



Play Dates

- Play dates are opportunities for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) to practice social, play, and communication skills in a natural environment. During these experiences, parents can observe their child's strengths and challenges in such skills as sharing and taking turns.
- It can be difficult for children with ASD to understand how to behave in these types of social gatherings. They may not have social skills that are common among their peers. It may be helpful to have a play date with one other child, in order to help prompt and reinforce appropriate interactions.
- When selecting a friend or friends for the play date, it is important for parents to choose children who exhibit behaviors that they would like to have imitated. It is also helpful to select children who have some similar interests with their child, such as video games, puzzles, or dancing to music.
- Initially, play dates should be short. Perhaps a child can only tolerate five or ten minutes. Each time a play date occurs, the child will become more familiar and comfortable with the environment and the friend. Parents may have a sense of how long the child can tolerate a situation. If he or she gets upset after fifteen minutes of play, use that as the measure when coordinating the play date so that a meltdown can be prevented before it starts.
- Initially, supervised and structured activities such as baking cookies or a prearranged art project may work best. Setting up a few organized play stations around the room can help the child recognize the activities before play begins and transition better from one activity to another.
- For the play date, try not to pick toys that the child fixates on, in order to prevent the child from getting upset when a playmate has his or her turn with the toy. Keep these highly preferred toys hidden and out of reach. Include toys, games, and activities that the child is familiar with and is somewhat comfortable sharing.
- Social stories are excellent ways to familiarize children with ASD with the environment and expectations. Photographs of the play area, toys, games, and people can be reviewed before the play date. Include alternative toys and activities within social stories so that the child can be prepared for changes due to such things as bad weather, broken toys, and other unforeseen changes or occurrences. These social stories can describe methods of play, rules, and what behaviors are appropriate during the play date. A blank template for creating social stories is available at www.childrens-specialized.org/KohlsAutismAwareness in order to create them as needed.
- Parents and teachers can role play different types of play interactions. Practicing appropriate behaviors prior to the play date will help the child be more comfortable when he or she is among friends.
- At the beginning, play dates may need to be at home or in an environment that is familiar and comfortable for the child. As he or she becomes more comfortable, play dates can take place in locations of interest such as the park or a zoo. This may take more preparation and support to handle the responsibilities and potential challenges of unexpected meltdowns or wandering.
- Before the play date, parents and teachers can work with the child to establish a body gesture or words as a signal when a situation may be overwhelming or if a break is needed. Over time, the child can learn self-help and self-calming skills to use as needed. The parent or caregiver can also have a signal which can be used when the child is behaving inappropriately – to help remind the child of the skills they practiced.
- It is important to reinforce appropriate behavior as it happens during the play date. Reinforcers could be treats, words, or small tokens of acknowledgment for good behavior.

- Sometimes game rules or play activities need to be changed so that they are more understandable and achievable by the child with autism. Let the playmates know that it is alright to find new ways to play so that everyone has fun.
- When the play date is over, talk with the child about what happened. Let him or her express what went well and any challenges. Emphasize his or her appropriate behaviors and the positive things that happened. Develop tools such as social stories, activity schedules, or rule sheets to help in the areas where support is needed.

