



# TIPS FOR PARENTS

## A Guide to Safe Sleepovers



Spending the night away from home can be exciting but also tricky for children and their parents. The concerns will vary by the age of your child as well as the nature of the relationship you have with the hosts of the sleepovers. Below you will find information about different concerns that might arise at various ages as well as questions you may want to consider before allowing your child to sleep over with family or friends.



### Young Children

Many children may first spend the night at their grandparents' or cousins' houses. Some children may find it easy to sleep away from home at a young age, especially if it is with family that they know well, but others may need some practice before they are able to stay all night in someone else's home. Parents can help prepare young children for sleepovers by letting them bring their favorite stuffed animal or blanket or reading a book about sleepovers. But parents need to be prepared—especially during the first few sleepovers—for a call in the middle of the night to

come get their child. While that may not be ideal, it is important to be there for your children when they feel unsafe. Even if you know they are safe where they are, your child may not feel safe. Your willingness to support them in those moments, even in this small way, lays the foundation for trust that will become increasingly important in later years.



### School-aged Children

As children start to build friendships, they may be invited to spend the night at their friends' homes. Your child may be the only other child invited or they may be part of a larger group of friends, which can pose new concerns for parents. Many times, you may not know your children's friends' parents well. You'll likely realize that how you do things in your home is not the way others do it. For example, some families may allow their children to watch movies that may be scary or what you consider to be inappropriate for your child. Communicating with your child about your rules as well as talking with the family hosting the sleepover can help keep your child safe and help calm your nerves.



### Teens

Sleepovers during the teen years may pose additional challenges, as this stage of development is a time when more risky behaviors, such as sneaking out, may become a concern. While you want to give your children more independence at this age, you still need to monitor their activities to keep them safe. How



you go about that might look different than it did in earlier years. For example, you may need to work with your teen on setting some safety guidelines. You can discuss ways to check in with each other through text messages or family tracking apps. You may need to have conversations with them on how to handle new situations that might arise. For example, discussions about dangers such as drinking and driving or adults not being at home to monitor activities may come into play during this stage. While these conversations might be hard, it is important to prepare your children for unexpected situations.

Gun safety, sexual abuse, drug and alcohol exposure, and other potentially dangerous situations are common topics in the news. Parents need to be prepared to have hard conversations to help protect their children from unsafe situations that may occur at someone else's home. By opening the conversation with yourself, your child, and other families, you can explain your expectations and standards regarding your child's safety. Conversations like these can be uncomfortable, but they are necessary.

The goal of this guide is to help families think through questions they should consider before allowing their child to sleep over with friends or family. By asking questions, you can make an informed decision based on your rules and family values. You may find that some of the questions below do not apply to you and your family, but these questions may be important for other families. Since this is meant to be a conversation and not an interview, leave space for questions from the other family and open time for further discussion. These questions are not designed to make the final decision for you; rather, they are a starting point for important conversations.

It is important to be respectful and open when asking and answering these questions. The goal is for families to know that their child is in a safe home. Not only does this help to keep your child safe, but it also allows you to set clear boundaries for yourself and your family, and it teaches your child to do the same.

## Questions to ask yourself before allowing your child to attend a sleepover

- Do I feel comfortable with the family that will be watching my child?
- Do I think my child is ready to attend the sleepover?
- Would I feel more comfortable hosting the sleepover?
- How far away from home is the sleepover?
- Do I feel comfortable enough with the family to have a conversation about sleepover concerns?

## Creating expectations and boundaries with children

- Tell your child that they need to ask about sleepovers in advance so that you have time to prepare for these conversations. This time limit can be adjusted to whatever works best for your family (for example, a day in advance vs. two weeks in advance). This time also allows you to contact the other family and discuss any expectations or questions.
- Tell your child that, if at any point they are uncomfortable or would like to come home, they can ask to be picked up. You may want to pick a code word or emoji that allows you to know when your child feels uncomfortable or needs you to get them out of the situation.
- If your family uses a tracking app, discuss rules about keeping location services turned on. Talking to your children about why you are having them share their location is important. These tools are for safety, not for spying on them.
- Talk to your children about family rules and how you would like those to be followed regardless of who they are with or where they are.



