



Conversation Guide for Caregivers:

Navigating Sleepovers with Children's Consent,
Boundaries, and Body Safety in Mind

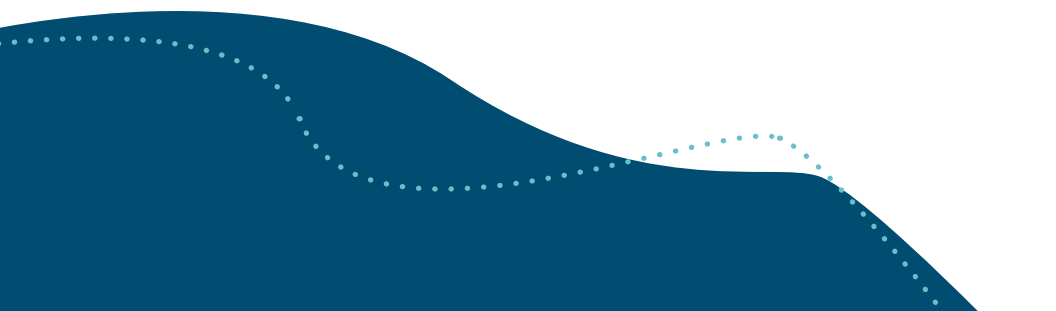




This guide offers practical, trauma and violence-informed advice for caregivers navigating decisions about sleepovers. Sleepovers can be wonderful opportunities for children and youth to grow, gain independence, and improve their social connections. However, it's also natural for parents and caregivers to feel a mix of excitement and concern, especially when it comes to keeping children safe from potential harm. Our goal at The Dragonfly Centre is to empower you with the knowledge and tools, not to alarm or increase anxieties.

Growing awareness surrounding the prevalence of child sexual abuse, and, for some caregivers, possibly their own experience(s), has many families approaching sleepovers with caution. Some are choosing to skip sleepovers altogether, while others are setting clear boundaries and safety plans to help their child navigate these situations confidently. Both choices are valid.

Preparing your child and proactively setting expectations can ensure that the experience remains as positive and safe as possible. Whether your family decides to allow sleepovers or not, open conversations about safety, trust, and body autonomy are powerful tools that will support your child far beyond one night away from home.



Caregiver Concerns

It's normal and natural to worry about sleepovers. Many caring parents feel torn between the excitement of sleepovers and wanting to keep their children safe. You might be nervous about the potential lack of supervision, bullying, exposure to inappropriate content, or even unwanted physical contact. These concerns are valid, you are not alone in feeling anxious. Acknowledging your worries is the first step, it means that you are a thoughtful caregiver looking out for your child's wellbeing. This guide will validate those feelings and provide strategies so you can approach sleepovers with confidence rather than fear.

NOTE: Trust your feelings, if a situation doesn't feel right, it's always okay to say no or delay a sleepover.



Weighing Pros & Cons

Before deciding on sleepovers, it helps to weigh the potential benefits against the risks. Every family and child is different, there is no one-size-fits-all answer. Consider these benefits and risks when deciding whether sleepovers are the right fit for your family.

Benefits/Pros:

Social Development: Sleepovers offer children the opportunity to build and strengthen friendships. It allows them to practice social skills, such as communication, sharing, and problem-solving in a relaxed, informal setting. These experiences can deepen their relationships and provide a sense of belonging.

Independence and Responsibility: Spending a night away from home teaches children to be more independent. They learn to manage their belongings, follow house rules in a different environment, and navigate situations without immediate parental support. It can help boost their confidence and sense of responsibility.

Increased Emotional Resilience: Sleepovers can expose children to new experiences and situations, such as being away from their parents or managing different routines. This can help children develop emotional resilience and learn how to cope with feelings of homesickness or uncertainty in a safe environment.

Building Trust and Communication: When children participate in sleepovers, it provides an opportunity for parents to communicate openly with the host family about expectations, boundaries, and safety. It can build trust between parents, children, and other families, strengthening community relationships.



