

Smartphone Free Childhood

Connecting, empowering and uniting parents, educators and regulators to delay smartphones and social media, establish phone-free schools, and safeguard the use of technology in education.

A Parent's Guide: Conversations around device-free playdates & sleepovers



In today's digital world, screens have quietly become the default activity for children. Choosing a device-free playdate or sleepover isn't about being anti-technology, it's about being pro-childhood. It's about protecting the vital "social muscle-building" that happens when children learn to navigate boredom, negotiate with one another, manage small conflicts, and use their imagination together.

Discussing device-free expectations for playdates can feel awkward, but it's a boundary many parents appreciate. The key is to be **direct, warm, and frame it as a positive choice for the children's experience.**

This guide provides the tools and scripts to handle these conversations with grace, clarity, and zero judgment.





The Mindset: Talk, Don't Tell

Before reaching out to another parent, remember: every family is navigating this challenging digital landscape in their own way. Approach the conversation as a collaborator, not a lecturer.

- **Assume positive intent:** Many parents feel quietly relieved when someone else is willing to set a boundary first.
- **Lead with the "Why":** Frame the decision around wanting children to make the most of their limited time together, rather than focusing on screens as the problem.
- **Be the Technophobe (if it helps):** A touch of humour — *"I'm that slightly old-school parent"* — can soften the conversation and lower defensiveness.



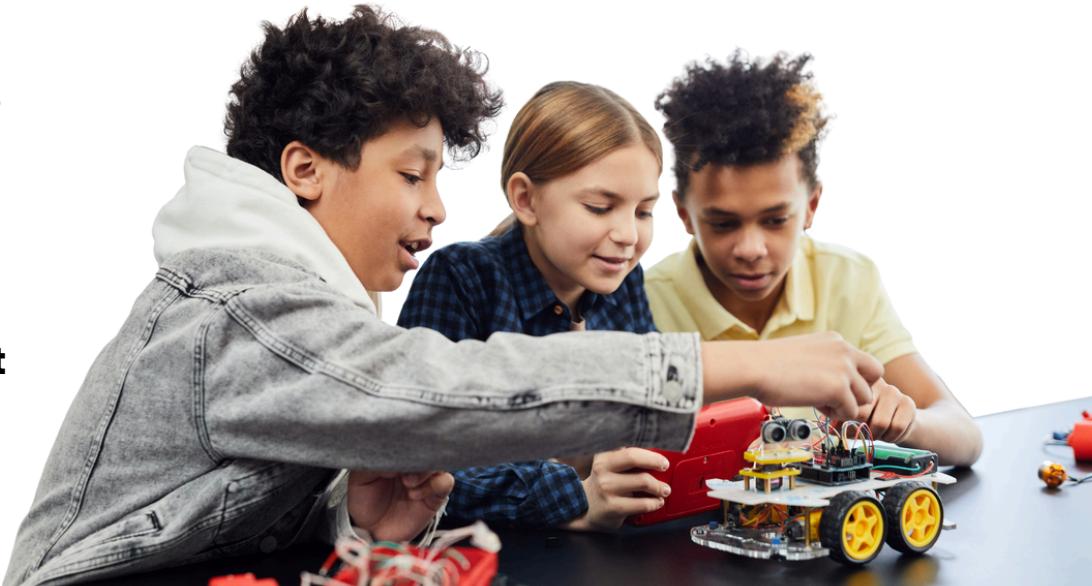
Conversation Scripts

If you are the Host:

If the sleepover is at your home, this means you are in the best position to set the tone. The key is to mention this upfront — ideally when extending the invitation — so everyone knows what to expect and it feels easy and normal.

- **The Casual Text:** *"We're so excited to have [Friend] over! Just a heads-up that we're doing device-free playdates at the moment. It really helps the kids chat, play, and connect. We usually pop phones or iPads into a basket at the door. Hope that's okay!"*
- **The Activity-Based Pitch:** *"I'm planning on having the kids do [baking/Legos/fort-building] today, so we're going to keep it a screen-free afternoon so they can really get into it."*

Both approaches are friendly, clear, and confident, and they signal that this isn't about rules or restriction, but about creating space for meaningful, fun connection.





If your child is the Guest

This can feel like the trickier conversation, because you're asking another parent to help uphold your family's boundaries. Clarity matters, but so does warmth. Aim for open, respectful, and collaborative.

Here are a few ideas:

The Curiosity Opener:

- "We've been trying to lean into a bit more screen-free time lately. What's your usual approach to devices during playdates or sleepovers? If possible, we'd really love for [Child] to stay off YouTube or social media while they're with you."

The Vulnerability Approach:

- "We've noticed that too much screen time can leave [Child] a bit wired or cranky, so we're trying to keep things mostly offline right now. Would you be okay helping us with that while they're at your place?"

