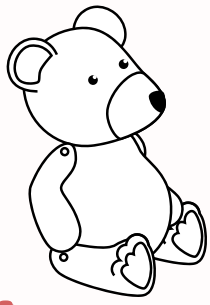

## Family Guide

# Supporting Play with Siblings and Friends

## Why Is Playing with Other Children Important?

Playing with siblings and friends gives young children opportunities to practice important skills like communicating, taking turns, sharing, responding to others, and building relationships.

For some children, including children with autism and other developmental disabilities, connecting and playing with other children can be more difficult. They may need extra opportunities and support to develop these skills.

Families can help by creating enjoyable opportunities for children to play and interact with siblings, friends, cousins, neighbors, or other children. Playdates can provide opportunities to practice social and friendship skills outside of school.

Adapted from: Raulston, T. J., Hansen, S. G., Frantz, R., Machalicek, W., & Bhana, N. (2020). A parent-implemented playdate intervention for young children with autism and their peers. Journal of Early Intervention, 42(4), 303-320 and Watkins, L., Tomeny, T., O'Reilly, M., Sillis, K. H., & Zamora, C. (2021). A naturalistic behavioral intervention to increase interaction between siblings with and without autism. Behavior Modification, 45(6), 863-886.

## Who Can Be a Play Partner?

**There isn't one "right" play partner.**

**Siblings** can be great play partners because they have many natural opportunities to interact at home. Shared activities can be built around the interests and preferences of both children.

No siblings? That's okay! **Friends, cousins, or neighbors** can also be play partners. Playdates at home or in the community can create opportunities for children to get to know one another and practice playing together.

**When possible, think about children who:**

- enjoy some of the same activities
- are interested in playing together
- are comfortable around each another
- can participate in shared activities together

## Choose Activities They Can Enjoy Together

Start with things both children like. Children are more likely to interact when they're engaged in something they enjoy.

Look for activities that naturally give children something to do together, such as:

**Building with blocks**

**Pretend play**

**Art projects**

**Puzzles**

**Outdoor play**

**Simple games**

**Sensory activities**

Activities that involve sharing materials, taking turns, making something together, or working toward a common goal can create natural reasons for children to communicate and interact. Activities can be intentionally selected to provide repeated opportunities for children to interact with each other.

## Help Children Connect

Sometimes simply putting two children together isn't enough to get shared play started. Adults can provide a little support when children need it.

**You might:**

- suggest something they could do together
- help a child invite the other child to play
- model a simple way to ask for a turn or share an idea
- encourage children to talk or communicate to each other, rather than through you
- notice and encourage positive interactions

**Both children may need some help learning how to interact with one another.**

## Give Children Room to Play

Once children are interacting, step back when you can. You don't need to direct every part of the activity.

Stay nearby and help if play gets stuck, but give children time to respond to each other, solve small problems, and develop their own play ideas.

## Keep It Positive and Realistic

Peer play doesn't have to be elaborate.

A short game with a sibling after dinner or time playing with a cousin can provide meaningful opportunities to connect.

Follow the children's interests, keep expectations reasonable, and remember that successful play may look different for different children.

## Keep in Mind!

The goal is **connection**, not perfection.
A sibling or friend isn't a little teacher. They're a play partner. Your role is to make it a little easier for children to connect and then give their relationship room to grow.