

7 to 8

Whose Play Date Is It, Anyway?

Allowing a younger sibling to join the fun can benefit everyone **BY MICHELLE ANTHONY, M.A., Ph.D.**

S EVEN- AND eight-year-olds are beginning to carve out personal space for themselves, both when they're alone and when they're spending time with peers. Yours may suddenly become possessive of his friends and complain when a younger sibling tries to join in on a play date. That will instantly cast you into the role of negotiator and, just as with other conflicts, put you on the spot: Should the play date be one-on-one time between child and friend—no siblings allowed? Or should it be a group experience where “everybody plays or nobody plays”?

INCLUDE HER FRIEND

While no solution will be perfect, you can find a satisfying compromise if you choose to allow a younger sibling to join in. I call it the “semi-inclusive play date.” The key is in the preparation: Before the play date begins, come to an understanding about how a sibling may participate and for how long. Talk with each child about the loose organization of the play date, namely which activities will be shared, and how things will transition from “friend-only” to everyone, and back again.

While your older child may grumble at first at the prospect of including a 4- or 5-year-old in her play at all, she may find that her friend is excited about it—especially if that friend doesn't have a younger sibling herself.

There are a number of benefits to these kinds of play dates, the most significant of which is the lesson it brings both children: The semi-inclusive



solutions can build a bond of sibling affection and also help children learn how to be kind while still asserting their needs and desires. Encouraging each child to put herself in the shoes of the other fosters the ability to see a situation from multiple perspectives. This approach also builds an understanding of fairness between siblings—when each is able to share some of her friend time, she is rewarded by being included in her sibling's friend time as well. These experiences develop generosity between siblings, even outside of the social arena.

Of course, it's equally important to honor your child's desire (and need) for individual friendship, as well as his need for autonomy, independence, and a sense of control over his social life. You might permit friend-only play dates every other time or let him choose which activities his sibling can be allowed in on. **P&C**

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