Both options invite partnership rather than pressure – and most parents appreciate being trusted and included in the decision.

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Essential Questions for Sleepovers

Sleepovers can be a lot of fun, and they also come with a higher chance of unsupervised late-night internet use. Asking a few thoughtful questions ahead of time helps everyone feel comfortable and keeps expectations aligned.

Consider checking in with the host parent about the following:

- *“What does a typical sleepover evening look like at your place?”*

This helps you understand whether the time together is centred around shared activities, games, or winding down, rather than screens.

- *“How do you usually handle phones or devices during sleepovers?”*

This opens the conversation and allows you to clarify your preference for a device-free environment.

- *“Where will the kids be spending most of their time together?”*

Shared, supervised spaces encourage connection and reduce the likelihood of isolated or unsupervised behaviour.

- *“What’s your usual bedtime and wind-down routine?”*

A clear, structured end to the evening supports better sleep and helps avoid late-night temptation to find loop-holes.

Preparing Your Child

One of the most powerful tools you can give your child is confidence, knowing what to do if something doesn’t feel right, and feeling supported to speak up.



The “Check-In” Plan

Agree on a simple phrase or question they can text or say (for example, “Did you find my blue sweatshirt?”) if they feel uncomfortable or just need an early exit. Reassure them that you’ll always come, no explanations needed.

The Positive Redirect

Encourage your child to be the one who gently shifts the energy if things stall. You might say, “If everyone seems bored or stuck, you could suggest a game, a board game, or building something together.”

This helps them practice leadership, creativity, and social confidence.

Benefits to Mention

If a parent asks why you’re so firm on this, you can share these positive experience builders:

- **Social Muscles:** Kids learn to resolve conflicts and read body language without a digital buffer.
- **Deep Play:** Unstructured play (and the boredom that precedes it) is where true creativity and flow happen.
- **Safety:** It removes the risk of accidental exposure to inappropriate content or group-think online.



To make this as easy as possible, here are three templates ranging from casual to a bit more structured. You can copy, paste, and tweak these based on your relationship with the other parent.

Option 1: The Casual Heads-Up (Best for WhatsApp)

This works well because it frames the device-free aspect as a household rhythm rather than a strict rule.

Hi [Parent Name]! We are so excited for [Child Name] to come over on [Day]! Just a quick heads-up, we've been doing 'unplugged' playdates lately to help the kids really dive into playing together. We'll have a basket for phones/tech at the door, but of course, they can grab them if they need to call you! Looking forward to it!

Option 2: The Sleepover Plan (Best for setting expectations)

Since sleepovers often involve a movie night, this helps you pivot the focus back to physical activities.

Hey [Parent Name]! [My Child] is counting down the days until the sleepover! I wanted to check in on the tech vibe - we're keeping things screen-free (minus maybe a group movie) so they don't get trapped into YouTube/TikTok. Is that cool with you? I'm happy to send over some board games or extra craft supplies if that helps!

Option 3: The "Our Kid Struggles" (Best if you feel awkward)

If you're worried about sounding preachy, use this version to place the blame on your own family's goals.

Hi [Parent Name]! Looking forward to seeing [Child Name] this weekend. Quick favour, we're really working on reducing [My Child]'s screen time because we've noticed it affects their [mood/sleep] quite a bit. Would you mind helping us keep the playdate device-free? If they get bored, feel free to point them toward the backyard or the Lego bin! Thanks for understanding!

Lastly, here are some tips to help you create the environment that supports your wish for your device-free playdate!

Quick Tips for Success:

The Parking Lot: Have a designated spot (a basket or a kitchen charging station) where devices go immediately upon arrival. It feels less like a confiscation and more like a routine.

The Boredom Pivot: Have one high-value activity ready to go (pizza making, a scavenger hunt, or even just a new box of art supplies) for that moment when the kids realize they can't use their phones and start to feel restless.



Boredom Busters: Here are some 10-minute screen-free ideas:

- **The Floor is Lava:** Use pillows and blankets to cross the room without touching the floor.
- **Speed Drawing:** Set a timer for 2 minutes and have everyone draw the same object. Compare the results.
- **Paper Airplane Contest:** Who can build the plane that flies the farthest or does the most loops?
- **Indoor or Outdoor Scavenger Hunt:** Give them a list of 5 random items to find (e.g., something fuzzy, something purple, a coin from before 2010).
- **Mini Dance-Off:** Put on one high-energy song and have a "best move" competition.
- **Balloon Volleyball:** Keep a balloon in the air using only your heads or feet.
- **Collaborative Storytelling:** One person starts with a sentence, and everyone adds one line to build a crazy story.
- **Blind Taste Test:** Use small snacks (pretzels, fruit, crackers) while one person is blindfolded.
- **LEGO Challenge:** Build the "tallest tower" or "best alien" in exactly 5 minutes.