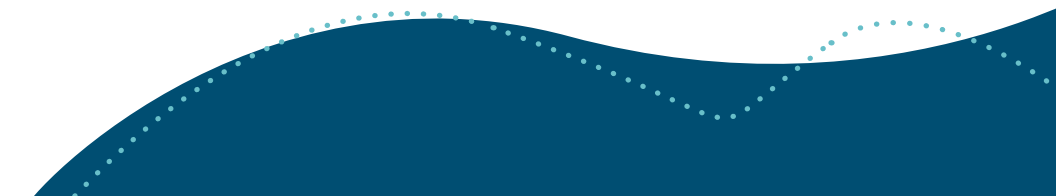
Learning to Share and Compromise: Children often share sleeping spaces, games, or activities during sleepovers. This teaches them the value of sharing and compromising, as they work out how to handle differences in preferences or play styles. It can also help them navigate group dynamics and conflicts in a healthy way. When attending a sleepover, children learn the importance of being a good guest, showing respect for their host's space, following house rules, and being considerate of others. This teaches them valuable etiquette and life skills that can extend into other areas of their lives.

Enhanced Creativity and Fun: New opportunities may arise when a child is spending time with a different family and environment.

Cultural and Diversity Exposure: Sleepovers offer a unique, informal way for kids and teens to experience different cultures and perspectives firsthand. By spending time in another household, they're exposed to different:

- Customs and traditions (e.g., food, family routines, languages, religious practices)
- Communication styles and values
- Social norms

Strengthened family bonds: Planning or communicating about sleepovers encourages communication and trust between parents and kids. This gives children a sense of independence and responsibility, which boosts confidence and trust within the family. When speaking with host families, it can create a wider support network and fostering a sense of community.



Cons or Possible Risks:

Safety Concerns: When your child is sleeping under someone else's roof, you have less control. You may worry about lack of supervision, the presence of other adults or older kids, or unknown risks in that home (like unsecured weapons or unsafe behaviour access). There's also the concern (however rare) of abuse by either adults or other children.

Child's Readiness: Not all kids are ready for a full night away. Younger children (5-7) in particular may not recognize unsafe situations or know how to respond. If a child is very shy or not assertive enough to say "stop" to someone older, they may be more vulnerable. A child who still wakes at night, has accidents, or has nightmares might struggle more in an unfamiliar setting.

Emotional Stress or Trauma Triggers: Kids who have a history of trauma or anxiety might find sleepovers especially challenging. Even a child without prior trauma could become very distressed by an incident at a sleepover. The **idea here isn't to catastrophize**, but to be mindful. For some kids the fear of the dark in a strange house or an accidental exposure to something scary (like an older kid showing a horror movie) could be upsetting. Caregivers should weigh if the child can emotionally handle the environment.

Sleep Disruptions: Sleepovers can lead to disruptions in children's sleep routines. Staying up late, sleeping in a new environment, or having trouble settling down can affect their sleep quality, which may lead to fatigue or moodiness the next day. Poor sleep can also impact focus, behaviour, and overall health.



Homesickness: For some children, being away from home and their parents for the first time can trigger feelings of homesickness, anxiety, or distress. This can be especially true if they're not used to being away from their family or familiar surroundings.

Exposure to Conflicting Family Values: Every family has its own set of values, traditions, and rules. Children may be exposed to practices, language, or attitudes at sleepovers that differ from those of their own family. This could lead to confusion, or in some cases, introduce unhealthy behaviours.

Sometimes, sleepovers can involve watching movies, playing video games, or engaging with online content that is not age appropriate. Without proper oversight, children might be exposed to violence, sexual content, or other material that could be harmful to their development.

NOTE: Remember, the vast majority of sleepovers are harmless fun, but staying informed will help you create the conditions for a **safe**, positive experience. When considering sleepovers, it's important to remember that not all risks come from adults.

