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A parent's guide to sleepover survival

Tips for knowing when kids are ready for their first sleepovers and helping to ease their fears

By LAURIE GREENWALD SALOMAN Correspondent

Just when you thought you had a handle on the good old-fashioned afternoon playdate, your child ups the ante by taking things to the next level: a request for a sleepover with a friend.

While this is a positive step in the growing-up process, experienced parents know that a successful sleepover requires planning and patience. In fact, sometimes it takes a few tries to get it right.

Ready or not?

The first step is to determine whether your child is truly ready to spend the night away from home. While many kids these days start to have sleepovers as early as age 5 or 6 (or even younger), there may be such a thing as too young.

"Children should probably not have sleepovers before age 6 or 7, and that's pushing it," said Dr. Vanita Braver, psychiatric medical director at Bonnie Brae, a residential treatment center for adolescent boys in Liberty Corner, and author of the book "Pinky Promise."



STAFF PHOTO BY ED PAGLIARINI

Hannah Broos, 10, left, and her sister Emma, 8, play a board game in her home in the Basking Ridge section of Bernards. Board games and make-your-own pizza dinners can be good activities for children's sleepovers.

TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL SLEEPOVERS

- Keep the number of sleepover guests to a minimum. One other child is ideal -- this way, no one gets left out as a result of a threesome.
- With your child, write out invitations to your sleepover, listing specific activities in which you're going to have the kids participate.

"This helps them look forward to the event and gives the other parents a chance to express concerns and ask questions," Dr. Vanita Braver said.

• Take everyone out to dinner first.









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"Before that, they don't have the coping skills to really separate from their parents," she said.

A better guide than age, some experts say, is how independent your child is. Can he brush his teeth and change his clothes on his own? Does he wake up in the middle of the night looking for you? If you have any doubts about your child's ability to handle himself away from home, it might be better to postpone the sleepover. Another option is first to schedule a sleepover at Grandma's house. If your child does well staying there, you can then consider letting him sleep at a friend's place.

The big night

Ideally, the house your child is going to is just down the block or across the street and not in another town. She'll probably feel safer knowing you're close by, and -- let's be honest -- if you have to pick her up in the middle of the night, this makes it a lot easier for you. Send your child with his favorite stuffed animal, if he has one, and let him know that he can come home any time.

You may be feeling a little woozy about the idea of sending your tyke off for the night. To ease your

worries, make sure you're comfortable with the family hosting the sleepover.

Don't be shy about asking questions. If it's not a house where your child has spent a lot of time before, you'll want to make sure the parents are safety conscious. Some parents feel funny quizzing another family about their habits, so turn the tables and ask them to humor your overprotectiveness.

"I always make it about me," laughed Braver, the mother of 9-year-old twin girls and an 11-year-old girl. "I say, 'I know I'm neurotic, but it would make me feel better to know there's no gun in the house and they aren't going to be watching any R-rated movies.'"

The first time Liz Broos sent her older daughter, Hannah, to a friend's house for the night, she was a little apprehensive.

"It's handy to have them fed before you get home because there's less mess," Broos noted. "Then you can make popcorn later, while they're watching a movie."

For more sleepover tips, visit <u>www.</u> dryanitabrayer.com.

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"She must have been in first or second grade," recalled Broos, who lives in the Basking Ridge section of Bernards. "I think I was more worried than she was. We told her that she could call us any time, and she called us when she got there. She did fine."

Broos is quick to point out that Hannah, now 10, is quite mature in many ways. "I wouldn't have felt comfortable sending Emma, who's 8, to a sleepover at that age."

Rules of play

One way you can see how your child will fare during a sleepover is to host it yourself. Braver recommended coming up with a few fun activities before the guest arrives, such as make-your-own pizza or board games.

Set ground rules early on: No phone calls without permission, perhaps, and no sneaking outside. And be sure to ask the parents about any medications the child takes or allergies you should be aware of.

When it's time for bed, be sensitive to the possibility that your child's guest may feel homesick. If she gets upset, ask her if she feels OK. Sometimes emotional distress manifests itself in a headache or stomachache. Once you've determined that there's no physical illness, just be there for the child.

"Tuck her in with her stuffed animals," Braver suggested. "Offer to lie down with her and comfort her. Reassure her that she can go home but remind her of the fun things she'll miss in the morning, like making pancakes. Distract her with a little TV or a game. If all else fails, call the parents. Sometimes talking to the parents on the phone is enough."

Rise and whine

Finally got the little angels off to dreamland and think the hard part's over? Not so fast!

"Any time Hannah goes to a sleepover party, she's in a foul mood the next day," Broos sighed.

It's common for kids (and parents!) to be exhausted and cranky after a sleepover, the result of staying up too late. Parents whose kids have early-morning activities such as Sunday school or soccer practice should consider themselves especially forewarned. Is that a reason to veto this all-important childhood bonding ritual?

Not a chance. Just remember to pour yourself an extra cup of strong coffee while you're making those pancakes.

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