (2022). [Can guidance during play enhance children's learning and development in educational contexts? A systematic review and meta-analysis](#). *Child Development*, 93(4), 1162-1180. Guided play showed advantages for some measured learning outcomes, but not all outcomes; the review found substantial variation in how guided play was defined and delivered. It should not be read as proof that less adult support always produces better social development.
- 3 National Association for the Education of Young Children. [Developmentally Appropriate Practice Position Statement](#). Guidance emphasizes the importance of both child-guided and adult-guided experience, individual development, culture, ability, and context.
- 4 StopBullying.gov. [What Is Bullying?](#) and [Other Types of Aggressive Behavior](#). Federal guidance distinguishes ordinary peer conflict from bullying, which includes unwanted aggression, repetition or likely repetition, and a real or perceived power imbalance.
- 5 Meiners, C. J. (2005). *Talk and Work It Out*. Free Spirit Publishing. A picture book offering simple conflict-resolution language; its strategies are most appropriate for safe, balanced disagreements.
- 6 Dweck, C. S. (2006). *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. Random House. An influential perspective on learning and feedback; avoid using mindset language to minimize environmental barriers, disability, safety needs, or unequal power.
- 7 Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Harvard University Press. A foundational theoretical source for guided participation and the zone of proximal development; contemporary uses of "scaffolding" extend beyond Vygotsky's own terminology.

A FINAL REMINDER

Choose and adapt any idea, reflection prompt, activity, or suggested response based on the individual needs, abilities, circumstances, and safety of the person in your care. Seek guidance from an appropriately qualified professional when a situation calls for individualized support. If anyone may be in immediate danger, contact the appropriate local emergency or crisis service.