Child on Child Abuse

When considering sleepovers, it's important to remember that not all risks come from adults. Research shows that approximately **40%** of child sexual abuse victims are abused by other children, often older or larger youth whom they or their caregivers know. This doesn't mean abuse will happen at any or every sleepover, instead it highlights the need for vigilance and open communication with your child. Being aware and ensuring the sleepover environment has appropriate supervision and clear rules about who will be present in the home, including the ages and relations to the host family, play key parts in sleepover safety.

What Does That Mean For You? It means being aware that abuse and boundary violations can happen from children and older teens too.

Adult-on-child sexual abuse often involves an adult who is granted **unsupervised access** to a child and is **viewed as a trusted authority**, such as a family member, teacher, or community leader. The adult may use **distorted justifications** to rationalize their actions, often engaging in grooming to manipulate and control the child emotionally and psychologically. In many cases, the perpetrator has a history of **addiction or substance abuse** or has experienced **previous trauma or abuse** themselves, which may contribute to their harmful behaviour, though it does not excuse it.



Adult-on-Child Sexual Abuse

Power and Control

Desire for power and dominance: For many adult perpetrators, the abuse is not about sexual desire, but about exerting power and control over a vulnerable child. This dynamic of power imbalance is central to many instances of abuse.

Manipulation and coercion: Adults who abuse children often manipulate and coerce their victims, making them feel powerless, confused, or even responsible for the abuse. They may use emotional, physical, or psychological tactics to gain control over the child and silence them.

Opportunity and Access

Lack of supervision: Adults who have regular access to children—such as family members, teachers, coaches, or caregivers—may take advantage of that opportunity to exploit children. These positions of trust provide a way for the abuser to groom the child and manipulate them into silence or compliance.

Isolation: In some cases, perpetrators isolate children from others or manipulate family situations in ways that reduce the likelihood of detection. A lack of support systems or open communication can increase a child's vulnerability to abuse.

Distorted Justifications

Grooming behaviour: Grooming is a process in which the abuser builds trust with the child, and often with the child's family, to gain access and manipulate the child into sexualizing the relationship. This can involve emotional manipulation, gifts, or affection, making the child feel special or loved. Perpetrators may try to convince the child that the abuse is normal or that the child "wants it."

While it's rare for such incidents to occur, it's important to be proactive and take measures to ensure that children are safe and protected during social gatherings like sleepovers. Prevention, open communication, and clear boundaries are key. If you would like more information on topics surrounding child sexual abuse, please visit the Knowledge Hub tab located on the homepage of thedragonflycentre.com

Prepare for Possible Challenges

Preparing ahead of time Fosters Adaptability, Enhances Problem-Solving, Reduces Anxiety, Boosts Confidence, Increases Success.

Addressing Anxiety and Fears: Discuss how they can express if they're scared, such as missing home, feeling uncomfortable in a new environment, or not liking certain activities.

Supporting Bedtime Comfort: If your child struggles with separation anxiety or has a bedtime routine, explain how they can express their needs. For example, bringing a comfort item from home, like a stuffed animal or favourite blanket, can be helpful.

Cultural Awareness and Respect: Discuss that each family may have different rules and customs. Teach your child to be respectful of those differences while also maintaining their own boundaries and values.

Handling Peer Pressure: Discuss potential situations involving peer pressure. Reassure them they don't have to participate in any activity (like eating certain foods, watching a specific movie, or playing a game) if it makes them uncomfortable. Encourage your child to be an advocate for their own needs and comfort, even in social settings.

There is no wrong answer. You can be a loving, careful parent whether you choose to allow sleepovers or not. What's important is making a **thoughtful choice**. If you do allow a sleepover, doing some preparation and safety planning (next sections) will reduce the risks. And if you decide to skip sleepovers entirely (at least for now), that's a valid choice, you can seek alternative ways for your child to have fun with friends (late-evening playdates, campouts in your own yard, etc.). This guide will help you either way by outlining precautions and conversations that bolster safety in any out-of-home scenario.

