



Let's Make a Playdate

My people will call your people

By Kelli Wheeler

Let me give you a definition of the word “playdate” from when I was a kid: being forced to turn off the TV and go outside to play with whomever I could find on my street or else I was going to be put to work.

I actually lived on a pretty good street, this big U of young families with lots of kids to stumble across. My very best friend lived three houses up. My backup friend for when my best friend wasn't home lived one more house down and across the street. If I didn't find someone to play with, I still was not allowed to step foot in the house unless I was bleeding or had brought someone to help me clean my room.

Granted, I was lucky enough to live on a block where there were more than a dozen kids between the ages of my older brother, my little sister and me that I would probably encounter if I just stepped outside. If nobody was outside, I could just start riding my bike up and down the street until someone saw me and came outside to play.

There was no organization: no datebook with little color-coded highlights, tallies and flow charts of whose turn it was to come over to play, no BlackBerry, Palm Pilot or even Rolodex to keep track of potential playmates and available dates. Life seemed simpler back then. Good Lord, it was only the '70s.

Now, not only do I have my own calendar that threatens to envelop

me on a daily basis, but I also have to keep track of my children's separate social calendar. The closest thing I have to “social” on my calendar is Wednesday playgroup at the park, where I catch up with other moms—technically, a social date for the kids that I've mooched in on.

Playdate. I remember the first time I heard that word. It sounded so yuppie and pretentious. This was back when I was an upwardly mobile, unmarried, Hey, Ya Wanna Go to Reno This Weekend? kinda gal. You know, the '90s. Playdates sounded so rigid and scripted, and I remember thinking, No kid of mine will ever suffer through those.

Hang on a sec—let me look at my children's calendar: Monday, playdate at best friend's house; Tuesday, playdate at our house for Logan; Wednesday, playdate at our house for Whitney; Thursday, playdate for both kids here so they will stop sobbing that it's not fair that the other has someone over to play and they don't; Friday, both kids gone at playdates—jackpot! OK, so it's the new millennium. Gotta get with the times.

Before I get blacklisted from everyone's playdate list for griping about organized play sessions, let me say this: I could not function without them. In true organizational mommy fashion, here is my list of reasons why, in descending order of importance, and with cute little bullets:

- ✿ Unlike when I was younger, I don't feel comfortable letting my 6- and 4-year-olds wander the streets looking for someone to play with.

- ✿ Playmates are hard to come by in and around our block. And best friends live in different neighborhoods.

- ✿ My kids fight less, occupy themselves better and have so much fun playing with their friends that I become irrelevant and can actually get something done.

- ✿ Reciprocation! Ahh, sweet silence and productivity when the little darlings are off playing at someone else's house.

- ✿ Great social skills for the kids. They get to interact with different personalities and learn about rules and expectations while practicing good behavior. (I know this one should be higher up, but self-preservation kicked in.)

- ✿ Helping fellow mothers live a sane existence. We're all in the same boat, so everyone grab a paddle and row. (This should be higher up, too, but safety first!)

So yes, some days when I am nearly drowning in a sea of commitments and things to do for my kids and myself, scheduling a playdate is the foot that steps on my head and dunks me underwater. But other days it is the life ring that someone has tossed me to make my day just a little bit easier.

The modern definition of playdate does involve some advance planning, organization and memory. (I am still in fear that I will one day leave someone's child at school who I was supposed to bring home for a playdate.) We live in different times, and the modern landscaping of parenting has evolved in so many different ways. I've signed on to

become a hands-on parent for the joy and enrichment it brings both my kids and myself. I accept the challenges that come with it, but I also bask in its rewards.

Like tomorrow: both kids off at playdates, and Mommy's off to get a pedicure! ●

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