

sticky situations

Solutions to your summer etiquette conundrums, from weekend stays to tipsy shindigs

by ELENi GAGE
illustrations by ANNE BENTLEY



Summertime, and the living is...often more complicated than the beloved song and nostalgic lemonade commercials would have us believe. Longer days, breezy nights, and out-of-office email settings mean more time to spend with friends. But joint vacations, shared housing, and all-day pool parties bring a raft of social dilemmas—some of which we haven't faced in more than two years. We called in the experts to answer your questions on how to avoid summer bums and enjoy three months of fun.

GUESTING GAMES

How do I deal with the phantom invitation?

The friend who says, "We'd love to have you out to the shore this summer!" The cousin who chirps, "Let me know if you ever want to use the lake house!" Are they waiting for you to suggest dates, or are they full of hot air?

First, express gratitude. Then talk schedules. "Say, 'That would be fabulous! Is there a good time to discuss dates?'" advises Lizzie Post, copresident of the Emily Post Institute and cohost of the podcast *Awesome Etiquette*. This is the summer version of "If you love someone, set them free": If they say, "Let me check with my spouse/kids/Airbnb listings," wait for them to come back with specific suggestions, or drop it.

If the offer was for you to use a property when they're not there, Post says, "you can call them in

six months and say, 'Does that offer still stand?'" If they say yes, follow up with "Great! What costs can I cover?"

Always hash out cash concerns right away, says Bonnie Tsai, founder of Beyond Etiquette, a corporate relations and etiquette firm: "Money can make things get ugly." The homeowner may come back with a rate or say, "None! We'd love to have you stay!" A caveat? "This shouldn't be last-minute," says Elaine Swann, founder of the Swann School of Protocol and author of *Let Crazy Be Crazy*. "Give them at least 30 days' notice."

What can I bring? (Really!)

Start with a few suggestions—pie, wine, bagels. That way your hosts have a chance to let you know they've given up sugar, drinking, or eating before noon so you don't show up with an armful of temptation.

Are host gifts still a thing?

They sure are. “A host should never expect a gift,” Post says. “But it is very nice when a guest either brings one or sends one afterward. Or you might offer to take the host out to dinner.”

The thank-you could be a present for the home, a (low-clutter, no-glitter) game for the kids, or indulgent food or drink. As always, it’s the thought that counts. “For the most part, host gifts are simple,” Post says. “I’ve seen everything from bottles of Champagne to rose petals from a guest’s garden, set in a bowl for use as potpourri.”

Whether you bring a gift, send one after the stay, or treat your hosts to a meal, if you dream of getting invited back (or simply like good karma), don’t forget to mail a physical thank-you note once you return home. Or, Tsai suggests, leave a note in the guest room for your hosts to find when they come in to gather the sheets (which you’ve stripped, of course!).

If you’re staying in someone’s house when they’re not there, offer to pay to have the place cleaned afterward. If they don’t take you up on it, tidy up yourself. “At minimum, launder the towels and bedding before you leave,” Swann says. “Then fold them and set them out so the host knows they’re clean.”

How can I help?

There’s a fine line between friend and freeloader. Take your cues from the host. The general rule is “the more formal the event, the less you should ask to help,” Post says. “If it’s a fancy engagement



party, don’t offer to do the dishes.” At casual events, volunteer to pitch in. If you’re clearing your plate and asked to please stop, “please stop,” Post says. Your host shouldn’t say, “Sit, relax!” if they don’t mean it. As Swann points out, “People can be particular about their kitchen. If they say no, respect their wishes.”

What if I really want to book it to a hotel?

You’d love to visit your college roommate on the Cape. But now that you’re a couple of decades older, a futon doesn’t look so inviting anymore. Here’s how to have a fun reunion without ruin-

ing your sleep: “Book your hotel room,” Swann advises. “Then you can honestly say, ‘We’ve already got a hotel, but I can’t wait to see you.’” There’s no need to blame your spouse’s snoring or your bad back. “Just press forward with the conversation,” Swann says. “‘Now, where should we have dinner on that Wednesday?’”

If your cousins call, hoping to sleep at your place, the same approach works: Focus on the options they do have rather than the one they don’t (staying with you). “I’d say, ‘I’d love for you to come up to Vermont. Unfortunately, my house is not good for

hosting, so honestly, you’d be more comfortable at a hotel,’” Post says. Then give suggestions, along with times you can have them over for a meal.

Am I expected to reciprocate?

If you’re the only one in your friend group for whom “summer” is merely a season, not a verb, you don’t need to turn down invitations because you can’t return the favor, Tsai says. “Your friends’ intention in hosting you is to spend time together.” To reciprocate the feeling, “buy tickets to a show or exhibit and say, ‘My treat,’” she says.

What if I mess up, big-time?

Your baby poops in their pool. Your teen runs through the screen door. Your spouse sits on a suede couch in a wet swimsuit. Breathe and remind yourself that “there’s a difference between remorse and shame,” says Niro Feliciano, a licensed clinical social worker and the author of *This Book Won’t Make You Happy: Eight Keys to Finding True Contentment*. “You may feel bad, but it doesn’t make you a bad person.”

Apologize, then make amends, “even if it’s just bringing over wine the next day,” Feliciano says. Post agrees: “Offers are important. If you can’t afford to buy new china, say, ‘I’d love to help you replace that—I can offer this much.’”

Finally, stop dwelling. “Ask yourself what you’d do if it were your house,” Feliciano says. “Often we have more grace for others than we do for ourselves.”

VACATION VEXATIONS

If I’m on vacation, why am I working so hard?

