

Other Kids' Rules **Ruth A. Peters, Ph.D.**

Okay, your eleven-year-old daughter has just returned from school with a sleepover invitation from a new classmate. Usually you know and like the child and her family and it's no problem. But what do you do when the child is new to you, or even worse, when you've picked up on some questionable parental attitudes at a recent basketball game or PTA meeting? Hopefully you've developed a family code of ethics that your child understands and abides by in terms of behavior and safety issues. But what about your daughter's new friend—do she and her family respect the same values and rules?

Well, probably not--every family is different and what's important to you may not carry the same weight with other parents. You may be a neat freak or stuck on nutritional issues, but are flexible when it comes to kid appearance or bed times. In my experience as both a mom and a psychologist these are usually not worth winning the battle and losing the war over. In other words, the small stuff can be seen as negotiable and shouldn't determine who your kids are allowed to hang out with to spend their free time. Where the line should be drawn, though, involves safety and moral issues.

As they grow, children will come in contact with other kids and families whose code of values differs in many ways from yours. What's important is to focus upon the big stuff—the behaviors allowed that can be harmful or dangerous, or the exposure to morally inappropriate ideas or information.

So, let's take a look at the forbidden fruit that may crop up at friends' homes and the most politically correct ways in which to handle these issues. Obviously, these will change as your child grows, but there are a few generic principles that I've found that apply to most situations:

- **Take the rap for being nosy, overprotective, or neurotic.** I've learned from my clinical practice that folks are much more open to dealing with **your** self-criticism than the perception of being criticized themselves. My personal favorite when I'm in this sticky situation is to begin the conversation with something like "I know that this is a bit neurotic, but..." Or, a good fall-back is "I'm known for my over-protectiveness, but...", and then I fill in the blank with my concern. I might add "Will the kids be allowed to watch R-rated or scary movies during the sleep-over?" If the answer is "yes", then I'd request that something else be chosen, letting it be known that my kid scares easily and will be a frequent visitor to our bed for the next few weeks, which I would like to avoid. This tactic not only gives the other parent permission to consider me the loopy one, but it also provides the information that I need as well as sending the message that my kid shouldn't be allowed an HBO free-for-all.
- **If your child has a medical problem, bring it to the attention of the host parent(s), but keep it short and simple.** Allergies, especially to certain foods, are quite common, and the uninformed host may be planning to serve chocolate milk and

chocolate chip cookies for snack time. Don't assume that your kid, who is highly allergic to this confection, will 'fess up and warn the unsuspecting host. Alerting her to the situation in advance will save everyone a heap of trouble! Also, if your child is allergic to cats or other dander-producing animals check to see if there's a portion of the house where the critter is not allowed—that should be a safer environment for the kids to play in. Giving this data to the host in a pleasant but informative manner will make the play-date or sleepover much more comfortable and successful for everyone. But, please don't overdo it—you can scare the wits out of the other parent with too much detail, and most likely your child will not be invited over again as she may be perceived as too much trouble or as a liability.

- **Never, ever be reticent to inquire about real or toy weapons.** It's not only your right, but also your responsibility to know if the kids will have access to BB guns, "toy" bows and arrows, or other play weapons. Many families do not allow their children to play with toy weapons, as the parents believe that these toys are "gateways" to the real McCoy, or that playing with a toy bow and arrow can be dangerous. (My own son, at age three, was stuck in the eye by a friend's toy arrow—luckily it was a small cut and did not damage his vision.) If a weapon-free environment (be it toy or real) is part of your family's code of values then this issue is most likely worth digging in your heels. Many of the Moms and Dads that I work with are concerned not only with play weapons, but also with real guns being in the host homes. I've found that it's usually best to be direct and forward about this issue—no beating around the bush here. Ask the host if they possess a gun and how it is stored. If you feel even the least bit uncomfortable with the answer—**don't allow your child to visit their home.** It's just not worth your worry and the possibility of injury. Perhaps the weapon can be removed during your child's visit, but many folks won't go to the trouble to do so, or you may have doubts that they will actually follow-through with the temporary removal.
- **Don't win the battle just to lose the war.** Socialization at every age is important to your child's cognitive and emotional development. You can only be the cookie-Mom so many times, and then you have to let go and allow your child to explore other people's homes, values and rules. To lessen your anxiety, try to get to know your child's friends and their parents intimately—via telephone, personal visits, play dates together at the park, or volunteering at school activities and field trips. With little ones you'll keep a close eye on their friends' environments, and most likely you'll migrate to inter-family relationships that reflect your own family's code of values. As your kids grow, you should never allow them to stay in a situation that you feel is immoral or unsafe, but you may have to give a little when it comes to the smaller stuff. For instance, perhaps the kids will be offered more junk food than you're comfortable with, or the bedtime is too late for your taste. Think about it—will this really hurt your child a week from now? Probably not, as long as you let her know that this is not what you would allow in your home. Tell her that other people have different values and rules, and within certain parameters you're willing to let her experience them. If you see, though, that your kid is becoming rebellious to your

own rules or developing an “attitude” because the Jones’ do it differently, then it may be time to tone down her visits with the Jones clan.

- **Finally—stick to the five W’s—the Who, What, When, Where and Why of the visit.** Especially as your children grow into the tween and teen years, about all you may get from the kid is to find out who’s doing what with whom, when it will happen and where, and why in the heck they want to do it anyway. Let your kid know that ultimately he or she is responsible for the behavior and that later and greater freedoms (driving the car, attending sleep away camp) will depend upon the honesty and common-sense shown now while visiting with friends.

As a parent, one of your most important roles is that of protector as well as provider. Being politely assertive, asking appropriate and pointed questions, and keeping a sense of humor as well as a sense of balance are requisite when guiding your children into and through friendships. Involvement with your children’s friends is key in helping you to gain information upon which to base your judgements, and ultimately decisions, about acceptance of other kids’ rules!