

PART ONE

How Parents Can Help



Your child needs friends as much as he needs food and exercise. Success in life is influenced by a combination of academic achievement and skill in being friendly towards others.¹ You can help your child find friends.

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Making Time for Friends

The Problem

- I'm not sure my child has the time to have friends, what with homework and all of the activities she's in during the school year. What can I do?

Background: Too Busy to Have Friends?

Our lifestyles today leave children less play time than children in the past had, and pull children away from friendships. Teachers depend more on homework (and parents) to teach children, and that added homework spills over into our children's afternoons and evenings. In more families than in the past, both parents work, so families spend less time together during the week. Some use week-ends for family time. The bottom line is that there is less time for all of us for friends.

We Misplace Our Time

School-aged children average twenty-seven hours of electronic media viewing per week.¹ And that's just an average—some children watch considerably more. This figure also doesn't include

video game play and other computer time. Children are home Saturday morning watching TV, sending instant messages to friends, and playing video games instead of running around and playing with each other. Many parents tell me they are hard-pressed to get everything done, and they are relieved that their children are occupied. But the prevalence of obesity is increasing in children, and the time spent watching electronic media has been targeted as a major contributor.² We are sacrificing companionship and health for entertainment.

We Give Away Our Time

Parents tell me they feel they have to put their child in many different structured activities: soccer, scouts, music lessons, computer class, karate. These activities can effectively fill up their child's free time, but they are left with no time for friends.

Children need time for one-on-one play dates—the best way to make friends. Classes and scouts may be productive ways to meet other children, and sports may sometimes be ways to get exercise, but your child needs enough open time for one or two play dates of at least two hours each every week (kindergarten and first graders start out with shorter play dates). You will need to open up more than four hours to make your child accessible to other children's schedules. Even if you and your spouse work, children have all day Saturday and Sunday for play dates.

Solving the Problem: How to Free Up Time for Friends

Freeing up time may involve some simple advanced planning to make adjustments to your weekly schedule. The key is to weigh the longer term importance of each activity and accept that you can engage in the more important activities.

Step 1: Calculate How Much Time Your Child Has for Close Friends

Figure out how much prime time your child currently has for one-on-one play dates. Prime time is when other children are likely to get together with your child. Include only times when

- You are around to supervise.
- Your child can see a single playmate of his choice.
- Your child can play without any siblings around. This may be difficult for you to arrange, but it will be worth the effort.
- Your child and his friend can choose what they want to play.

Table 1.1 shows typical times for play dates, figuring school ends at 2:30.

Don't include sleepover time (Friday and Saturday after 7:00 P.M.) as prime time. Sleepovers are valuable for children who are becoming good friends, but not for the first few play dates with each other.

If both parents work, then play dates from Monday through Friday are not possible, which leaves only seventeen hours of prime time per week. Now figure out how many hours your child has for one-on-one play dates. If your total is less than four hours per week during prime time, go to step 2.

Table 1.1 Prime Times for Play Dates

Days	Prime Times	Total Hours
Monday through Thursday	2:30–6:00 P.M.	14.0
Friday	2:30–7:00 P.M.	4.5
Saturday and Sunday	10:00 A.M.–7:00 P.M.	17.0
Total prime time		35.5

Step 2: Drop Activities That Don't Yield Friendships

Make a list of all the activities your child has during prime time and how many hours each takes up.

The overscheduled child whose weekly activities are shown in Table 1.2 has no time to develop close friendships. He needs to free four hours for this essential activity. What are the things to cut back? Here are my suggestions, set out in the order in which to drop them. Move down the list until you find enough to drop so that your child has those four needed hours.

Activities to Drop

- 1. TV and video games. These are the least necessary, waste the most time, encourage an unhealthy sedentary lifestyle, and are most easily dropped at the last minute. Schedule a play date to take the place of Saturday morning TV (the TV stays off during the play date).
- 2. Playing with friends of convenience. These might be a child of your friend, a relative, or a neighbor whom your child does not like. Playing with friends of convenience offers none of the benefits of playing with a close friend. If you can arrange a play date

Table 1.2 An Overscheduled Child

Activity	Weekly Time Commitment
Homework	8 hours
Music lessons and practice	4 hours
Play with neighbor's child I baby-sit	1 hours
Little League games and practice	3.5 hours
Religious school	4 hours
Scouts	1.5 hours
Soccer	3.5 hours
Watching TV, playing video games	9 hours
Origami class	1 hour
Total	35.5 hours

with someone your child likes, cancel these other commitments (a week's notice will be sufficient).