Pre-Sleepover Planning:

Thorough prep work before a sleepover is key to ensuring it's a safe experience. This means talking with the host parents to vet the environment and talking with your child to equip them with knowledge and a plan. Don't worry about coming off as overprotective, most responsible parents will understand and appreciate your openness. Here's how to plan:

Open Communication: Have a Pre-Sleepover Discussion With Your Child

This pre-sleepover discussion between caregivers and the child should take place as far ahead of time as possible, allowing for adequate time to thoroughly discuss.

Gauge Interest: Confirm that your child genuinely wants to attend the sleepover and feels comfortable doing so, free from peer pressure. Openly discussing their feelings; Maybe they've had some friendship troubles at school with the friend who has invited them for a sleepover, and they don't feel comfortable spending the night at their house. Or maybe, they are very eager to spread their wings and enjoy a fun friend sleepover! A conversation surrounding interest will help solidify the sleepover plans.

Discuss the Sleepover Details: Find out the planned activities, who else will be there, and any special rules the host family may have (e.g., curfew, screen time limits, sleeping arrangements). Ensure your child knows what actions to take if uncomfortable with certain activities or media content.

Discuss Expectations: Outline what they can expect during the sleepover, activities, the environment, who will be there, animals that may live in the home, sleeping arrangements, and any specific rules they should know about.

Reinforce Consent: Teach your child that they always have the right to say "no" to activities at any point, even if it's after they've arrived. Introduce safety strategies like using a confidential family code word or having the X-Plan to signal when they want to come home immediately and discretely.

Speak to Your Child About Safety and Boundaries

Boundary Setting: Teach your child about boundaries and how to confidently establish and communicate boundaries. Ensure that they understand the importance of immediately expressing discomfort and reinforce that they are never at fault or to blame for other's inappropriate actions.

Exit Strategies: Reiterate that they can call you or leave the sleepover at any time if they feel unsafe or uncomfortable. Make sure they know how to reach you, some options maybe to write the phone number(s) on a paper inside their child's overnight bag.

Emergency Planning: Ensure your child understands how to reach you or another trusted adult in case of an emergency. Let them know how to handle situations that don't feel right. Explain that their body clues are important, and to listen to their bodies.

Respect Consent in Social Situations

Respecting Boundaries: Educate your child on the importance of respecting the consent and boundaries of others, whether it's about personal space, playing certain games, or activities like sleeping arrangements.

Empowering NO: Assure your child it is completely acceptable and necessary to decline uncomfortable activities and equally important to respect when peers say "no." Let them know that they can always still be friends even if they say no.

Talking with the Host Family

Start by having a frank, friendly conversation with the host parent or caregiver(s). You might do this on the phone ahead of time, or in person when dropping your child off (but don't wait until drop-off to ask big safety questions, have the important talk at least a day or two prior to the date of the sleepover so you can decline the invite if needed). Some topics to cover:

Exchange Contact Information: Before the sleepover, get the host caregivers' contact details and ensure they are always reachable. This also goes both ways; ensure you give the hosts multiple points of contact should they need to reach you in case of emergency or for communication. As the caring adults, this is one of your responsibilities.

Who will be at home supervising?: Confirm which adults will be present and responsible during the evening and overnight. Will the host parents be home the whole time? Are they planning to go out for a while, leaving the kids with a sitter or older teen? Ask if they are expecting **any other adults** to visit the home that night (for example, a neighbour or relative dropping by). Ask if they can keep you updated should someone stop in unexpectedly. **Ideally, an adult you know and trust will be actively supervising at all times.**

