

Ask Ellen

Our etiquette expert helps you navigate parenthood's most perplexing situations

Party-Spot Stealer

Q A mom whose kid is in the same class as my son asked me where I'm having his birthday party. I told her I'd found a great new place with a rock-climbing wall. Now she's booked her kid's bash there—for the week before mine. Can I tell her to change to another locale?

—Second in Line and Steaming

A This woman has already put down a deposit. You can't ask her to lose that. Besides, she'd whisper to other mothers about how you're so deranged you want her to alter her plans so you can have the site all to yourself.

But that doesn't change the fact that she should have checked with you first. If you can tell her, in a joking tone, "Hey, you stole my party spot!" go for it. You'll also be doing a public service; she needs to be more considerate. If, however, you can't say those words without a forehead vein bulging, don't risk looking like a fool. Remember: Your party will still be fun, simply because you and your boy are at the center of it.

Are you worried that a jaded little guest will grumble aloud, "Rock climbing again?!" Shuck it off; the child will be whooping it up by cake-cutting time. Concerned that you'll look like a copycat party planner? From now on, remain absolutely mum about your celebration ideas until your invitations have been stamped and mailed.

Moaning Over Loaning

Q In October, my daughter's teacher asked parents to lend the class books we had on outer space for a lesson on the solar system. I sent in a beautiful, photo-filled coffee-table tome on the Apollo missions, signed by the author. Months went by, the class finished the project, but my book didn't come back. A few weeks ago, I sent the teacher a note about it. No response. Next, I snagged her in person. "I'll look into it," she promised. I've heard nothing. How do I get my book back? I can't search the classroom.

—Ready to Book Her

A Why not just keeping asking? So what if you're pestering her; she did misplace your book. Politely tell her—in writing or in person (which is preferable, as it has more impact)—that you hate to bug her, but you're wondering if she'd had a chance to look for it. Restate the title and author; maybe she's perplexed over which item is yours. Check in even a couple more times. Then give up. Maybe somebody walked off with it. In the future, don't lend anything you can't stomach losing; even a diligent teacher can forget to lock up one night. Or lend the thing, but arrange to have the teacher return it the next day. She can always ask your daughter to bring it in again.

By Ellen Welty



Playdate Ditcher

Q One of my 8-year-old daughter's classmates has had her mother call twice to arrange a playdate. Wouldn't you know, my child doesn't think this girl is fun. Both times, I told the mom that we were unusually busy as a family that week. The second time, she was momentarily silent and then said, "Oh, well, we'll try again soon." I gushed that it would be great. Call me chicken, but is there a better way to handle her next call? I'm torn between telling the truth and making more excuses.

—Dreading the Call

A A woman I once knew used to announce to mothers who asked about playdates, "Sorry, my daughter doesn't want to play with yours." It chills your blood, doesn't it? She was otherwise a nice person—baked bread for friends, did charity work on top of her job—but she had a misguided notion that the truth was best here. The other mothers were left to wipe expressions of anger or hurt off their faces,

so that their poor kids nearby wouldn't sense what had just been said, and had to quickly think up some innocuous yet plausible reason there was to be no playdate.

Be "busy" again. It's the best you can do. But don't misleadingly say that it would be lovely to have her keep calling. Instead, sigh: "Oh, we're so swamped. I wouldn't blame you for giving up on us." Maybe she'll take the cue and say to her kid: "Honey, she's busy again. Perhaps we should call other friends."

Stiffing the Sitter

Q Recently, a friend was really strapped for childcare, so I let her leave her 10- and 11-year-olds with Gloria, my nanny. My daughter's just shy of 5, so this was clearly no playdate. I assumed the mom would pay Gloria for her troubles, but I found out she gave her nada. Now this friend wants to drop her children with my sitter again. Should I ask her to fork over some greenbacks this time?

—Bitter Over the Sitter

A Sure, although "Fork over some greenbacks" probably isn't the exact way I would put it. You won't really know whether your bud is a tightwad until you've tactfully asked her to ante up. Chances are, as she sped off that day, she thought to herself, "Tra la la, my kids won't be any trouble to watch!" But if babysitting were truly such a picnic, we'd all be doing it. There's also the possibility that your friend merely forgot to open her wallet. We've all had ditzzy days.

First, ask Gloria if she minds being responsible for extra kids who are clearly not there to play with your daughter. If she is willing to pitch in, she should be paid. Wouldn't you see red if your boss asked you to work an extra job for

zilch? Then gently tell your friend that "Gloria would be happy to take care of your children on Friday at 3:30, but she needs to be compensated X dollars per hour." Your sitter counts on you to look out for her.

Flipping About Tipping

Q My friend Nora, our four young kids, and I all recently ate at a kid-friendly restaurant. The children, while waiting for their hamburgers and hot dogs, entertained themselves by tracing designs in salt, shredding napkins, etc. Yeah, the table and floor underneath were a mess, but I still thought Nora was nuts when she said that we should tip the waitress extra for "putting up with" our brood. Cleaning is a waitress's job. The place advertises that it welcomes families. Who's right?

—Puzzled Patron

A Look at it this way: You too run a kid-friendly establishment. Yet if I were to bring a small gang of hooligans to your home and hand them your saltshaker, saying, "Art time, kiddies!" you'd feel less welcoming, yes? If I then let them rip, rip, rip all your napkins, flinging pieces hither and yon, and then we all departed without saying a GIANT thank-you, well, would you ever want to see our faces again—no matter how cheru-

bic they may be? Would you feel we had treated you fairly? "Kid friendly" does not mean "Slime up the place all you want." It means that dribbling and squirming and a few extra crumbs are kindly tolerated. It means the eatery never runs out of ketchup.

You both ought to have left the waitress a little more moolah and taken a moment to apologize for skipping out on the pigsty—which would have taught your children, by example, that it is very good to be appreciative of those who go the extra yard to take care of us.

Ellen Welty, who has been dispensing advice for years to friends, family, and the readers of many national magazines, lives in New England with her husband and two children.

"MY MORTIFYING MOMENT"

My 6-year-old dressed for school in a Hawaiian floral shirt his uncle had sent him. Over that, he wore a fringed cowboy vest his grandmother had bought. When another boy's dad saw this outfit, he said to me, "Isn't it a parent's duty to keep a kid from looking like that? Har, har, har..."

"He wouldn't have listened to me," was my lame reply.

The comeback I wish I'd thought of: "I bet when you were a kid, you wore a few things that some parents thought were stupid, too. I hope they were kind enough not to say so, though."—R.L. in Paducah, KY

Stumped over a parenting etiquette dilemma? Got a mortifying moment to share? Write Mom Manners, FAMILY LIFE, 530 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10036; fax 212-467-1248; or e-mail etiquette_familylife@timeinc.com. Include your name, address, and daytime phone number (we'll keep all info confidential). Sorry, but Ellen can't respond personally to letters.