3. Teams or scouts with poor adult supervision benefit no one. Your child is better off at home than being yelled at by a coach or left to his own devices.
4. Teams or scouts outside your neighborhood that don't lead to play dates in your home.
5. Teams that offer your child little opportunity for physical exercise (sitting on the bench, waiting turns). These have few of the health benefits of physical activity and may also encourage a sedentary lifestyle.
6. Nonschool instruction, such as origami, karate, or art class. These activities can be fun and can be a place to meet friends. But there is little benefit in meeting friends if your child never gets to know them.
7. Multiple team or scout activities (Little League, soccer, and swim team practice are too much). Don't cut them all out, just the least productive. All you need is one of these activities at any given time for your child. Your child will benefit little from more than one of these activities at a time if he can't have play dates with friends.

Overscheduled children have more than enough of teams and classes. Each of these activities may have seemed enriching when you signed your child up, but look at the total schedule at this point and set your priorities. Think about eliminating the activity that would lead to the fewest play dates. Open up blocks of time by dropping nonschool classes or activities.

Step 3: Drop Activities That Soak Up Your Time

You can't leave play dates for someone else to supervise. You are the best person to be there to make sure things go well. Your time

is valuable and not as productively spent in activities that don't benefit you or your child.

Margaret, for example, is a soft-spoken, pleasant mother of eight-year-old Todd. For the past two years, she has put in many hours as the leader for Todd's Cub Scout den, which has six boys other than Todd. She spends two hours each week planning den meetings, plans and spends the better part of one Saturday each month on a den outing, and spends one hour per month with other den leaders planning Cub Scout pack activities.

In spite of his mother's volunteering twenty-two hours per month for scouts, not one of the other boys has ever invited Todd for play dates. They never invite him to their birthday parties, although they occasionally talk about their parties at Cub Scout meetings in front of Todd. In fact, Todd has no friends at all he can invite to play with.

My heart went out to Margaret when she told me this story. Despite her valiant efforts (Cub Scouts wouldn't exist without parents like Margaret volunteering their time), her child is overlooked by the other children she is helping. Putting this much time into scouts keeps her from helping Todd find children who would be happy to play with him. Here are twenty-two hours each month that she could devote to Todd's benefit. She has three choices at this point:

1. Devote time to arranging play dates with the parents of her Cubs.
2. Look for ways to add Cubs to her den who want to play with Todd.
3. Graciously hand over the den to another parent. She does not owe the others her time. She can tell the other parents she is too busy to continue and they have to find someone else. She can give Todd the choice of continuing with this den, changing to another, or dropping out of scouts.

When I was a Cub master, I saw parents who took choice 3, and no one blamed them; we were glad to have their help while they could give it. The other parents will take over den leadership if they care enough for scouts.

Step 4: Make That Car Pool Work for You and Your Child

Not only do car pools save time, they can also help your child meet children his age who live close by. The common destination gives children something to talk about, and riding in the car (with the radio off) gives them time to talk. Arranging play dates becomes much easier. For example, Darnell's and Clark's moms have car-pooled with each other to get their boys to school. Here's how easily they arrange a play date:

DARNELL'S MOM: Darnell would like to know if Clark can come over to our house this Friday.

CLARK'S MOM: Clark's been asking to play with Darnell, so that I'm sure he'd love it.

DARNELL'S MOM: How about if I just take them over to our house after school when I pick them up?

CLARK'S MOM: That will be great!

Nevertheless, car pools can sometimes work against having friends, as Paul and Joanne found out. They live within two blocks of each other and are good friends. Their sons attend first grade at the same school across town, so they have arranged a car pool there. But Joanne's son behaves poorly at Paula's house, in the car, and at school, and Paula's son does not like to play with this boy. But he does anyway since he doesn't have any other choices.

Although Joanne and Paula are friends, the two boys are not. They are forced to be together in the car and have play dates with each other out of desperation, which is preventing other relationships from sprouting. Perhaps there is a boy in the area whom Paula's son likes and attends the same school. Changing

car pools or adding him to the car pool would give Paula's son a more suitable child to play with.

Tips on Forming Car Pools

- Don't make them permanent. Set them up as temporary, so that if you need to change them, no one's feelings will be hurt.
- Set them up so they save you time (but also do your share of the driving).
- Turn a ride home into a play date. Arrange play dates at pickup or drop-off times to save additional time. The other parent can do the same on a day she drives.

The Next Step

You and your child now have more time during the school year to devote to the serious business of making friends (for time management during summer vacation, read Chapter Fourteen). If your child has children to invite over, read Chapters Ten and Twelve before you make your next play date. If your child has difficulty being a good host, read Chapters Twelve and Thirteen before scheduling a play date. If your child spends too much screen time or time playing by himself, read Chapter Two. If your child has trouble meeting new friends, read Chapters Five and Seven. If you could use a few tips on how to connect with other parents to find friends for your child, read Chapter Six.