

# **Si**MPLE ACTS

The Busy Family's Guide  
to Giving Back



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# CHAPTER ONE

## Organizing Playdates with Purpose

*"Alone we can do so little;  
together we can do so much."  
—Helen Keller, American author  
and activist*

After-school or weekend playdates are a frequent activity in early childhood and provide a perfect place to begin our discussion of incorporating simple acts of kindness into busy schedules. I have spent a considerable amount of time over the years arranging, hosting, and shuttling my three children around to play with friends. My oldest, Emi, was even a bit of a playdate tyrant. I would arrive at nursery school to collect her, anxiously anticipating hugs and sticky kisses, but before I could ask about the many details of her day, she would urgently ask me, "Do I have a playdate?" It wasn't a pleasant scene if I had forgotten to arrange one.

These coordinated social interactions are important for young children as their personalities and temperaments begin to develop and they embark on the lifelong process of learning how to share, resolve conflict, and navigate human interaction. While unstructured playtime is encouraged, sometimes a specific kindness activity or outing will keep little ones engaged while imparting lessons about working together to care for others.

When incorporating service into a playdate, there are many creative options that you can adjust to the ages and attention spans of the children, the season, the weather, and the amount of time you want to spend on service while still allowing time for free play. It's important for the adults to roll with any unforeseen glitches and to show a healthy dose of enthusiasm to get the children excited about participating. If everything doesn't go smoothly the first time, try again. Raising kindhearted children is a marathon, not a

sprint. Every small effort is worthwhile, and even if one activity flops, the next one might be a big hit. The important thing is to keep trying in a low-key, organic, and positive way.

## Tips for Holding a Playdate with Purpose

The possibilities are endless, but use these simple tips to plan a successful playdate with purpose:

- Start with a story.
- Keep it simple, creative, and fun.
- Share, reflect, and keep it going.

The rest of this chapter explains and gives ideas for each of these steps.

## Read a Book to Set the Stage

If you are hosting a playdate with purpose, it's important to set a positive tone and engage young children right away. One of the best ways to do this is by reading a story together. Before you begin a kindness activity at home or head out into the neighborhood to do a service project, sit together and read an age-appropriate children's book to frame the experience. Books such as *Those Shoes* by Marybeth Boelts, *The Last Stop on Market Street* by Matt de la Peña, *Somebody Loves You, Mr. Hatch* by Eileen Spinelli, and *Ordinary Mary's Extraordinary Deed* by Emily Pearson are some of my favorites. But there are many wonderful books about generosity and making a difference, as well as others that deal with social-justice themes in a gentle way for young children. You can also find many resources online that provide topical lists to help you identify stories that will make your efforts more accessible for young children and will spark important conversations and reflection. Here are some of these resources:

- The Doing Good Together website (<https://www.doinggoodtogether.org>) features a "Reading with Empathy" section, which offers a list of books that cover a range of issues. (See the Resource Guide for more information.)
- Read Brightly ([www.readbrightly.com](http://www.readbrightly.com)) is an online resource featuring book recommendations, reading tips, and seasonal inspiration to help parents and educators grow lifelong readers. It offers lists of recommended books about service, kindness, and social-justice themes.
- The Best Children's Books ([www.the-best-childrens-books.org](http://www.the-best-childrens-books.org)) is a website created by teachers that offers lists of the best children's books by subject. You can find book suggestions covering topics such as generosity, honesty, gratitude, and open-mindedness.
- A quick internet search will uncover many parenting blogs with lists of children's books about service, kindness, and current social issues.
- Bookstores often group and display children's books by theme, especially around holidays such as the Martin Luther King Jr. Day of Service, Valentine's Day, Independence Day, and Thanksgiving.

## Keep It Simple, Creative, and Fun

Young children love to be creative and messy when playing together. Coloring, arts-and-crafts projects, and baking are great playdate activities. While free play should be encouraged, a little bit of directed activity can open up natural conversations about generosity, gratitude, and compassion.

The next several sections include ideas for projects that you can complete at home or in the community, including a larger-scale idea for bigger groups. For maximum enjoyment and learning, choose activities that appeal to both the children and their families or caregivers.



### *Quick Kindness Tip: Choosing an Organization to Support*

Many of the suggestions in this chapter refer to national organizations that encourage donations and include detailed instructions on their websites. However, before beginning an at-home kindness project, think about the organizations or people in your own community to whom you might send or deliver the things you make. It's always a good idea to make a connection with these organizations in advance to talk about the items you'd like to donate and to ensure that these gifts are welcome, safe, and acceptable for the intended recipients. During these conversations, you might learn about an alternative or additional project that would be fun for the children to do and would provide something needed by the agency. For example, you might be thinking of making lap blankets for the elderly in a local nursing home. But while talking with the volunteer coordinator, you learn that many of the seniors receive no mail and have bare bulletin boards in their rooms, so they might prefer cheerful drawings and cards instead.

## Do-at-Home Service Ideas for Playdates

### **Make Cards and Letters of Encouragement and Gratitude**

You don't need much to spread some joy—just paper and crayons, markers, or colored pencils.

- Make "Welcome Home" posters for active-duty military through Operation Help a Hero (<https://www.operationhelpahero.org>). Operation Help a Hero coordinates support for soldiers and military families, including celebrations when soldiers return to their home barracks after deployment. "Welcome Home" posters, along with cards and gifts, toiletries, snacks, and other treats, are given to soldiers to show appreciation and provide a warm welcome upon their return.
- Senior citizens who live in a local nursing home or assisted-living facility may not receive a lot of visitors or mail. Children can create cheerful cards with simple messages such as "thinking of you" to cheer the elderly or infirm. If the playdate

takes place close to a holiday, applicable greetings can be included. Contact the nursing home or facility to find a convenient time to deliver your cards.