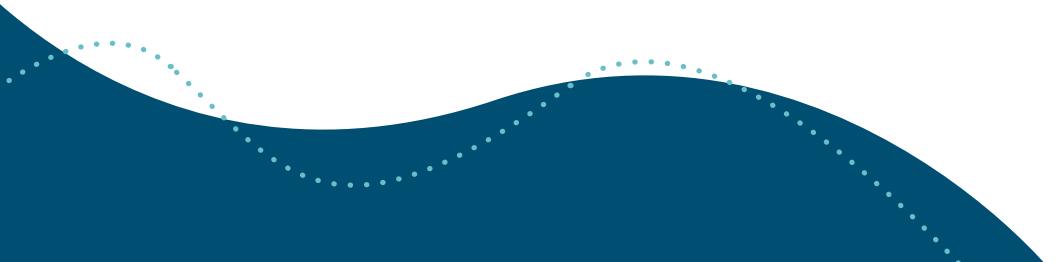




Are there additional children or teens in the home?: If the family has older children (or there will be older cousins/friends around), ask what their interaction will be with the younger kids. **Where will those older kids be during the sleepover?** This is important because you want to avoid situations like a much older child hanging out alone with the younger ones. One prevention rule that experts recommend is “**no uninteruptible, one-on-one situations**” between a child and any older individual (whether adult or teen).

It might feel awkward, but you can politely mention that your child knows they aren’t allowed to be alone one-on-one with anyone. For example, you could say: “**We’ve taught Amber that she should stay with the group and not go off alone with an older kid or adult. If you notice her or anyone wandering off, could you remind them to stick with the group?**”. Most parents will get the hint that you value supervision.

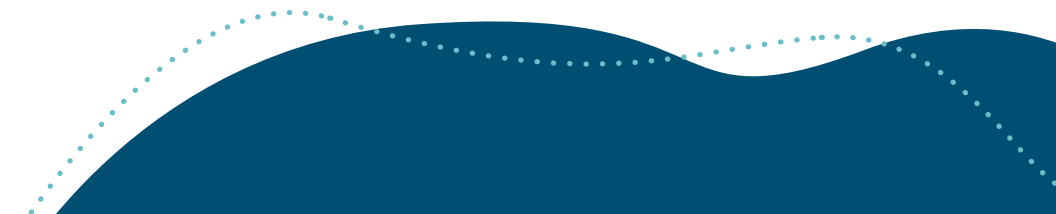
Media and internet rules: In today’s world, screen supervision is crucial. Ask what kind of movies or games the kids might be allowed to watch or play. For instance, “**Are you planning to put on any movies? We try to avoid PG-13 or higher for our 7-year-old.**” Similarly, ask about internet access: “**Will the kids have access to computers or tablets?**” and “**What rules do you have about that?**”. It’s fair to mention, “**We’ve talked to Jason about internet safety; he knows not to go online without an adult. I just wanted you to know that in case the kids get curious.**” This signals that you expect oversight of digital activities.





Activities and ground rules: Get a sense of what the agenda is. A well-structured plan (pizza, movie, then lights out at 10, for example) often means better supervision. You can ask, “What fun things do you have planned for them?” and **“About what time do you think they’ll settle down to sleep?”** This not only gives you better insight, but also lets the other parent know you care. Use this opportunity to share any **“hard rules”** you have. For example, if you don’t allow your child to watch a certain show or play certain video games, let the host know in advance. You might say, **“Oh, by the way, please no horror movies for Emma, she spooks easily. And we ask her not to play M-rated video games yet.”** Also mention any personal needs: **“He sometimes sleepwalks”** or **“She needs her inhaler at night.”** etc. Sharing this info ensures the host can care for your child properly.

Example Script – Talking to the Host Parent: “Thanks for having Morgan over! I just wanted to touch base on a few things so I can relax tonight. Who else will be around? Oh, your teenage son and his friend will be upstairs? Great. Just so you know, we have a rule that Morgan shouldn’t be alone one-on-one with anyone older – it’s something we teach for safety. So if you could make sure the little ones stick together and maybe leave doors open, I’d really appreciate it. Also, Morgan knows she can call us anytime if she needs us. Would it be okay if we give her a quick call around 9 to say goodnight? And of course, if she feels uncomfortable or even just too sleepy, we’re happy to come get her. We want this to be fun and low-stress for everyone!”



