

PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF YOUNG CHILDREN'S SOCIAL PLAY AT HOME: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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BACKGROUND: Play dates are early social events that lie at the interface between family and peer relationships. Despite their ubiquity we know very little about the types of play that children engage in, the benefits and barriers of having play dates, or the influence of differential parental supervision and monitoring.

OBJECTIVE: To qualitatively explore parents' perceptions of play dates and investigate how early peer play in the home may support the development of social and emotional skills, and resilience.

METHOD: 11 semi-structured interviews with parents of children aged 5-6 years enrolled in their second year of formal schooling (Year One in the UK). Thematic analysis was undertaken on transcribed interviews.

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THE PLAY-DATE COMMUNITY

You pick up quickly who the good children are and who the naughty ones are

As long as I thought the parents were nice and like-minded

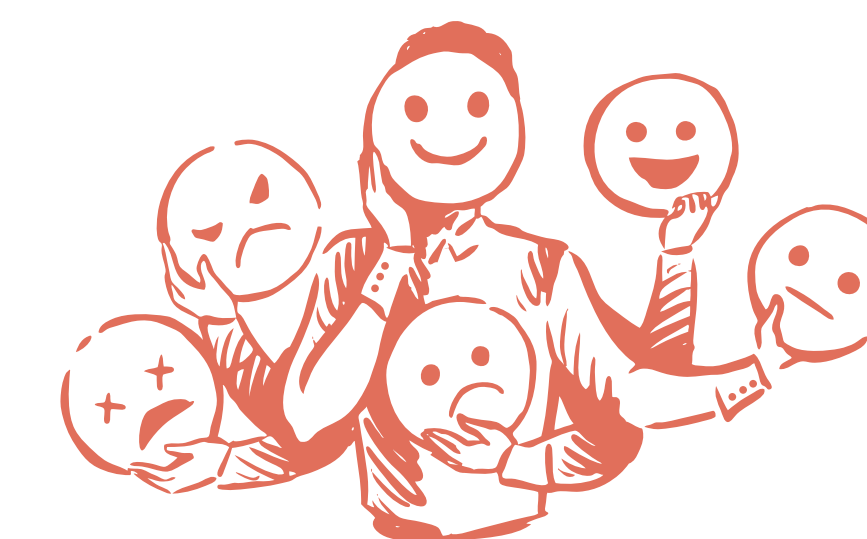
Nowadays children have so many activities after school that finding the time is difficult

I only really allow him to go to play date houses that I know the parents, know the children, and feel comfortable and confident with

Play dates occur between families with existing social relationships or who are perceived to be 'like us'. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds or those with additional needs are more vulnerable to exclusion. Practical barriers, in particular increased after-school structured activities, restrict time available for play dates.



Overwhelmingly, parents consider play dates to be valuable social opportunities that help support the development of social and emotional skills, including sharing, negotiation, resilience, and compromise. However, they also report high levels of stress, including frequent social comparison anxieties, and feelings of effortful social presentation.



PARENTAL AMBIVALENCE

Learning to share your space and your toys and maybe that special toy that you don't like to share very much

It's just an added responsibility

It's good for them to go round to other people's houses, see how other people live...it all helps to shape their world

I've got a friend who doesn't have any play dates and she feels incredibly guilty - she deems her house too small

Play dates have taught them how to play much better

My son would say...'it's much nicer and so-and-so has a big house' and that kind of thing

TYPES OF PLAY

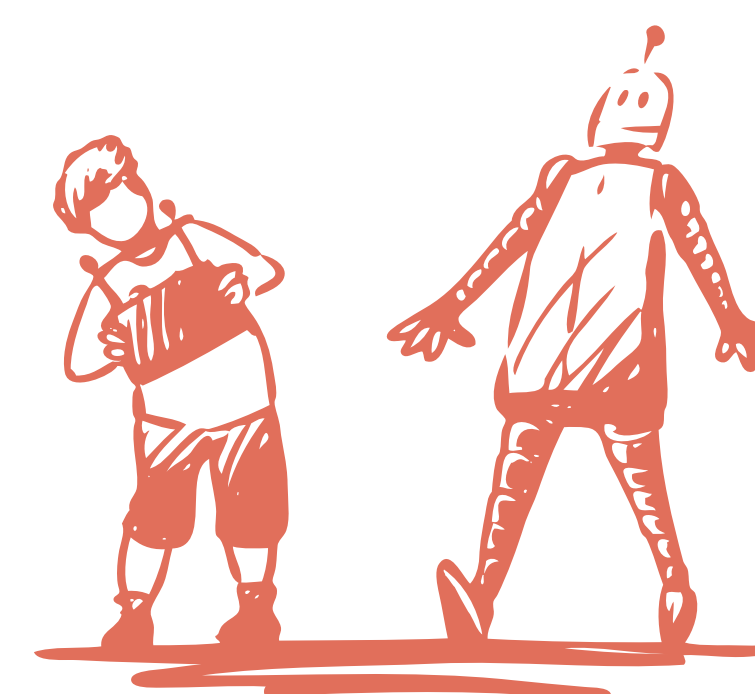
The role-play things that are left to one side in the playroom, they come alive when they have friends over

Invariably, they'll come into the bedroom and they'll even push the door up because they like to be private

They play differently... maybe more freely

They play with what they want, make up a game...I mean they've had a whole day of structure at school

For most children, play dates are times of relatively unstructured, minimally supervised play. Imaginative role-play games are a particular feature with parents reporting that play dates offer unique opportunities for creative, dyadic play not typically observed in more structured environments.



Both parent and child initiated play dates increase sharply during the first year at school. Parents actively manage invitations to try to establish their child positively within the peer group. Direct supervision decreases during the first two years of school while use of technology increases over the same period.



DEVELOPMENTAL CHANGES

A lot of the Reception year was exploring different options and now this year it's very much the same set of people that come over

It was very much play based really, toy based, and now as they're getting older it's more technology

Once we get into the house I just leave them to it within reason

It's gone totally the opposite way now...My friend said the other day, 'and she stayed!' - when asked if parents continued to attend play dates with their school age children

CONCLUSIONS:

- Parents consider play dates to be unique opportunities for peer group integration.
- Play dates include high frequency of unstructured, imaginative play not available in other social settings.
- Close parental supervision and the introduction of screen based activities reduces time spent in creative, imaginative play.
- Access to play dates is not universal: children from disadvantaged backgrounds or whose parents have few social networks are less likely to receive invitations.
- Parental management of invitations may also exclude children perceived to be unpopular or poorly behaved.
- Parental ambivalence and busy schedules may limit access to play dates.