On a group trip, it can be easy to fall into unfair divisions of labor—the friends who cooked a great dinner the first night get stuck on kitchen duty the rest of the week. To avoid turning a group getaway into a grind for some (and let’s face it, that “some” is usually the moms when it’s a multifamily trip), put a little pre-vacay effort into planning. “Ask how people want to handle food. If that’s cooking at home most of the time, who’s bringing stuff?” Post says. “Is each person or family responsible for a different meal?”

If you hate cooking, cover one night out, or offer to book all the reservations or be the designated driver. Or go on a group trip to an all-inclusive resort, where no one needs to cook at all!

What if my guests have caviar tastes but I’m on a hot-dog budget?

As with figuring out duties, it’s best to manage expectations beforehand. “Be brutally honest without being brutal,” Swann says. If your friends have their hearts set on the seven-course tasting menu and yours is set on paying off credit card debt, it’s OK to split up for a night or two. If you’re the one who wants to splurge, let people know. “When you do something extravagant, recognize that other people may not want to come. Say, ‘Catherine and I were thinking of going out to a really special dinner at Chez Wherever,’” Post says. All are welcome, but no pressure!



KID CONUNDRUMS

Is it getting a little crowded in here?

If you sense that everyone is feeling too close for comfort, Swann suggests saying, “Hey, folks, we’ve had dinner together every night. Are you all right doing that again, or do people want some alone time?” And if *you* need to be alone, Tsai says, “it’s fine to say, ‘Have fun! I’m going to stay in and read.’”

What if I made a mistake picking a travel mate?

A getaway with your work bestie seemed like a fun idea, until you realized she likes to drunkenly dance on tables (and grind on your last nerve). Swann says it’s OK to go your separate ways and just meet for meals. Frame it as a clash of interests, not personalities: “I want you to make the most of your vacation, not be stuck in the hotel room with me.”

What if everyone else’s little angels are driving me crazy?

You want to kick back and rosé all day, but there’s a scrum of 7-year-olds making a racket around the pool. Is it OK to shut that down? You can play it safe by speaking to the group under the guise of talking to just your own kid, like “Hey, bubs, do you want to cool it so we adults can relax?”

But if there are only one or two offenders, Post says, “you have to be careful how you speak to other people’s kids.” Discipline should be handled by the parents, who should be approached tactfully. “It’s better to come from a place of ‘How can I help?’” Tsai says. “Don’t shoot first—‘Your kid is being bad’—because they’ll get defensive.”

Have you met my children, the spawn of Satan?

The only thing worse than your friends’ kids misbehaving? Your own kids acting up. The best offense is a good defense: “Prior to going, remind them, ‘How do we behave at someone else’s house? What do we do and not do?’” Feliciano says. Then, she adds, if their inner Mr. Hyde rears his ugly head, “take them aside and say, ‘What did we talk about? What don’t we do?’”

If they still don’t listen, it’s time to sentence them to a fate worse than death: spending time at your side while you and your friends play (to their little ears) the most boring game of “Mommy blah-blah.”

What about the CoComelon heads?

After two years of virtual living, nothing warms the heart like seeing your kids come together with other kids—until you realize they’re all staring at their tablets. Before you go, tell your hosts that your child is *this* close to becoming an avatar and ask if they’d agree to make it a no-devices trip for the kids. If that’s not feasible, have a few aces up your sleeve. “No one—not even adults—reacts well to being told to get off a screen once they’re on it,” Feliciano says. “Instead, suggest alternatives. Is there an activity they can do together—swim, play basketball, ride bikes, practice TikTok dances?”



If you’re traveling with another family, “it’s thoughtful for the parents to say, ‘Hey, these are our screen-time rules. What are yours? Do we want to set up some house rules?’” Post says. If you’re just heading to someone’s home for the day, you can either pull a when-in-Rome and let your kids adopt the local customs, or remind them that different families have different rules, and yours still apply to them. (If your host’s kids are glued to iPhones all afternoon, hand yours a pen and paper and send them on a scavenger hunt around the yard.)

When friends are visiting, you have every right to politely mention the house rules. “I’d say to the parents, ‘We’ve told our kids no screens when guests are over,’” Post says. If the parents disagree? Let it go, and hang out sans kids next time.

HEARTY PARTYING

What if I haven’t worn a bathing suit since the Clinton administration?

You just had your hair straightened. Your bikini waxer relocated. You like to keep your appendix scar to yourself. There are many reasons you may not want to slip on a swimsuit and have chicken fights with the rest of the neighborhood. Instead, Swann says, make a bold, nonspandex fashion choice: “Get outside with everyone else, wear a cute caftan, and accept yourself for who you are.”



If the host pushes you to dive in, clap back with “I’m so comfortable where I am. This is wonderful!” Post says. “That nips it in the bud.” It’s hard to argue with happy.

So...are you boosted?

We hope that, by the time you read this, Covid is a distant memory. But just in case: “It’s important for hosts to state their safety protocol,” Post says. When you call, text, or e-vite guests, you can say, “We’re asking that all our guests be vaccinated. If that’s an issue, please let us know.” Then, Post says, “you’re empowering them to make their own decision.”

Exactly how long is happy hour?

Between six-hour weddings, all-day barbecues, and ever-present frosé, summer has the potential to turn into an extended bottomless brunch—a recipe for a season-long

hangover if you don’t have a plan. At a party, Tsai goes for the classic glass of water between drinks. You can also water down your drink by waiting for your ice to melt before sipping, or pretend you’re a 1970s lady who lunches and stick to wine spritzers.

If you’re the host, “it’s really important to offer your guests water constantly,” Post says, along with other booze-free options, like seltzers, lemonade, or mocktails. If someone does end up getting, um, overserved, take them aside and offer them some water, a place to lie down, or, at night’s end, a ride home. And if they aren’t the only one starting to slur their words, put the bar cart away. “It’s also the easiest way to signal that the party is over,” Tsai says, and that the long summer night has come to an end. ■