Having this conversation sets a **tone of shared responsibility**. You're showing the other parent that you're a mindful caregiver. Many parents will respond with reassurance, e.g. "Don't worry, we'll keep an eye on them." If a parent reacts defensively or dismissively (e.g., "Oh, you're being paranoid, we don't need to talk about this") that's a **red flag**. A family that doesn't respect your reasonable questions may not deserve your trust with your child. In those cases, it's okay to politely decline the sleepover. Your child's safety and your peace of mind come first.



Let's look at the statistics of who sexually abuses children and youth. Many people believe strangers are the most common perpetrators, however the majority of the time children are sexually abused by someone they know (88% of the time). Of that 88%, 38% are family members of the child, 44% are acquaintances. Acquaintances would be individuals such as coaches, babysitters, parents of peers, neighbours. These are individuals that the child does know and often are well known by the parents. The last 6% are "intimate partners" to the youth such as romantic partners, boyfriend/girlfriend or ex partners.

Post-Sleepover Support

Reflective Check In: After the sleepover, ask how everything went, what they enjoyed, what activities and food they shared with their friend. You can also ask them at this time if anything made them feel uncomfortable or worried. Even if it was something very small or harmless, having the moment to share in conversation and reflecting will benefit your parent-child relationship and make it easier in the future for them to disclose any harmful experiences should they ever occur.

Respect Their Privacy: Allow your child space to share experiences in their own time, maintaining open communication.

Learning from Experience: Use sleepovers as an opportunity to discuss and reinforce boundary-setting skills and conversations to improve future safety strategies.



Signs to Watch For

Unclear Host Boundaries: If the host parents are not clear about their supervision plans, safety protocols, or if you feel they don't respect your child's boundaries, it may be better to decline the sleepover. You have the right to do what you feel is best for your child, even if your child feels upset at the decision not to attend.

Behavioural Changes: If your child seems anxious, withdrawn, or exhibits changes in behaviour after a sleepover, it's essential to explore whether something happened during the sleepover that made them feel uncomfortable or unsafe. Sometimes crankiness can just be caused by a lack of quality sleep from a fun late night of pillow fights and movies, but you know your child best. It never hurts to open the discussion; your child will recognize you as their safe adult and trust can be built.

Physical or Emotional Distress: Be mindful of signs of physical or emotional distress, such as unusual fear of going to sleepovers in the future, signs of bullying, or discomfort with certain individuals.

Gut Feelings: Trust your instincts. If you feel uneasy about the sleepover or have any concerns about the host family, it's okay to decline the invitation and arrange an alternative plan. Please remember, sleepovers are always optional. If they don't fit your family's beliefs, that is also okay. There are many happy, thriving children who don't partake in sleepovers with friends.



Final Thoughts

Participation in sleepovers is a personal decision, and each family should feel empowered to make the choice that aligns best with their values, comfort level, and circumstances. Respecting each individual family's decision helps to create a supportive and understanding environment for everyone. Explain to your children that not everyone that they will be friends with will be allowed to participate in sleepovers, but that it is their own family's choice.

Remember that sleepovers are about more than just fun and late-night snacks, they're also valuable moments for building trust, independence, and social skills. Whether you're a parent guiding your child or a young person preparing for your first overnight stay, communication, boundaries, and preparation go a long way.

Keep the conversations open, trust your instincts, and don't be afraid to say "not yet" if it doesn't feel right. Every child is different, and every family's journey with sleepovers will look a little different too—and that's okay.

Visit the Knowledge Hub on our website for more resources and guides.



Resources and Supports



- Alberta OneLine for Sexual Violence
1-866-403-8000
- Hope for Wellness Helpline
1-855-242-3310 (in Cree, Ojibwe & Inuktitut languages)
- The Dragonfly Centre
1-866-300-HEAL
- KidsHelpPhone
1-800-668-6868
- Visit the Knowledge Hub on our website for more resources and guides

We are committed to providing resources and support for parents and caregivers to educate and empower children. Together, we can create a safer world for children to grow and thrive.

