

“When Is It Appropriate to...”
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Keeping the balance between “what’s okay” and “what’s convenient, appropriate, or too weird” is often tough to accomplish as a parent. Let’s say that your four-year-old daughter is with her father at the fast food establishment and she has to go to the bathroom, and she means business when she says “Right now!” No time for a quick run home...is it okay for Dad to take her into the Men’s room if there is no “family friendly bathroom”? How about the sticky situation that develops when your six-year-old son’s best friend just happens to be a girl, and they want to have a sleepover at your house? How do you balance the kids’ needs and desires with concerns of safety and propriety? Let’s take a look at some of these close calls and how best to handle them.

When you gotta go, you gotta go!

Okay, it’s Daddy-daughter time and the twosome are at their favorite fast food joint having breakfast, letting Mom sleep in for a change. All’s well until the kid announces that she’s got to pee, and from experience Dad knows that he’s only got a few minutes to help her get the deed done before an accident occurs. As it’s a small place there isn’t a family-friendly (genderless) restroom, and he has to decide whether to send her in alone to the Ladies’ room, or hope for the best and venture into the Men’s room. When I first considered these options, my knee-jerk response was to do a quick fall-back to my normal stance—that *safety* comes first, always. In this case, it would be to opt for the parent being with the kid, taking her into the Men’s room so that she could be supervised properly. But then I began to think about urinals and the possibility of her viewing male genitalia belonging to strangers and I began to wonder if my safety consciousness was overriding good judgment. So, I performed a scientific poll...immediately. Well, it wasn’t really that scientific, and it did take only a few quick phone calls. I spoke with five pediatrician friends—three female and two male, and asked for their thoughts. Interesting results, but please take into account that this was a quick, “what-would-you-suggest” kind of analysis. All five agreed that the little lady should be with her father in the Men’s room, and that helping her to undress if need be and either standing in the stall with her or just in front of the closed door was the absolute best option. In fact the two guys noted that men stand in front of urinals in such a manner that their genitalia would not be easily exposed to the daughter if Dad quickly herded her into a stall. The three female pediatricians focused also upon safety and having a parent or older sib watching the youngster closely. One suggested to shorten the actual time in the Men’s room by not having the child wash her hands there, but that Dad could moisten some napkins in the water fountain and at least give the kid a quick hand wipe. Of course she suggested that *everyone* should have a gallon or so of Purell in their glove compartment, and that a thorough germ-killing could then be accomplished in the car.

My initial thought was that this was appropriate until the age of nine years or so, and my very unscientific poll concurred. One pediatrician suggested until age eleven years, while the others hovered around the ages of nine and ten years of age. Their thoughts were that

by third, fourth or fifth grades the child should be, depending upon her maturity level, safety-conscious enough to efficiently go into the Ladies' room, get the job accomplished, wash her hands, and leave without talking to anyone. Dad should remain right outside the main door to the bathroom (whether it is in the restaurant, mall or movies) so there would be an immediate pick-up as she exited the restroom. Sound a bit paranoid and untrusting of the world. Yep...it is. But, when it comes to kids, safety is paramount.

A Co-Ed Sleepover?

It's usually a no-brainer when your six-year-old son asks to have his best friend spend the night, right? Well, if his bud happens to be a girl then the situation becomes a bit more complicated. I love it when boys and girls still accept each other as buds at this age—it's sweet and suggests that these two kids are not yet tangled up in the gender-specific rules that often pervade, and tarnish, childhood. Now, if these two have been having sleepovers for years (perhaps she's his cousin, or your best friend's daughter), then you probably wouldn't think twice about the appropriateness of the situation. Hopefully they haven't played doctor yet (which wouldn't be out of the question, kids do get curious and fall into the "I'll show you mine if you show me yours" stage). And, if they have behaved themselves there's absolutely nothing wrong with this arrangement. However, if this is your son's first time requesting his girl-as-friend to spend the night, you may wish to consider making it a more "public" affair. Consider some sleeping bags on the floor of the living room, perhaps letting them fall asleep in front of the TV. Don't make a big issue out of the gender situation, just suggest that it would be more fun to camp out, eat some popcorn and watch their favorite movie. If they have been best buds for a while, most likely you know the little lady very well and trust that they truly would behave themselves. Hey, they are six-year-olds and are not thinking about having sex. Get a grip and realize that it's *your* mind that's wandering into that murky area! However, her folks would probably appreciate your concern about decorum and supervision, and if your child spends the night at their home would probably follow your lead. Now, if your eleven-year-old son makes a similar request, and this isn't a girl whom he has grown up with as a best friend, I think that it would be a better idea if she came over for a play date, parent supervised movie or other excursion. When kids begin to hit the tween stage they need to accept the new, perhaps unnecessary but wise, limitations that become socially acceptable as they mature.

