

Successful Play Dates

Introduction

Play is an important part of early childhood development. Playing with other children helps a child develop their social skills, form friendships and learn how to interact successfully with peers. Autism affects a child's ability to interact with others, and can often be very isolating. Playdates, or specific times for children to play together, are a great way to encourage children to develop these social skills. For children with autism, learning to play together may require some support from caregivers. We review some tips on how to set up an appropriate playdate and what to do to support your child through a playdate.

Setting Up a Successful Playdate

1. Pick a Play Mate:

To set up a successful playdate for your child, first consider finding an appropriate play mate. A good match is someone the child may interact with socially in other settings, such as a peer from school, or a child that lives nearby. You could pick a child who has shown an interest in playing with your child, is relatively good at following instructions from adults, and is a positive role model for your child. Children who are polite and open to sharing their toys can be a good match for your child. Before you attend the playdate, you should have a conversation with the playmate's caregiver so that they know what to expect from your child and can prepare the playmate. That way the playmate will know what they are going to do, and how your child may respond.

2. Setting a Date, Time and Place:

For children with autism, it is a good idea to keep a playdate short and focused. Twenty minutes to a half hour is a good place to start, and you can gradually increase the amount of time depending on how your child responds to the playmate. Pick a time when your child is relaxed, not overly tired and doesn't need a meal. You can let the parent of your child's playmate know that you will only be there for a short time, so they can set expectations with their child. Also, think about picking a place where your child will not be inclined to wander, such as at a park. A smaller space or nook where your child has something specific to do is best.

3. Pick Appropriate Activities:

It is important to pick activities that your child enjoys doing, such as playing with sand, play dough, cars, or blocks. Easy board games, which rely on visuals rather than words may be fun for some children, and can encourage them to communicate with their peer. If you pick activities that your child doesn't like, he or she may lose interest in the activity and ultimately the playdate. Activities that help to strengthen gross motor skills can be fun and beneficial to your child at the same time. Something as simple as playing "catch" with a ball and throwing it back to a friend requires gross motor skills, as well as attention, and the ability to interact and communicate with another child. This could be a great way for them to learn to play "with" another child, rather than engaging in parallel or solitary play.

Here is a list of sample activities that require children to interact together while playing:

- Card games
- Board games such as 'Snakes and Ladders'
- Ball, soccer, basketball
- Pretend play with dolls or action figures
- Dress-up games
- Lego
- Hide and Seek
- Treasure Hunt
- Tag
- Pretend kitchens, play pots and pans

4. Facilitate the Play Date:

To create a successful play date, you will need to actively support your child through the play date. Be ready to prompt them as needed, especially to help them respond to their playmates questions, comments or needs. You could also bring along visual supports to help with communication, especially if you would like your child to choose between activities. You could create a visual schedule for your child, so that they know which activities to expect during the play date.

Also, it is a good idea to have reinforcers for both children, so that you can encourage positive behaviors and communication. For example, you could use praise, toys, or even small snacks to reward your child for taking turns, for answering questions and for making eye contact.

5. Observe Your Child at Play:

Observe your child as they play with their peer. Through observation, you can determine if your child is interacting with other children, and you will be able to see if they are developing social skills through these play dates. Look to see if your child is doing any of the following:

- Responding to the other child's requests,
- Answering questions and comments,
- Asking questions,
- Learning how and when to take turns,
- Responding appropriately to conflict.

You can use a data observation sheet to help you take notes. By collecting data over time, you can compare your notes and see how your child is progressing. To learn more about collecting data and for sample data collection forms, you can refer to our module on data collection. If you find that your child is unable to play with another child, despite having multiple opportunities to do so, you should speak with your child's therapist to see if they have ideas on how to assist your child in this area. You can also share any data you collect with your child's therapist.

Conclusion

We hope you have found these tips helpful. Over time, you can increase the number of activities you pick for your child to do on a playdate and also increase the amount of time your child plays for. By observing your child, you will be able to monitor their progress and provide valuable feedback to your child's therapist. Thank you for taking the time to review this information. You can find many other learning modules on the Porchlight website, www.porchlighteducation.org.