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Other Houses, Other Rules

By Jacqueline Burt Wong From: Parents

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What do you do when your child visits a pal whose family has different ideas about fun and safety? We've got all the answers.

Never Be Shy About Safety



+ ENLARGE IMAGE

"It is actually good for your child to be exposed to other ways of doing things and other families' values," says Bette Alkazan, a therapist and founder of balancedparenting.com, a family- and parent-coaching Web site. "These differences are a terrific opportunity for her to learn when to be a get-along-go-along guest and when she should assert herself." Knowing she can negotiate playtime culture clashes will help you relax when your kid is at someone else's house -- as well as

when the gang is over at yours.

It might feel awkward to ask a mom who's gracious enough to host your child, "Oh, by the way, do you have a swimming pool, and if so, is there a locked gate?" But not only is that reasonable, it's smart. Before you agree to a playdate, scope out the serious stuff: Who will be supervising the kids? Will they use helmets if they ride bikes or scooters? And the biggie: Are there any guns in the house? (Just incorporate this into the general stream of pre-playdate questions.) A parent who's on the same page as you when it comes to safety isn't going to flinch at your questions -- she's going to be happy to have found a like-minded family. On the other hand, if the parent looks at you as if you're crazy for bringing it up, consider that a red flag -- this may not be such a compatible household. If you don't feel comfortable asking the questions or with the answers you receive, have your get-togethers on neutral territory -- say, the local park.

If your intuition tells you that this family's safety standards don't meet your own, don't feel bad about declining invitations altogether or insisting the kids get together only at your house.

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