

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



Setting device boundaries for kids during free play fosters crucial offline development, preventing screen time from displacing essential activities like physical play and social interaction, while modeling healthy habits and promoting better focus, in-person connection, and real-world engagement.

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.

Setting the Stage (The Invitation)

The easiest way to set the device-free boundary is right when you are making the plan. This frames it as a rule for your home/activity, not a judgment on their parenting.

For Playdates at Your House:

Frame the discussion around the specific activity you have planned.

Script: *"We'd love to have [Child's Name] over on Saturday! We're planning to build a giant fort/do some messy painting/play outside, so we'll be keeping the electronics (and the phones!) tucked away so they can really focus on playing together."*

The Follow-Up: If the parent brings their child with a device, you can say warmly, *"Oh, thank you for bringing that! To make sure they don't lose it while we're building the fort, I'll put it in a safe spot here by the door, and you can grab it on the way out!"*



For Playdates at the Park/Neutral Location:

Frame the discussion around the experience and interaction.

Script: *"I'm looking forward to the kids playing together! I'm keen to let them practice some imaginative play on the playground, so let's agree to keep all devices away so we can focus on them, and they can focus on each other."*

The Follow-Up: If the parent brings their child with a device, you can say warmly, *"Let's put all of our devices away safely while we play on the jungle gym / slides and run around, so we can have lots of fun without worrying about them!"*

Addressing Specific Scenarios

If you need to address parent device use

Sometimes, the child's screen use isn't the issue—it's the parents who pull out their phones during the playdate.

Script (Gentle): *"I know it's hard to catch up on emails! Let's put these away for the next hour while the kids are playing, I want to make sure we don't miss anything funny they do!"* (Smile and put your own phone away conspicuously).

Script (Direct): *"Could we agree that for the first hour of the playdate, we put our phones completely away? I want to make sure we're fully present in case the kids need us."*

If the Other Child Asks for a Device

If the other child starts asking their parent or you for a device during the playdate, you can redirect them.

Script to the Child: *"We don't use screens during playdates at my house. We want to build/play! Would you like to play with the train set or help me give the dolls a bath?"*

Script to the Parent: *"No worries, our house rules are usually device-free during playdates. I have some fun sticker books and markers out if [Child's Name] wants a quiet moment. Do they usually need a calm-down activity after a lot of running?"* (This helps the other parent save face).





The Underlying Strategy: Be the Host

When you host, you get to set the environment. Plan engaging, open-ended activities that naturally capture the children's attention and leave no "room" for a device.

Here are a few ideas:

For younger children -

- Messy play: Water tables, bubble solution, kinetic sand, mud kitchens (outside), or shaving cream on a tray (inside), chalk drawing.
- Building: Mega blocks, Duplos, Lego, or cardboard boxes and painter's tape.
- Role play: A doctor kit, dress-up clothes, or puppets.
- Active games: Obstacle course, nature walks, ball games, dancing, water play.

For older children -

- Treasure hunt / scavenger hunt
- Obstacle course
- Water balloon toss
- DIY craft station
- Cupcake or cookie baking and decorating
- Fort building
- Science experiments



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