

When Children Are Houseguests For a Weekend

By MELINDA BLAU

WE descend upon my brother-in-law's house once a year for a long weekend in the country. We fill his refrigerator with Hawaiian Punch and his good glass bowl with Doritos. The kids know they have to toe the line around Uncle Rick, but somehow they manage to spill something sticky, stuff the wrong things down the disposal system and forget to put TV Guide back where they found it. Uncle Rick survives the summer invasion, determined never to have children of his own.

Many childless people are not prepared for kids. Words like "nerve-racking" and "intrusion" crop up when people who don't have children are asked about entertaining weekend guests who do. Even those who "enjoy the experience" admit there are problems when adults with children and adults without get together.

Childless hosts worry most about "childproofing" — protecting the child from potential dangers and protecting their belongings from a potentially dangerous child. Some go overboard. Barbara Biziou recalls the time an unmarried friend invited her over to celebrate her son's fifth birthday. "When we arrived, there were towels covering every piece of furniture. I was so nervous about it that I spilled coffee all over the rug!"

When a host gives not-so-hidden messages about a child's behavior, it often makes the parent tense, resentful and defensive. "I can't help feeling that my kids are a reflection on me, that my friends will judge me by what they do," said a mother of two, adding that such feelings often make her angry at the children before anything happens.

Dr. Beatrice Harris, a psychologist who practices in Manhattan, describes the dynamics: "Both sides get caught in an escalating spiral of unexpressed feelings. There's an undercurrent of tension — and everyone acts as if it's the child's fault for being there. No wonder adult conversation is constantly interrupted."

But it doesn't have to be that way. "The difference between a delightful weekend and a disaster has to do with the adults' attitudes toward the child or children," said Dr. Jaqueline

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Becker, a Manhattan psychotherapist who specializes in children. "You have to treat them as human beings — not excess baggage."

In short, parents shouldn't take children and nonparents shouldn't invite children if no one intends to include them. Both sides need to prepare for the weekend with children in mind.

What the host should do:

Find out how many children are coming and what their needs are in terms of food, sleeping arrangements and supervision. As one childless host said, "I 'edit' the families who come out. You have to know what you're getting into."

Lay down the ground rules at the outset. The parents may not mind strangers invading their refrigerator; if you do, say so. If you're not familiar with children, ask the parents what's reasonable to expect. A "terrible two" can't be trusted around Waterford crystal, so it's best to remove it. But most older children respond well to limit-setting.

Do something to make a child feel welcome. Val Weaver, a confirmed nonparent but the oldest of nine children, has a special drawer for young visitors. Filled with inflatable toys, old Halloween masks and Cracker Jacks prizes, it makes children feel at home and keeps them occupied in the one unfinished room of an all-white house. She also keeps plastic dropcloths on hand, sets aside a bottom shelf in the refrigerator for snack foods and, with younger children, plans separate mealtimes. "And I always give them some chore or project — making hamburgers or ice cream, husking corn, stripping beds."

What parents should do:

Find out what the house is like (pets, steep stairs, nearby bodies of water) and how the host lives. You may not be bothered by the sight of a naked child or a nursing mother, but some people are.

Tell the child what to expect, sharing the information without threats or warning. Rather than saying, "You'll have to be very careful not to break Mary's glass ornaments," you might

say, as you would to a friend, "Mary told me she has beautiful glass ornaments to show us."

Be realistic about your child's attention span and interests when you plan group activities. Eight hours on a boat is too much for a 5-year-old; a 10-year-old may not appreciate spicy foreign flavors.

Take along what you need — food, clothing, toys — for the weekend activities and, if you can't anticipate them, ask. Prepare for the unexpected. If you're going to a woodsy area and your child is susceptible to poison ivy, calamine lotion doesn't take up much room. Also, pads, coloring books, small games and favorite books can help stave off boredom in bad weather. But unless you're going to a totally desolate place, don't get too caught up in rainy day contingencies. Worse than the guest who brings nothing and burdens the host with a shopping list is the guest who arrives for the weekend with a steamer trunk.

Don't try to substitute "things" for attention. Plan to spend time with your children while letting them know you plan to spend time with your host. When children receive a fair share of parental energy, they're less likely to intrude on adult time. Even a bike ride or a shell hunt becomes special when a child feels that part of the weekend is just for him; it also gives the host a breather.

Try to arrange for local teen-agers to baby-sit, particularly in the daytime and especially if there's only one child in the house. Too often, parents hire a sitter for Saturday night and then find they and the host are so exhausted from having entertained a child all day that they don't have the energy to go out.

Think of the weekend as a lesson in living. In other people's homes, children learn to cope with the unfamiliar — to live by new rules and within new boundaries; to respect and communicate with a nonparent adult. That means cleaning up after themselves, sharing the responsibilities of the house and, after the visit, calling or sending a note to say thank you.

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