Introduction

All the bathrooms are clean, dishes put away, beds made, floors Swiffered, laundry folded, garbage cans emptied, and toys put in their place and sorted for age appropriateness. The kitchen is full of aromas, boiling pasta, simmering sauce, freshly sliced carrots, celery, and oranges, all displayed on sparkling white plates. Lined up are juice boxes boasting their 100 percent organic label, plastic forks and plates, and beside them some half-folded white disposable napkins. On a solid black cutting board there is a perfect semicircle of whole-wheat and table water crackers, with three varieties of cheeses costing more than the outfit I am wearing. Some chilled mimosas sit in the fridge just in case, and fresh fruit, all prewashed and ready for consumption, on the dining room table in a large bowl next to the Annie’s organic cheese crackers. Every minute pushes me to go over my list of things to do as the anticipation builds. Did they get lost on the way over? Did I give them the correct directions? Oh, I hope they don’t cancel after I’ve prepared all of this food! The doorbell rings twice and the pitter-patter of little feet comes scurrying down the stairs as I reach the front door. I give my last warning to the kids to share all of their toys. I open the door and cheers and laughter fill the mudroom. I hug everyone entering and prepare for the ultimate social performance of—The Playdate.

This scene is typical of my five years of entertaining childcare providers, parents, and kids alike. Over time, my displays of extravagant entertainment have been modified as we have come to know the families for whom we once went all out. The playdate experience has become less about getting the kids together for social purposes and more about inviting those families we feel share our interests. For those living in Brooklyn, the settings for playdates include a public park among the
dense residential neighborhoods of gentrified New York, and the private homes of residents in these neighborhoods as well as those living “out of zone.” New York City has an educational system where children entering pre-kindergarten and kindergarten classes in the public school system must be zoned for the school they attend, meaning that they must live in the residential boundaries set by the New York Department of Education within specific districts. Children who are “out of zone” typically enter the schools because the families once lived “in zone” and have an older child attending the school. Some families become creative advocates for their children’s education (which means that parents go to great lengths to deceive the system about their primary residence by obtaining water or electric bills from family or friends who are “in zone”). This is common practice in New York City since, as in other U.S. cities, the inequality in the school system is extreme. What emerge from these playdates are not only friendships that sometimes result in reciprocated free childcare, but more importantly, social and cultural capital for the parents involved.

Social capital, as conceived by the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who coined the term, refers to the number and types of people in one’s network. By increasing one’s network of interactions or contacts, one has the ability to gain or confer certain advantages to one’s benefit or the benefit of those one knows. I argue in this book that playdates are planned events that parents organize to extend their network, thereby conferring advantages to their children as well as themselves, and that the playdate is not necessarily an event that is determined by the child. Cultural capital, for Bourdieu, is gained through specific tastes in lifestyle or material goods (e.g., tastes in food, fashion, or education). This cultural capital may be gained through the attainment of certain social capital and other experiences. I will argue in this book not only that playdates are a way for parents to extend their network, but that they do so with middle- to upper-middle-class people who share certain middle- to upper-middle-class preferences in food, toy choices, and levels
of education, all of which influence how parents and children navigate their social worlds.

This book takes the perspectives of parents, childcare providers, primary school teachers, and a children’s studies college professor in New York City to understand the phenomenon of the playdate. I use the word “phenomenon” because the term “playdate” was not always used to describe children’s play; however, it has now become the term for a common event that is used with a common understanding by those who participate. I define playdate as an arranged meeting, organized and supervised by parents or caregivers, between two or more children in order to play together at a specific time and place, for the most part at an indoor location. This book explains how parents think about the benefits or drawbacks of playdates. It also shows how participants view the tensions created by the media around the issue of child safety and how these tensions justify the creation of the playdate. More than anything, this book illustrates how parents and some teachers are able to reproduce social class. The goal of this book is to shed light on this practice in order to explore the social and cultural capital gained by members of middle- to upper-middle-class social groups, but also to show how certain groups of parents seek interaction with other adults through the playdate experience. This book therefore shows how playdates are critical social events for parents as well as children and how children's play should be taken seriously as a unit of analysis. It expands the existing literature on the reproduction of inequality while demonstrating the importance of how we manage our social worlds and the worlds of our children. This is important to understand because the playdate re-creates an elite social class despite the economic, ethnic, and racial diversity of an urban center.

