

The Joy of Sleepovers with Friends Past and Present

Shôn Ellerton, June 25, 2026

Our children learn so much by taking part with another family even if it's a simple sleepover.



You know you're getting older when your friends' parents start to pass away and, unfortunately, it's a fact of life and it will happen to us all at one time or another. Sadly, another of my friend's parents had recently done so which prompted me to write this piece.

So, to capitulate on the subject, let's go back to one of the most coveted of childhood halcyon moments.

The moments of meeting new friends and families.

There are many wonderful things about being a kid, but I think one of the most joyful things of childhood is being able to meet the families of the friends that one makes. To me, I think this is one of the most crucial ways of enriching the life of children because they are able to learn new experiences they would not otherwise normally receive at home.

It all really begins at the early age of around three to four years of age when kids begin to make good friends at school or during extracurricular events like sports or even through their parent's friends that have their own kids. It's around this time when sleepovers become a common event and it's great for both the kids and the parents. I enjoy hosting my son's friends and, of course, when taking turns, it's nice to get a little away-time from the kids. Not only that, it's an opportunity for the parents to meet other parents because it can often get progressively more difficult to forge good relationships during our adult lives due to being generally rather busy.

It's a win-win situation.

For kids, staying over for a sleepover is often a journey, especially the first time with a new friend.

What are the parents like? What kind of food will be for dinner? Are there any pets and, if so, what kind are they? Is the house clean or dirty? Will there be any cool toys to play with? These days, many kids bring their electronic devices and share the experience of showing off their new games and whatnot. Back in my day, you just hoped they had some fun stuff to play with.

My eleven-year-old son now shares a similar pastime that I once had at his age. The experience of wandering off to the nearby Colonnades Mall in southern metro Adelaide near his friend's house and simply 'hang out'. In this case, his friend had a single mum who takes a quite relaxed approach as to what they get up to. My son talked about his experience on a local school radio broadcast how he and his friend hid amongst the boxes in the employee-only section of a local Bunnings, a large DIY store, and not get caught by the staff. Getting to the mall involved traversing his friend's local neighbourhood and crossing a pedestrian bridge over a freeway and wandering through another neighbourhood to get to the mall.

As a parent, there's always a little trepidation on the knowledge that your child is wandering through some slightly dodgy neighbourhood, but then I look back during my youth, and I did *exactly* the same, if not worse. Kids need adventure and, although there's always some small risk with many things that they do, they need *some* element of risk to further their real-life skills.

Then there are the parents who take up a far more helicopter approach ensuring that the kids are literally within hail from the house for fear of being kidnapped by the grannies wandering down the street. Paradoxically, this paranoia tends to occur more often for those parents living in safer affluent neighbourhoods rather than the rougher ones like the one the single mum aforementioned lives in.

During my childhood in the United States, I've come across many families, each with their little quirks and traditions. Some were deeply religious, usually either Jewish or Christian in my case, while others were against religion purporting the notion that faith and spirituality had no place in this secular and material world. Some parents were decidedly strict and others extremely relaxed. Kids staying over at someone else's house learn to appreciate being invited, to eat what they

eat, and to take part with the customary traditions of the household, even if their own parents may take offence or do not observe these traditions. Most parents are understanding of food restrictions due to allergies or religious constraints, of course.

Unlike my own son, I had, unfortunately, come across a couple of very dysfunctional families during sleepover with friends during my childhood. One, with a permanently drunk and heavily abusive father who seemed to enjoy beating his son for the slightest infraction of the house rules. And another comprising of a gambling-addict mother and a crazed ex-army Vietnam vet who, like the previous case, took to beating his kids for little reason save to show that he's the one with the authority.

The only lesson I took away from this is to ensure that I never become like them!

My friend and I, however, did had fun by firing off his dad's Magnum 44 pistol in the backyard. Foolishly, he left it loaded and kept it in his bedroom chest of drawers. No wonder, so many killings in the United States occur simply because of the heat of the moment. At some point, he would have had to explain to his dad why there were so many holes in his wooden fence.

During later years in life, I enjoyed having sleepovers with families of friends I had met during college and university days in Cardiff and London in the UK.

