

Skill-Building Opportunities

Stressful Play Dates

Question: My child always has a hard time leaving when his play dates are over. How can I make the end of play dates less stressful for everyone?

Many children find the transition from one activity to another, like playing with friends to going home, to be stressful and difficult. The things that happen during daily life are often the best opportunities to help promote life skills in your child. You can lessen the stress of ending play dates for you and your child by promoting the life skill of Taking on Challenges.

Megan Gunnar of the University of Minnesota is one of the foremost authorities on stress and coping in children. She notes:

A childhood that had no stress in it would not prepare you for adulthood. If you never allow your child[ren] to exceed what they can do, how are they going to learn to manage adult life—where a lot of it is managing more than you thought you could manage? A normal childhood has challenges in it ... and we need to help our children understand how to manage themselves, but not protect them completely from those challenges

Taking on Challenges: Life is full of stresses and challenges. Children who are willing to take on challenges (instead of avoiding them or simply coping with them) do better in school and in life.

1

Remember, your relationship with your child is the best stress buster.

It is important to help your child take on and manage challenges himself rather than try to protect him from stress or fix his problems. But that doesn't mean you have no role. In fact, your relationship with your child is essential. When your child knows that you are "there for him," he is likely to feel that he can handle hard things. You act as a stress buster for your child when you do things like:

- Acknowledge his emotions, like: "It looks like you are upset to leave your friend." This will help your child feel recognized and heard as he begins to make connections between his feelings and his actions.
- Share your experiences with your child. For example: "When I see my friends and have to leave when I don't want to, it is hard for me, too. It is important to me to make sure I get to say goodbye and tell them how much fun I had. I also like to talk about the next time we will see each other."

Your child is more likely to be able to manage challenging situations if he feels safe and secure and has warm, caring and trusting relationships with the important adults in his life.

Heidelise Als of Children's Hospital Boston and the Harvard Medical School has found through her work with premature babies and the impact of stress on their development, that you have

to understand the language of children's behavior to figure out how they function best and then build on what they do to manage stress.

2 Determine the issue.

By reading the language of your child's behavior, try to figure out what it is about the end of your child's play dates that makes them challenging. Have a conversation with him about his thoughts and feelings. You can say things like: "It seems hard for you to say goodbye at the end of your play dates. How do you feel when it's time to leave?" When you do this, you are modeling the skill of reflection or stepping back from a situation to consider what is happening. You can also remind him of what he has done in the past to manage difficult times.

3 Problem solve with your child for solutions.

Once you have established what is making play dates so stressful, you can begin to set a goal together for making these transitions less difficult. Explain to your son: "We keep having the same problem when your play dates are over and it's time to leave. You say no, I say yes, and then we argue. What ideas do you have to make it easier for both of us?"

- Write down his ideas for solutions without judging them.
- Ask him what would work and what wouldn't work about each of these ideas.
- Pick a solution to try together.
- Evaluate how it is working or not working after you try it a few times.
- If it isn't working, repeat the problem-solving process again and come up with some different strategies to try.

If your child doesn't have specific suggestions to try, you can suggest some. For example: "I will let you know five minutes before we need to leave. During the five minutes, what would like to do to make sure you are able to say goodbye to your friends?" When you make suggestions, it is important to remember that you are helping him learn to Take on Challenges rather than fixing problems for him.

4 Continue to give your child support as he tries out his solutions.

There are things that you can do to make the transitions easier. Here are a few things to think about:

- How much time is given for the transition to end the play date? If the transition is too abrupt, more warnings about the approaching end of the play date may be needed. You can say things like: "Three more minutes left to play, then it is time to go home" or "You can have two more turns with this toy and then we will say goodbye."

For more ways to help your child learn and develop, visit mindinthemaking.org and vroom.org

- What is the activity level of the play? If there is a lot of high energy play going on, consider arranging a calming activity for the playmates at the end of their playtime together. Your child can choose songs to sing, games like “I Spy” or “Simon Says” to promote focus and self control or tongue twisters and other word games.
- Does your child worry that he won’t get the chance to play again? Ask your child about his feelings and reassure him that he will get together with his friend again. If possible, arrange for the next play date and use a visual reminder like a calendar. Try to give your child some control in choosing an element of the next meeting, like where it will be or what they will do.

By working together to find solutions, you are helping your child learn strategies for managing stress, which strengthens his ability to Take on Challenges, in school and in life.

Carol Dweck from Stanford University and her colleagues conducted a study where she gave fifth grade children tasks (like those found on intelligence tests) that became increasingly difficult. In this study, she found that the children in the study who “wilted” in the face of stress or a challenge saw their abilities— their intelligence—as something that can’t be changed. They believed that people are born smart or not. She called this view of the world a “fixed mindset.” In contrast, the students who continued to pursue the challenge saw their abilities as something that they could develop and change—they had a “growth mindset.”

Carol Dweck and her colleagues then found that the way adults praise children affects their mindsets or beliefs about the world. Children who are praised for inborn characteristics like: “You are so smart!” are likely to have a fixed mindset. Children who are praised for their effort or strategies are more likely to have a growth mindset.

5 Praise effort and strategies.

As you teach your child about Taking on Challenges, it is important to focus on the effort and strategies he is using. This type of acknowledgment supports a “growth mindset.” You can say things like: “When you made an effort to say goodbye to your friends without getting upset, it really made that play date end fun for everyone. I could see how much you tried.”