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First Sleepover

*It's an exciting – and memorable – night for all kids.
But how do you know if they're ready for it?*

By Lynn Armitage

You knew the day would come eventually – your child's first invitation to sleep over at someone else's house. She's giddy with excitement and has talked about nothing but the three P's all week: playtime, popcorn and pillow fights. Secretly, though, you wonder if she's ready. Once all the chit-chat dies down and she finally tucks in, you worry that you'll be getting that tearful call in the middle of the night: "Mom, I want to come home!"

Sleepovers are a rite of passage for all children and an important part of growing up, says Susan Bartell, Ph.D., a nationally recognized child psychologist and author. "They promote independence and help a child learn how to separate from parents." They also teach kids to speak up for themselves outside the home, says Dr. Bartell. "The more they do that, the more confident they become, and the more comfortable they are in negotiating the world."

But how do you know if your little bed bug is grown up enough for the first Big Night under someone else's roof? Let our ABZzzzs of sleepovers help you decide.

FIRST, THERE'S NO "RIGHT" AGE

Sleeping away from home is a BIG deal to kids. Some will have their bags packed in a nanosecond. Others, well ... they're not so sure about it. Because children develop at different paces, there's no benchmark age for sleepovers, says Heather Huszti, a pediatric psychologist at Children's Hospital of Orange County in Southern California. "There are some very mature 6-year-olds. Others are never ready. You really have to gauge your own child."

If your 8-year-old is leaving sticky notes on your coffee cup and taped to the bathroom mirror -- "Please, can I go, Mom? PLEASE!" -- odds are, she can handle an overnighner. Or maybe your son is able to

play at a friend's house for hours without you. "Can they tolerate separation? Can they share? Can they play cooperatively? These are important markers in determining their readiness," says Dr. Huszti.

But if your child seems anxious about the upcoming sleepover at his best bud's house, you may want to hold off for a bit. "For some kids, it's not the sleeping, but change, in general, that is hard for them," says Dr. Bartell.

READY, SET . . . GO SLEEP OVER!

One great way to prepare your child for that first sleepover is to first let her stay overnight at her grandparents' house or with your trusted friend. She knows them, they love her -- you know it's a safe place. It's a win-win for everyone, says Sharon Fried Buchalter, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist and author of two iParenting Media Award-winning books. "Practicing ... can be very helpful. It can help ease the transition into peer sleepovers."

Before the big event, buy a sleeping bag (a must-have item as more invitations come rolling in!) and let her sleep in it at home to get used to it. When packing her bags, don't forget her favorite stuffed animal or blanket -- maybe even a flashlight, for fun. And tuck in a surprise love note to help with YOUR separation anxiety.

Whatever you do, don't call her that night. "Tell her you'll see her in the morning and you're excited to hear all about it," says Dr. Bartell. She'll feel trusted by you and get the message that it's safe to be there.

YOUR HOME OR BUST!

If you're hosting the sleepover, what can you do to make this landmark night memorable and easy on everyone in the household? For answers, we turned to Jo Frost, a 20-year child-care veteran, better known as "Supernanny" on the so-named ABC hit series.

Jo suggests all the bells and whistles, such as "great games, movies and fun, treaty snacks," as well as sleeping bags in the living room. But to establish some order to the inevitable off-the-wall silliness, Jo says to spell out your house rules clearly and establish a lights-out time, right up front. To help them wind down, read them a story. "Arthur's First Sleepover," by Marc Brown, fits the occasion perfectly.

But be realistic and flexible, too, Supernanny counsels. “What child and parent really got a good night’s sleep on the first-ever sleepover? It was all just too exciting!”

COED SLEEPOVERS – YES OR NO WAY!?

Should you let your 7-year-old son stay the night with his good friend Molly? It all depends, says Dr. Buchalter. “If family members are long-term friends who you and your child are close to, and the children ... hang out on a regular basis, then the sleepover will probably work out nicely.” Even so, she says, a coed sleepover should be carefully supervised by parents, with clear-cut boundaries such as separate beds and separate bath times.

However, Dr. Bartell doesn’t think coed sleepovers are such a good idea because there’s “too much opportunity for exploring and experimenting, which can get kids in trouble and be awkward for parents.”

In the end, it’s your judgment call.

WHEN IT’S OK TO SAY, “MAYBE ANOTHER TIME”

Your daughter is pushing hard to sleep at the house of “my new best friend!” But you don’t know her or the parents. What to do? “If you don’t know the parents well enough to know what goes on in their household, don’t allow the sleepover,” says Dr. Bartell. Your child might be exposed to fights between parents or an out-of-control teenager, and that will be frightening to her. “Safety isn’t only about physical safety. It’s also about emotional safety.”

You can always open up your doors, instead, says Dr. Huszti. “Say, ‘Until I have the chance to talk to Johnny’s parents, we’re going to wait for you to sleep there. But if you want to bring Johnny here, you can do that.’” This lets you regain control, she says, and shifts responsibility to Johnny’s parents.

(Sidebar): 10 RULES FOR A KNOCKOUT SLUMBER PARTY

Now that you’ve conquered the casual sleepover, celebrate with a slumber party! Professional party planners Jeanne Benedict, of

Celebrations.com, and Penny Warner, of Balloon Time Helium Balloon Kits, offer these tips to make the Big Night memorable:

- 1. Pick a fun theme:** Consider a “Beauty Makeover Party” or a “Krazy Karaoke Party.” Brainstorm ideas with your child.
- 2. Make creative invitations:** Match them to the theme. Include a checklist of things to bring and pickup times.
- 3. Set the stage:** Decorate with theme-inspired décor, like hanging up movie posters for “Movie Night.”
- 4. Plan fun games:** Plan activities around your theme. Invite a stylist to give makeovers or take turns playing “Rock Band.”
- 5. Feed fab food:** Let them make their own pizzas. Sugary treats are expected, too. But balance them with fruit kabobs or natural sodas.
- 6. Make space to spread out:** Clear out furniture in the family room to keep everyone together.
- 7. Wind down:** Dim lights and pop in an age-appropriate movie. Rent two in case they reject the first one.
- 8. Don’t let siblings crash the party:** Keep them entertained elsewhere.
- 9. Serve a power breakfast:** Cook up pancakes or something fun and easy in the morning.
- 10. Clean up:** Before parents arrive, have a “clean off” challenge. Give the winning team goody bags.

Lynn Armitage is a freelance writer in Orange County, California, and former editor of two parenting magazines.