Too Old for Night Fears?

I remember when my son, who bravely (on hindsight impulsively) would wake up in the middle of the night at age three, and I'd hear the television on with the kiddo watching his favorite VCR tape! Alone. Surrounded by the dark. Oblivious to the creepy night noises that pervade all houses when Mom and Dad go to bed. I thought it was kind of weird, but he'd watch for a while and head back to bed...alone...in his own bedroom. And then it happened—at about the age of four years he finally figured out that the dark is SCARY. That his bedroom was FRIGHTENING. That only his sister's room or his folks' bed would save him from the monster in the closet. In other words, the kid finally got it—you're *supposed* to be afraid of the dark when you're a child, especially when you're alone! No more midnight video watching for him—if he woke up (we insisted that

he went to bed in his own bedroom) he was allowed to come into another bedroom (dragging a blanket and a pillow), and sleep on the carpet. Sure, he got stepped on occasionally, but it was his responsibility to pick a safer place to plop down. As long as he didn't wake anyone up (which meant staying out of the bed) the security of his sister's or parents' presence allowed everyone to get a good night's sleep. And, this occurred occasionally until he was eleven or twelve years of age. So, if your child is afraid of the night and all that it brings consider a compromised position—forget that the parenting books insist that he or she sleep in their own bed. Who cares? Too soon he may not even want you hanging around in his bedroom and you'll long for the closeness. Trust me...he'll won't go off to college still needing his folks to sleep with. Relax...respect his security needs...and get some sleep yourself!

Should the Bed-Wetter Be Discouraged from Sleepovers?

Lots of kids are still incontinent throughout the night even through the elementary school years. It's usually a genetic condition—Grandma will note that Mom or Dad wet the bed until the fourth or fifth grade and can remember the embarrassment and limitations endured. Is it appropriate to encourage or allow sleepovers if your child still wets the bed? Kids with this problem whom I've interviewed differ in their thoughts. The socialites so enjoy sleepovers that they are willing to pack a Pull-Up in their overnight bag and surreptitiously wear it beneath their jammies. They can discreetly remove it in the bathroom in the morning, put it in a plastic zip bag and pack it with their other stuff. If their friend is aware of the problem it's usually a non-issue, but one that isn't to be shared if other friends are also spending the night. Other children, more sensitive to the potential for embarrassment, refuse to sleep out, insisting on friends spending the night at their own home. If the plastic sheet on the bed is fodder for embarrassment, the kids usually stay on sleeping bags in the family room, watching TV or playing video games. The point is that sleepovers are a normal, fun, bonding experience that most children enjoy. Bed-wetting shouldn't be an obstacle at any age. If your child truly wants to experience this kind of fun, then help accommodate his or her needs. Practice with various types of Pull-Ups to assure that the urine is adequately contained. Don't force your child to sleep over others' homes, or shame him into feeling "different" if he's afraid to do so. Work with the kid—if he's more comfortable having others in his own home so that he can change his pajamas or underwear discreetly respect his desires. Urinary incontinence is usually outgrown by the end of the middle school years. Your pediatrician can offer specific training techniques, or perhaps medication, that may also be helpful.

Discipline in Public?

Call me crazy, but I *respect* seeing a parent disciplining a child in public, rather than ignoring the rude or inappropriate kid behavior. Watching a Mom or Dad placing a five-year-old in time-out in the department store (even if the kid is fussing or crying) warms my heart! This evidences parental guts and a determination to reinforce that consequences occur regardless of where the meltdown happens. Of course the discipline would be inappropriate at the table in the middle of the restaurant, especially if the kid is pulling the mother-of-all-meltdowns. She doesn't need the audience, and the rest of us really don't need to hear the wailing because she was denied dessert and Dad is sticking

to his guns. Take the kid to the bathroom and stand her in the corner with your back to her. Or, leave the restaurant for a few minutes and put her in the car seat. Sit in the car but don't talk with her. Let her be bored, miss the fun at the table, and perhaps consider not throwing crackers at her brother the next time she's told to knock it off. The important thing is to reinforce that you will provide discipline even in public places. It's not only appropriate to do so, regardless of the age of the child, but necessary in your attempt to raise good kids. Older children can lose home privileges (electronics time, bed time) for acting up in public as well. Once your children accept that you will handle, not ignore, the situation you'll see better cooperation and compliance when in public.