## Questions to ask your child before allowing them to attend a sleepover

- Do you feel comfortable sleeping over at your friend's house?
- Is there anything you are nervous about?
- What would make you more comfortable while at their home? For example, taking their own pillow or stuffed animal may help them sleep better away from home.
- Go over scenario questions to help prepare your child for potential safety concerns. For example, What if your friend's older brother asks you to hang out alone in his room? What would you do?
- What is our code word if you are ready to come home early? Pick an emoji or phrase that you do not use often to reduce confusion. For example, you may choose a rain cloud emoji as a sign your child would like to come home. If your child sends that emoji, you know they would like to be picked up.

## Questions to ask sleepover hosts

- Are there any younger or older siblings in the home?
  - Will they also have friends spending the night?
  - Will the other siblings be spending time with my child or spending the night in the same room as my child?
- Will a trusted adult always be in the home?
  - Will there be any additional adults in the home who are not the parent/guardian of the child?
  - Can I have the contact information of all the adults who will be in the home during the sleepover? This way you have multiple points of contact.
- Are there guns in the home?
  - How are they stored?
  - Are there any ways that guns might be accessible to children in the home?
  - Do your children know where the guns are or how to access them?
  - Have you ever had an incident with guns in your home?

- Are all medications in the household safely stored and out of reach of children?
  - Do you have a safety plan in place if a child accidentally accesses where medication is stored?
  - If my child needs medication, are you willing to learn how to administer their medicine and comfortable with giving them their medicine? Will you call me before giving them medicine?
- What are your rules about screen time?
  - Do your children have unlimited access to the internet?
  - How do you control what your child watches?
  - What technology do you allow your children to use (TV, computer/laptop, iPad, iPhone, etc.)?
  - You can also give the family a list of technology that you allow your child to use in the home. For example, "My child has an iPad that he uses to watch YouTube Kids, but we do not allow him to watch regular YouTube."
- Do you have a pool/hot tub that is easily accessible to the children?
  - What are your family's rules on pool time?
  - Will a trusted adult be supervising their pool time?
  - Is anyone in the home CPR certified?
- How late do you allow your child to stay up/out?

## Information to provide the hosts

- Your contact information
- At least one other emergency contact
- Where you will be during the sleepover
- Any allergy concerns (food, pets, etc.)



## Resources

[Guidance on Safer Sleepovers from Dee Norton Child Advocacy Center](#)

[Safer Sleepovers from Alliance for Children](#)

Little BIG Chats, a series of books that can be purchased in a pack or individually. Specific books from this series that could help regarding safe sleepovers:

- *Secrets and Surprises: Learning the difference between secrets and surprises*
- *My Safety Network: Introducing a Safety Network (3–5 trusted adults a child can go to if they feel unsafe)*
- *Families: Celebrating diversity in families*

Other books about safe sleepovers:

- *Ira Sleeps Over*
- *This is My Body—I Get to Choose: An Introduction to Consent*
- *Yes! No! A First Conversation about Consent*
- *We Listen to Our Bodies*
- *Toys, Tools, Guns, & Rules: A Children’s Book about Gun Safety*

Visit [tips.extension.msstate.edu](https://tips.extension.msstate.edu) for additional parenting resources.

**Publication 4017** (POD-07-24)

By **Sophia Manley**, MS, Extension Associate I, and **Lori Elmore-Staton**, PhD, Associate Professor, School of Human Sciences.

Copyright 2024 by Mississippi State University. All rights reserved. This publication may be copied and distributed without alteration for nonprofit educational purposes provided that credit is given to the Mississippi State University Extension Service.

Produced by Agricultural Communications.

Mississippi State University is an equal opportunity institution. Discrimination in university employment, programs, or activities based on race, color, ethnicity, sex, pregnancy, religion, national origin, disability, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, genetic information, status as a U.S. veteran, or any other status protected by applicable law is prohibited.

Extension Service of Mississippi State University, cooperating with U.S. Department of Agriculture. Published in furtherance of Acts of Congress, May 8 and June 30, 1914. ANGUS L. CATCHOT JR., Director