

“Why Playdates are Helpful”

BIA recommended frequent playdates for my son, Ben. I had a hard time with them at first. Here I was just getting used to the diagnosis myself. And then I had to “sell” mothers of typical children on the merits of having their child play with my child. My child, who had a fuss if he wasn’t first, knew few games, had very little interest in other kids, and had a tendency to pounce and scratch. I didn’t see it, and to be honest I was afraid. I was afraid Ben would fail, that he wasn’t ready, that he would put kids off, not create friends.

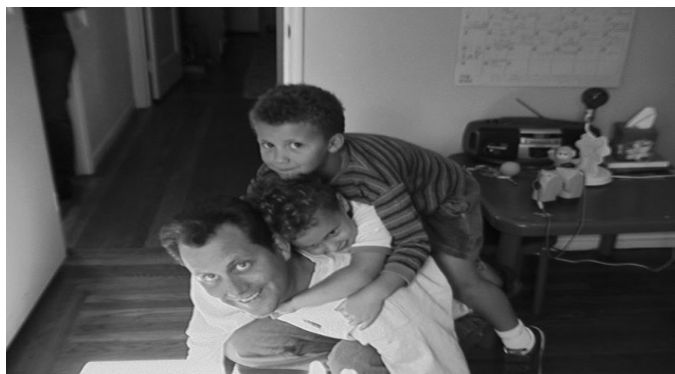
First, I tapped into my old friends, mom’s group and neighbors’ pool of 4-5 year olds. Several moms said no and one or two kids said no. I had to steel myself against the rejections, but the real truth is, all kinds of kids are rejected for playdates, and it has more to do with the family or the child than your special child. This I believe strongly. There are more kids out there, so don’t give up. When I asked for playdates I came out clear and strong – “My child has Asperger’s, or difficulty with social skills. We did regular playdates, facilitated by the coolest adults around. Kids made lists, played games, did art, got snack, and if Ben had a hard time, either one of the staff or I was there to help him through it (these episodes became more and more rare.)”

I did a lot of schmoozing with parents about the playdates. They loved to know how their kids were doing and also to hear how Ben was progressing. *I truly believe that the majority of parents learned a lot from the experience as well, and it probably helped parents to answer questions when their kids came home and mentioned something odd that Ben did. I think it helped to open parents minds to understand and accept a “different child,” as well.* Almost every kid that played with Ben wanted to come back.

The first 3 months of playdates, (3 to 4 times a week) were the hardest. We were quickly building Ben’s repertoire of skills so he could play in games. He also had a hard time dealing with the additional stimuli, more people, new rules, other people’s ideas. There was a brief time when I wondered if we were pushing him too much. Whenever that thought would come up, Ben would have a breakthrough soon after. *What I learned from this period was don’t give up when the program seems difficult for the child. It is, but they are learning, taking it in, and one day they’ll use what they learned.*

It really helped me to participate in and observe closely these playdates. I, Ben’s mother, was the one that worked with Ben when we had friends over on weekends, who filled in when tutors cancelled, and who had to help Ben play with his younger brother David. I watched to see when BIA would step in and organize things, when they would step out and see what might happen, or when they felt that it was time to end a playdate. *I learned their strategies for intervening, yet not being too much of a presence so as to keep the children oriented to one another. I used all of these strategies and learnings in the rest of our family life and it really added to the work Ben was doing by nurturing his orientation to his peers.*

One of my favorite strategies about the way to work with Ben was to engage him in the activity you want to teach him as often as



Ben and brother play “Pile On Daddy”

possible – to make a habit of it. He’s not going to learn to play with other kids by playing with me or by talking about it. And the more time he spends in playdates, the more he’s going to be accustomed to playing with other kids and want to play with other kids. Towards the 6-8th month of the program, we had almost 5 playdates per week. When I did leave a day without a playdate, Ben began asking why didn’t I have a playdate today and on his way to school in the morning he would ask me who is my playdate today.

BIA really emphasized getting playdates from Ben’s class. It was more difficult for me, because these people were new to me and to Ben, but we did it. We saw a direct correlation between the playdates and the play with the kids at school. *The more often he played with a child in a playdate, the more often he related to them at school.* He might talk about them more in the home as well. *The schoolmate playdates really helped to increase Ben’s affection for kids and motivation to join kids in play at school.*

There are a couple of other reasons I really enjoyed and benefited from the BIA facilitated playdates. Not only did I learn to facilitate, I learned to play. Firstly, I learned to play with Ben the way other kids do, using their language, mannerisms, their kind of play. Secondly, I learned to play with all kinds of kids. When I substitute for my other son’s preschool now or Ben’s kindergarten, I’m right there with the kids, with big expressions, lots of ideas, and the knowledge to work out a fuss, a fall, or a fight. Ben’s Mom is fun, Ben is fun, let’s do a playdate. It keeps the good feeling of other kids and family coming towards our family despite Ben sometimes being a little different or aloof.

It sounds like a lot as I read all of this, but the truth is, it made a difficult time more fun. Our house was full of kids, tutors, trainers, parents and others. It made it more fun for me and it helped Ben get used to a lot of people and friends in the house. He’s now much more able to handle it when people come over socially or for play, not only because his repertoire is expanded, but because he truly enjoys it. - **Lisa Greenberg**