

parents

Mothers of contention

While their children play, modern mums wage war over rival notions of parenting. **KAREN GLASER** reports on the middle-class hell that is the playdate

Fred had just sunk his toddler teeth into Joe's arm for the second time that morning. Joe started howling furiously and Fred's mum, Clare, apologised, equally furiously. But Joe's mum, Sarah, wasn't playing ball. The last time the boys met, Fred had whacked the three-year-old hard in the face with his intergalactic light sabre. Twice. "If you can't control your child," said Sarah slowly and deliberately, "I'm afraid we'll have to stop seeing each other, Clare. This situation is unfair on Joe and I must put him first."

How I admire Sarah. That conversation took place at a playgroup I frequented several years ago, and she hasn't spoken to Clare since: their five-year friendship finished there and then.

I have a Clare in my life right now, and we are long overdue a conversation about what I see as her lax parenting. We met a couple of years ago through our daughters, now both 5, but our rapport goes beyond mummy friendship. Charlotte and I agree on most of the big questions, except maybe the biggest of them all: how to raise the next generation.

This is shamelessly subjective, but I'd characterise my parenting as thoughtful and structured, and Charlotte's as laissez-faire. I try hard to ensure that my daughter Leah is asleep by 8pm; Charlotte's child Molly goes to bed whenever she likes. Leah eats a reasonably balanced diet; Molly seems to subsist on pitta bread and chocolate.

On the infrequent occasions when I admonish Leah, I insist that she listens and absorbs. Charlotte, on the other hand, doesn't actually do telling off: she believes in negotiating with five-year-olds instead.

None of this would matter terribly were it not for the playdate, the 21st-century word for what used to be known as going round to a friend's house, and one of the few occasions when the usually private business of parenting is on public display. The very young, you see, usually

attend playdates with their parents, almost invariably mothers. When the mums sing from the same parenting songsheet, these get-togethers are a joy and are relished by thousands of stay-at-home Middle Britain mums. But when women have different ideas about childrearing, a playdate can turn into a social minefield as each mother tries to show respect for the other's values while not compromising her own. It is a hard balance to strike.

This is where I am with Charlotte. I have become so silently critical of my friend's parenting that I dread these meetings at which, in the interests of harmony, I let my five-year-old do pretty much what she likes. So I go to comical lengths to avoid attending them. When Leah has a playdate at Molly's, I drop her off at the door and scarper. I can handle my daughter having chocolate for dinner every

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other week: I just don't want her to see me sanction it. And when it's my turn to have Molly, I either make sure it's when Charlotte is working, or I rope my partner into looking after the girls, or I pretend we are going to the local softplay area, a place that Charlotte hates as vehemently as Molly loves it. I'll do anything, in short, to avoid all four of us being in the same room for more than five minutes.

"Why don't you just talk to Charlotte?" my partner asks. "If her casual parenting puts you between a rock and hard place, why don't you tell her?" Because I don't think our friendship would survive the conversation, and my daughter's friendship with Molly is more important.

My friend Vicky thinks that my predicament is common. "I have a friend who arrives unannounced at 6.30pm

when I'm bathing my two kids before bedtime. It drives me nuts, but I've never said anything. I imagine she sees me as an uptight mum and I don't want to give her the chance to tell me so. I'm vulnerable about the way I bring up my kids. I think most women are."

Lydia Tischler, a child psychotherapist, says: "If you have strong feelings about your child's diet you should make it clear from the outset. If you are explicit, people know where you stand. It sounds to me as if you and your friends are not convinced by your own rules."

"There are so many parenting experts in the media and on our bookshelves telling us how to bring up our children that women no longer trust their own instincts. At the same time our competitive generation desperately wants to get it right. This is why we are so judgmental about other people's parenting," says Sarah Tucker, the author of *The Playground Mafia*, a novel about the politics of the school gate that comes out on September 21.

And working women are particularly disparaging, says Carol Levine, a psychotherapist and mother of two. "Mothers judge each other all the time. And working mothers, like me, are particularly critical: we feel we are more capable than stay-at-home mums. The fact is that most middle-class mothers work hard at parenting, and that's why we get so hurt when our parenting is criticised."

This could explain another of my Charlotte gripes. As well as negotiating with, rather than upbraiding, her own daughter, my friend thinks it's fine to negotiate with mine when I am trying to read her the riot act. I suspect that Charlotte feels she is being supportive, but I find her intrusions undermining. When I tell Leah off for yelling, I don't want another mother asking my five-year-old why she feels the need to raise her voice. It feels as if I am being told off too.


Tucker reckons that I probably am. "It sounds as if



she's letting you know that you are not doing your job properly," she says. "However gently or smartly they do it, when another mother criticises a child, they are criticising its mother – and they know it."

Another friend commented recently: "I sometimes think a playdate is nothing more than a socially ambitious mother training her kid to be the same. I think I'll be doing fewer of them in future."

She may have a point, but not in relation to Leah and Molly, who love each other's company: their friendship has nothing to do with their mothers' misplaced social ambitions. They are also unlikely to bite chunks out of each other: their play revolves around Barbies rather than intergalactic war. I have, in short, no reason for curtailing the girls' contact. Their playdates and my fretting are here for the long haul.



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