



Setting Up Play Groups

Children need opportunities to play with other children. Sometimes this happens naturally, sometimes it does not.

Transportation difficulties, busy schedules, and other family responsibilities sometimes seem to get in the way of parents and children getting together to play, have fun, and exchange ideas. Organizing a play group often can help families provide a way to enrich children's lives in a meaningful way.

A play group offers children opportunities to

- be with other children in a group setting,
- learn from other adults,
- learn how to get along with other children,
- participate in new and different activities,
- become more independent, and
- develop self-confidence.

How does a play group work?

A play group consists of several preschool children who meet regularly at each other's homes to play, with the parent in that home planning activities and supervising the group. Play groups generally are planned to meet the needs of the children, and are not considered to be a formal child care arrangement. However, such groups may provide some free time for parents when their children are in other people's homes.

Who is in a play group?

The children do not have to be the same age, but it is easier to plan activities if children are close in age, skill level, and interests. The size of the group should be small. As a general rule, the younger the children, the smaller the group size. Four three-year-olds can be quite a handful over several hours. However, a group of independent four- and five-year-olds might be a bit larger. Six should be a maximum number, particularly if there will be only one adult supervising.

How are play groups organized?

Parents whose children are in the play group should meet to discuss their goals and plan schedules. Half-day groups usually are best for preschool children, and once or twice a week may be better than daily.

Often "play time" is loosely organized and activities generally are up to the parent in charge. However, some play groups agree on a typical schedule such as a planned activity, snack, and a free play time. You may find that parents also want to discuss beliefs about naps or rest time and thoughts about balancing indoor and outdoor activities. Parents also will want to share information about their child's interests and skills.

Each supervising parent should have a list of emergency phone numbers for each child in the play group, as well as a medical release form for the doctor or the hospital authorizing the play group parent to sign in case of an emergency.

How do I prepare my child for a play group?

Some children and parents in your play group may not know each other. Spend time talking to your child about the play group. Arrange for parents and children to meet and get to know each other. This may be an informal afternoon at someone's home for refreshments and play time, or a more special outing like a picnic. Whatever your plan, provide ample opportunity for parents and children to get to know each other.

Your child may be hesitant about your leaving the first time the play group meets. This is not unusual. Preparing your child in advance may help. It also might help for you to stay a little while or perhaps the entire first session. You may decide as a group that parents will stay for the first session at each new house, retreating as the session progresses. This may provide the support your child needs. It is important for your child to feel secure and know that you will be there when it's time to go home.

A play group experience can be a valuable part of your child's life. When well organized and planned, it can be an enriching experience for you and your family.

If you are in the process of selecting or changing child care, you may want to read Child Care Checklist for Parents, PM 1805. You may request a single copy free from Extension Distribution Center, 119 Printing and Publications Building, Iowa State University, Ames, IA 50011-3171; 515-294-5247; e-mail: pubdist@iastate.edu.

For more information

The following publications are available on the World Wide Web at the following location: <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/Pages/pubs/>

- Child Care Checklist for Parents, PM 1805 (also available in print),
- Child Care in Your Home, PM 1807,
- Child Care Cooperatives, PM 1808,
- Child Abuse and Child Care, PM 1810.

Child Care That Works (CCTW) has other resources for parents and children from Iowa State University Extension to families. Contact your local extension office for details. Also check the CCTW Web site: <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/Pages/families/life/CCTW/home.html>

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