

Sleepovers for 3-Year-Olds



The slumber party used to be a special event, usually convened by ad-

olescent girls and anticipated days or weeks in advance. Now even 3-year-olds seem to be having sleepovers. In Family Matters, Hilary Stout looks at the pros and cons of letting children spend the night with friends.

(Article on Page D3)

Family Matters / By Hilary Stout

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LATE LAST SPRING, Ellie Klein, a mother of 9-year-old twins in Atlanta, decided the time had come to set some limits. We're not talking about restricting TV or time on the computer. We're talking about sleepovers.

Ever since her son and daughter entered second grade two years ago, sleeping over at friends' houses—or having friends sleep over at theirs—has been an obsession for them. Birthday parties are almost always sleepovers, and even regular play dates frequently turn into requests to spend the night.

"It's really gotten to be this mania," Ms. Klein says. The family's new rule: each child gets two sleepovers a month, and never on back-to-back nights.

Sleepovers used to be a special event for kids. But now they're getting a lot more common and start at much younger ages—

one Chicago mom, Katrina Parker, hosted a toddler slumber party for her daughter's third birthday.

This raises all kinds of problems and dilemmas for parents, who sometimes they feel like innkeepers. And when their kids are lodging elsewhere, they worry about everything from what movies are being shown to whether there's a gun in the house.

In some ways, this phenomenon simply reflects the growing precociousness of young children's activities. Five-year-olds compete in organized team sports and take chess after school, so spending the night away from home perhaps isn't such a stretch. Moreover, in families with two working parents (or a working single parent), evenings may be easier time than after school to schedule get-togethers for the kids.

The upshot is that many parents find themselves sucked into a sleepover cycle, reluctant to say no but unsure of what's appropriate. "It's a very hot topic," says Vanita Braver, a child and adolescent psychiatrist in Morristown, N.J., who says queries about sleepovers—like what is the best age to start—are some of the most frequently asked questions in her outpatient practice. (Her answer to the age question: probably not before 6 or 7, but it really depends on the child and the family's comfort level.)

One dilemma is how to ask about rules and supervision at someone

else's home without sounding judgmental. One Connecticut mother is known for quietly taking a safety matter into her own hands by packing smoke detectors with her kids' pajamas. Jean Kunkhardt, co-director of the Scho Parenting Center in New York, advises prefacing an awkward query with the disarming, "I may be neurotic, but..."

There is also, of course, the universal day-after scenario: The kids are exhausted and very, very cranky. Amy Drescher, a mother of 7- and 9-year-old boys in Cheshire, Conn., has learned never to schedule any activities the day after a sleepover. The other day was classic: Her sons had two twin 7-year-old brothers over for the night. It was little-boy heaven: they played

kickball in the backyard, videogames inside, watched "The Goonies" and got to stay up till 10 p.m.—a full two hours later than their usual bedtime. The next morning they all played happily until 11, when the guests went home.

Then, almost immediately, the repercussions began. Her youngest son fell to pieces in a crying jag, he fought with his brother, and he was so exhausted that he couldn't figure out what he wanted for lunch, leading to more frustrated tears.

But for all the fallout and logistics, sleepovers can also be wonderful rites of passage and important bonding experiences. Ms. Klein thinks they help her children's sense of independence and teach them how to act in someone else's home. "They are big events in the lives of our children," Dr. Braver says.

So how to placate the child who isn't quite ready for one? Lynette Harris's daughter is 14 now, but when she was 5 and eager for a sleepover, Ms. Harris came up with a masterful idea: A "Not Sleeping Over Party." The guests arrived in pajamas, cuddling blankets and stuffed animals. They ate pizza and popcorn on the sofa sleeper in the TV room. Then, the Harrises drove everyone home—a thrilling 60 to 90 minutes after their bedtime—and they fell fast asleep in their own beds.



Illustration by [unreadable]