- Make cards for children who are ill, disabled, or traumatized, and donate them to your local children's hospital or cancer center. If your community doesn't have these facilities, try making cards for one of these organizations:
  - Send Kids the World ([www.sendkidstheworld.com](http://www.sendkidstheworld.com)) allows you to search a list of children who are battling serious illnesses and to direct encouraging cards, letters, and postcards to a particular child.
  - Cards for Hospitalized Kids ([www.cardsforhospitalizedkids.com](http://www.cardsforhospitalizedkids.com)) offers a similar database and provides helpful information to make this activity a success, including a checklist for hosting a card-making event or playdate.
  - The Confetti Foundation (<http://confettifoundation.org>) supplies party kits to children who spend their birthdays in the hospital. Each kit includes a handmade birthday card (see "Adding Kindness to Any Party" in chapter 2).
- Many nonprofit organizations that address hunger through home delivery of nutritious food, such as Meals on Wheels (<https://www.mealsonwheelsamerica.org>), include handmade cards in delivery packages and gladly accept donations all year long. The cards can be general notes of encouragement, birthday cards, or holiday greetings.



### *Quick Kindness Tip: Make Cards at Mealtimes*

Always keep a stack of construction paper (folded into cards) and a bucket of crayons, markers, or colored pencils on the dining table or within arm's reach of where children eat meals. While waiting for food to be served or after helping to clear dishes, you can encourage your children to create cheerful cards for soldiers, senior citizens, or children battling serious illnesses.

### **Make Bird or Squirrel Feeders**

Kindness and caring should extend to the natural world. Create a homemade bird or squirrel feeder for your backyard animal friends. Here are a few simple examples:

- String pieces of round oat cereal onto pipe cleaners, and bend them into heart shapes.
- Fill the crevices of a pinecone with peanut or almond butter, and roll the cone in birdseed. Hang it outside a window with string or wire. Alternatively, use a cardboard tube instead of a pinecone, and string it on wire or yarn between two branches of a tree.
- Fill a mason jar or a painted tin can halfway with birdseed, crumbs, cereal, or scraps of bread. Lay the container on its side on a windowsill.

## Create Drawings and Paper Flowers

- Create colorful drawings or simple tissue-paper flowers to deliver to your local senior center or nursing home. The flowers can be inserted into small flowerpots or paper cups that are decorated with paint or stickers. Follow these basic steps to make the flowers:
  1. Stack several square sheets of colorful tissue paper on top of each other.
  2. Fold the stack accordion style.
  3. Round the ends with scissors (optional).
  4. Use wire or a pipe cleaner to make the stem, wrapping one end around the center of the accordion.
  5. Spread out the individual folds of tissue paper to create petals.
- Download printable coloring sheets from Color A Smile (<https://colorasmile.org.presencehost.net/>), a nonprofit that distributes drawings to senior citizens, hospitalized children, soldiers overseas, or anywhere a smile is needed. Detailed instructions are provided on the website.

## Cook or Bake

- Baking and decorating treats (and taste-testing the finished products, of course) is always a fun activity with children. Cookies or muffins can be delivered, along with a note of gratitude, to your local firehouse or police precinct, where children may get to explore a fire truck or tour the station.
- Leave a ziplock bag of baked treats in your mailbox as a surprise for the mail carrier. If you are expecting a large package, do the same for the delivery driver by leaving a treat bag at your front door.
- Deliver baked treats to an elderly or ill neighbor with a cheerful note. Or, if you are feeling really ambitious, consider cooking a meal or making soup to deliver at dinner time.

## Make Pet Toys

Make pet toys for donation to the ASPCA or your local animal shelter. Even young children can make chew toys out of supplies you likely have around the house—scraps of fabric and fleece, old T-shirts or socks, tennis balls, and empty water bottles. Here are a few simple examples:

- Wrap an empty plastic water bottle in a piece of an old T-shirt, and knot or braid the ends. Dogs love the crinkly sound the bottle makes.
- Insert a tennis ball into a colorful old sock, and knot the end.
- Braid several long scraps of fleece into a thick, short rope, and knot both ends.

## Decorate Lunch Bags and Place Mats

Decorate paper lunch bags or plain place mats for donation to your local food pantry, Meals on Wheels program, or other food-delivery network. These organizations typically welcome these items, along with handmade birthday cards, to include in food-delivery packages to brighten the recipients' days.

# Raising a caring, socially conscious child is easier than you think!

Take a fresh approach to community service and giving back. Teaching young children to be socially conscious, community oriented, and eager to volunteer seems like a daunting task, especially for busy families with children of varying ages. *Simple Acts* brings busy parents practical, easy-to-do ideas to involve the whole family in volunteering and helping others in the community.

**With step-by-step instructions, you'll learn:**

- The proven value of service in raising compassionate children
- How to choose community-service options that are right for your family
- Ideas for integrating volunteering and service into your already-busy schedule
- Ways to help your children experience the deep satisfaction of helping others

Full of advice, tips, and real-life stories, this fun, easy-to-use guide helps parents and children of all ages incorporate hands-on community-service experiences into their daily lives. You're never too young—or too old—to start giving back!



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