



Sweet Dreams

Sleepovers are a rite of passage for kids. Here's how to tell if your child is ready—and how to prepare

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IT WAS A FOURTH-GRADE FRIDAY. “You’re staying over tonight, right?” Helen, my new friend, asked. I nodded excitedly. We had everything planned. Board games and Nancy Drew mysteries. Microwave popcorn and potato chips. Sleeping bags and stuffed animals. I remember every detail as if it were yesterday—but not because this sleepover was more unique than any others I had had. I’ll just never forget how special it felt to bond with my new friend over all the funny little interests we had in common.

REGGIE CASAGRANDE/MORRISON STOCK/GETTY IMAGES (RM)

SLEEPOVERS ARE major milestones for children. Thinking about, planning, and talking about them becomes a social currency that allows kids to move from being playground buddies to best friends, literally overnight. Do you remember how exciting it was to unroll your sleeping bag and tell stories and jokes into the wee hours of the night? Like an extra long play date, sleepovers provide kids a chance to get to know each other better and to build trust. Sleepovers are also a tangible sign that children are “big kids” in the eyes of not only their peers, but also their parents.

As wonderful as sleepovers are, you may be apprehensive about letting your child stay at a friend’s all night or about taking a friend in. A sleepover can leave kids grumpy or out of sorts the next day. You may also wonder how your child will fare away from home. This anxiety is natural. But with forethought and planning, you can lay the groundwork for the big night so that you—and your child—can relax and enjoy it.

IS SHE READY?

You’ll want to make sure that your child has a certain skill set before she spends the night away. Can she sleep through the night on her own, in her own space, or does she tend to climb into your bed before morning? Are nightmares an issue? Can she go to the bathroom by herself, brush her own teeth (if only for one night), get changed, and so on, without you?

If you’re not sure your child can handle it, or if you’re looking for a low-stakes way to find out, set up some “dry runs.” Arrange a sleepover with a sibling, cousin, or neighbor. Start by having the trial at your house, then see how it goes at your sister’s. Think about setting up a sleepover-type situation on your next vacation. Let your children know that you are curious to see how well they are able to fall asleep—and how well they function the next day—because that will help you determine whether they are ready to have real sleepovers with friends.

Explain to your child that sleepovers are a privilege to be earned, not a right to be expected. Part of earning this privilege means accepting the responsibility of managing tiredness the next day (with your support). Similarly, help your child understand that another part of a sleepover is cleaning up with her friend the next morning. Giving her the power to earn sleepovers teaches her responsibility and independence.

SETTING UP

When you feel your child is ready, the next step is to plan the experience so that it’s successful

from the start. The more sleepovers he has, the less planning is needed, but it really helps to get organized for the first few at least. Some things to consider:

Time it right. Start with short sleepovers—an after-dinner arrival and an after-breakfast departure—and then work up to longer ones.

Trust Your Gut

You may have reservations or feel she’s not quite ready for a sleepover. Provide solid reasons or alternatives:

» If you feel your child is too young or has not shown he has the energy, simply tell him what needs to happen for that to change. For instance, he needs to be in first grade, he needs to handle a family sleepover without melting down the next day, etc.

» If you are uncomfortable with her sleeping at a friend’s house, ask her to invite her friend to yours.

» If she gets homesick easily, let her try sleepovers with cousins or siblings or even overnights with Grandma, instead. This will let her develop the skills necessary to have successful sleepovers with friends.



The kids may not yet have the stamina and social skills to spend an entire 24 hours together.

Think about the day after. Friday night sleepovers give your child two days to recover. Overnights are generally more successful when the day after is flexible. It’s one thing to expect your child to function despite being tired; it’s another to set him up for failure by having an important event (for you or for him) slated the next day.

Talk about the rules ahead of time, including

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your expectation for bedtime, where the children will sleep (your child's room, the living room, the basement, etc.), what level of inclusion you expect for siblings, and so on.

Check in with the other parents. At whose house will the kids stay? If they're at yours, are there things you should be aware of (allergies, food restrictions, necessary bedtime routines)? You will all feel better if everyone is on the same page.

THE BIG NIGHT

The friend has been chosen and the day is set. What's next? If you're the host, brainstorm a few ideas for activities the kids can do together. Some children need more direction and structure, while others are happy to disappear into a fort or the bedroom and emerge only for food or a bathroom break. Even if the plan is just to hang out and play, think about what activities will allow connection and still be appealing to both. Are they into board games, crafts, building sets, or video games? It helps to have a plan A to get them started and a plan B in case an argument arises or they don't seem to be connecting. Don't forget to have plan A and B for the next morning as well.

When things start to get settled, speak to both children about the rules for the evening and the next morning. Can the kids wake you up? Are you making pancakes or passing out cereal? When does cleanup need to happen, and what time should your child's friend be ready to go? Your child and her friend probably won't fall asleep early, but you should make clear at the outset when you expect them to begin winding down. Then make sure you help them settle in and that they know there are no more snacks, video games, and so on for the evening. They won't miss those things anyway—especially if they have a flashlight or glow wand on hand!

LISTEN AND OBSERVE

As the parent, you play a big role in helping a sleepover run smoothly. First and foremost, be mindful not to embarrass your child in front of her friend. This might mean letting

Slumber Party Smarts



go of brushing her teeth with her that night, making an exception to the "finish your broccoli before dessert" rule, and so on. If you have other children, understand their desire to be included, but be sure to preserve

bonding time for the friendship pair. Decide which activities siblings can join in on (watching the movie, making their own sundae), or have something separate for them to do so they don't feel excluded.

Don't forget the importance of being a fly on the wall. You don't have to monitor the kids' every move, whether siblings are involved or not, just try to have everyone, including you, hang out in the same general area. Children

are less likely to speak unkindly of peers or make bad choices if they know parents are nearby. Talk to your child ahead of time about avoiding a gossip-fest, and encourage her and her sleepover pal to play in common areas of your house—like the kitchen or living room—for a large portion of the time so you can help manage as necessary. That way you can be present without being omnipresent.

When your child becomes comfortable with the routine, he'll likely start asking if a play date can spend the night. If your schedule allows for it, why not? Don't worry about planning ahead of time, just play it by ear. Offer to loan his friend some PJs, see what snacks you have on hand, and remember that if things go awry, you can always pop in a video.

Helen and I became best friends quickly, and our frequent sleepovers played a big part in strengthening our bond. We're still best friends today! So when my 9-year-old asks for a sleepover, I remember those countless late nights and early mornings that led to a friendship that's 30 years strong. And as much as I sometimes hate how tired sleepovers leave my children the following day, I think about Helen, and know that the positives they bring are far greater. **P&C**

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Ready for a gaggle of overnights? Keep these ideas in mind:

CREATE A SAFE SPACE for the party. Given the dynamics of groups, it can help to have them in a more public place like the living room.

SET RULES that will keep the fun going. For example: All kids are included in all games, the sleeping arrangement must not leave anyone alone in a corner, etc.

HAVE A PLAN. The party will go much smoother if you map out a rough (but flexible) timeline beforehand.

KEEP AN EYE—and an ear—out. A group can turn on an individual, or conversation can become a complaint-fest about a particular child (present or not). Be ready to interject with a group-unifying activity or game.