One, by the name of Darren, I had met in a YMCA I was staying at during my studies. I could write a whole book about this interesting character who was raised by a working class couple who came from 'the Valleys', a coal-mining community in south Wales that virtually disappeared after Thatcher virtually destroyed the industry along with many others on the promise of economic prosperity.

Within a small terraced house in the suburbs of Cardiff, in typical Welsh working class fashion, his parents were extremely hospitable and lavished upon me endless cups of tea, in differing mugs, accompanied by a seemingly endless buffet of sausage rolls, cheese and pickle sandwiches, and a variety of Penguin and Golf chocolate wafer bars and Jaffa jam biscuits.

All of it, decidedly unhealthy.

Stuffed to the core, I thought that was it, only to find out that it was a mere *snack* before tea. The working class nomenclature for dinner is often simply, 'tea'. So instead of saying, 'What's for dinner?', you say, 'What's for tea?'

Turned out that 'tea' comprised of one very massive beef roast with huge bowls of Brussels sprouts, peas, roast *and* mashed potatoes, and, of course, lots of Yorkshire pudding, which is, essentially, a sort of savoury baked batter of eggs, flour and milk drowned with oodles of gravy.

Conversations were usually centred around me, much to my embarrassment, but also of his dad's lawn bowls club, his time in the constabulary, and his mother giving me a running commentary whilst showing me pictures of Darren when he was a young lad.

Then came the 'afters'. *Afters* is the working class word for dessert, and in this case, it was a mountain of Swiss roll with vanilla ice cream and jelly accompanied by tins of syruped peaches. Only to be followed by his dad's favourite port which he kept for special occasions.

After an uncomfortable night of uncontrollable heartburn and stomach rumblings, I woke up in the morning only to be assaulted by the full English breakfast which included fried eggs, tomatoes, black pudding, baked beans, toast, sausages and bacon.

Interestingly, Darren was a Type 1 diabetic and thin as a rake and oddly, could get away with eating vast quantities of food day and night. While I, was just getting fatter and fatter.

Very sadly, Darren had died from misdiagnosis by the hospital and passed away in his home. Not too long ago, his father contacted me to inform me that his wife had passed away as well.

But the memories live on.

As alluded to in the beginning of this piece, one of my friend's parents had recently passed away.

During my days in London at university, I had a made a friend who had a Welsh mother and an Iraqi father. An interesting combination!

On several occasions, I was invited to stay over at his parent's place, a very nice sprawling home in an affluent area surrounded by lush green parks and trees in

southwest London. This very comfortable spacious home had a nice combination of Western and Middle East influence. For example, there was the large sofa and coffee table, a very nice Persian rug and an assortment of odd looking Arabic coffee pots with enormously long spouts in the large TV room.

Dinner was always the main feature and inspired me to cook in a similar light during my later years for my own family. The favourite of mine being Arabic style upside-down rice with the brown crust on top with oodles of melting lamb which had been slow cooked.

I had never had rice like this before, and ever since, adopted it as my *de facto* standard.

The father, being a retired civil engineer, often talked about his engineering experiences in unusual, and sometimes dangerous places. World politics and exotic travel were such typical discussions, which, of course, interested me. It always tickled me when my friend and his slightly older brother interjected with comments like, ‘OK, he didn’t *really* do all those things’, or when his mother said, ‘I’m sure Shôn doesn’t want to hear that story again’, or something of that ilk.

And then my friend, his brother, and I would walk down to the local pub for a couple of pints of lager or stout in the most traditional of village pubs to chat about bullshit and keep an eye on any local talent that might walk in the door.

There never was.

Roll in many more years to the present after making the move to Australia, my wife and I enjoy the same joy of meeting our son’s friends in the very same way that I had when I was growing up. Typically, I would cook something like a curry, a pasta dish, or get everyone involved with assembling Chinese dumplings, my wife being Chinese herself having that piece of culinary knowledge.

In all, there’s nothing more gratifying when our son’s friend’s extend their utmost thanks with words like, ‘Thank you for having me!’

And we respond, ‘Anytime!’