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Summer friends are great and all, but . . .

As summer approaches, I am struck that parents tend to fall into two distinct camps. There are those who, by May, are dying for a change of pace: “I am soooooo ready not to have the kids on such a schedule! I can’t wait to not hustle us out the door to school by 8 am.” Against such admirable cheerfulness, of course, there is my camp—the parents like me who, when faced with three months of “freedom, flexibility, and fun” are already wondering about how in the world we’ll fill the time!

Whatever your take on summer, for better or for worse, it will surely consist of some sort of lifestyle change for your elementary school-age children. Gone is the daily structured interaction with school friends and in its place are often seamless hours with neighborhood kids. Indeed, this is some of the best stuff of summer. But a new kind of peer group brings new challenges, too. Take just a few minutes to consider what issues your child may face as he or she navigates the often Machiavellian world of the summertime neighborhood.

So much time together/ too much time together. Some of my fondest memories are of endless summer hours with Nikki, my best-friend-from-the-block. We’d be riding bikes by 9 am, head to the community pool by 11:30, convince somebody’s mom to take us to the mall about 4 pm, and then beg and plead to spend the night together. Days like that are great, but they do require a certain stamina simply to remain amicable. Pay attention to identify when relations have begun to break down from the sheer exhaustion of being together! It may be tempting to put the onus on your child—“If you keep fighting like that, Nikki will have to go home. . . .” When, in reality, such incentives may create undo pressure on your child to put up with bullying and other mistreatment. Instead, use your own informed judgment to decide when it is time to take a break for a few days.

Home-field advantage. At school, everyone is on neutral territory—an elementary-version Switzerland. During the summer, though, a lot of play-time happens in kids’ homes—yours, the neighbors, etc., and there is a lot of politics involved in home play! For example, while kids feel pride in having friends to their own home, they may be protective and possessive with toys. Talk with your child about practices that

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make sense when friends come over. For example, can your child “put away” a special toy that is fragile or he or she just doesn’t want to have to share? Also, make sure your child understands that his or her friends very likely have the same sensitivities. Simple planning like this can help keep your child less vulnerable to kids with less-than-great motivations.

“Please can Janie spend the night?” The appeal of spending the night with a friend is a powerful force. Little else seals best-friend bonds like staying up until 2 am, eating junk food, and watching television. The closeness of all-nighters can be an additional source of strain, however. Make sure you have talked with your child about appropriate behavior and boundaries in the bathroom and while changing clothes. Not only do you want to make sure that your child isn’t intimidated or bullied in these especially sensitive circumstances, you have a fairly unique opportunity to reinforce your family guidelines about privacy and appropriate behavior.

Older and younger. In most schools, kids spend much of the day, if not all of it, segregated by age. Even in Montessori classrooms, the age span is fairly small. During the summer, however, your child is much more likely to be playing with children both younger and older. Have you spoken with your child about conduct in such situations? Does he or she understand that being older should be used as a force for good—modeling excellent behavior for the younger kids? Or as a younger member of the pack, does your child understand that mistreatment by older kids isn’t acceptable? Also your child needs to know that there may be certain activities that the older kids are allowed to do that aren’t appropriate for him or her. The start of summer is an excellent time to have an open-ended conversation about age, maturity, and discretion.

Crossing the street and other landmines. It seems as if all of us parents these days talk about the relatively greater freedom we had when we were school-age: playing unsupervised around the neighborhood until dark, for example. Your kids may be on a tighter rein, but in summer, he or she will very likely be outside more. Does your child know the basic rules for crossing the street—both your family’s standards about when and where they can go as well as basic safety? Do they know where they are allowed to go and, if they are old enough to be unsupervised, and when you expect them to check in? Reviewing these rules will not only keep your kids safer, but can both allay some of your fears and avoid a few disciplinary moments, as well.

Going it alone. It seems universally true that kids seem to have more opportunities for independence in the summer. Perhaps it is juggling childcare or simply the longer hours of sunlight. Whatever the reason, though, you will want to make sure that your kids understand the basic rules for staying safe from sexual predators—especially as summer approaches. Do they know that their private parts are private, to tell you if anyone is inappropriate, even if they are told to “keep it a secret”? And do you know which adults are going to be with your kids at other people’s homes and activities—including older brothers and visiting relatives? Have you made a point to meet the adults involved? Perpetrators target kids they believe are vulnerable and less supervised. How can you convey to other adults that you are, in fact, paying close attention?

I hope your summer gets off to an excellent start. While this is a short list of issues worth thinking through, these are all certainly worth your attention. Whether you are cheerfully anticipating the change—or a tad worried, even—let’s make this summer a safe one.

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