This idea of studying playdates came to me one Sunday morning around 10:00 a.m., when my then husband and I decided to have our first “boy” playdate for our son. He mentioned two boys he was fond of, so we made plans with their parents to have them over for brunch one
Sunday. I became intrigued by their professions as we spoke, while the kids jumped off the bunk beds upstairs. One of the couples is a lawyer married to an artist, while the other is a screenwriter married to a man whom I later learned was the curator of the book lecture series at one of New York’s public libraries. As I chatted with the curator and discussed my work as a sociologist who studied West Indian childcare providers, he asked me whether I knew the sociologist Philip Kasinitz. I said, “Yes, he was on my dissertation committee.” He then said that he knew Phil really well and that I should give a talk at the library once my book was complete. It was at this moment that I started to realize how many times the parents I had invited to a playdate either knew someone I knew or offered to take family portraits for us, get us tickets to outings, or invite us to a trade show in which they participated. During this conversation with the curator, the idea of studying playdates became more concrete as I noticed that I was personally gaining social and cultural capital through the relationships I made as my son and daughter played with the other kids out of sight. I had been informally doing an ethnography of playdates for the past five years during my fieldwork on childcare providers and in my non-research life, but this topic seemed to demand further investigation. Rather than subject my kids and others to staged playdates for the purposes of research, I came to study playdates using forty-one in-depth interviews conducted with a diverse group of parents and teachers and twenty-five interviews and ethnographic observations of Caribbean childcare providers across New York City. The aim was to determine how playdates acted as a means of gaining and reproducing social capital for certain classes of parents, how they are organized as a way of communicating exclusion, and how simple “play” turned into “playdates.”

Privatizing the Commons

The metaphor of the commons, a concept originating in sixteenth-century Britain land enclosures whereby the private enclosure of publicly
held land and resources resulted in economic gain for particular groups of people, is highly applicable to a discussion of playdates. The American ecologist Garrett Hardin discusses the effect of population growth on the global commons, where the personal choice to raise a family would strip away public resources and require “authoritarian regulatory population control.” Many authors have analyzed and deconstructed the commons as cultural (such as language or urban spaces), intellectual (patenting rights), or material (housing), with the same end result of commonly held capital being privatized for economic gain. The playdate, I argue, is an example of this trend over the last two to three decades. In this book, the commons serves as a metaphor for the public sphere, where the goal of interaction is for the good of the whole population, children and parents alike. The commons might be neighborhood streets, local parks, or other playspaces. The enclosure of the commons is like a playdate that seeks to privatize space to preserve class reproduction, thereby obliterating the idea of a true “commons.”

Playspaces may appear to be public commons since they are seen as spaces for shared social progress and practices. Playspaces are regulated by caregivers, parents, park personnel, and the like. However, the playdate is even more regulated as an enclosure to the common playspaces like public parks. Playdates are continuously subject to social control by some of the same regulators at the park, mainly parents or childcare providers, so that not only has children’s play been enclosed, but as this book argues, it has also been commodified by parents in order to fulfill the acquired social and cultural capital gains expected of the middle-to upper-middle-class strata. By regulating and thereby commodifying the commons, parents may be undermining the socializing that more naturally occurs in the commons, or, for the purposes of this book, in parks, neighborhoods, or other public spaces. This turn inward, similar to that of historical suburbanization in the 1950s, when there was a retreat of people from city streets to their own backyards, changes social relations. Once people retreated to their backyards, there was less interaction between classes and races and less inclusivity of people differ-
ent from themselves. Boundaries became more defined. What is more surprising is that even in an urban environment such as New York, this turn inward and exclusivity can be observed today even though there is ample opportunity to be among others, given the close proximity to public spaces and dense housing.

This book uses the framework of the enclosed commons to understand how privatizing children’s play has changed the interaction of both children and parents.

Parenting Children

Parenting can mean different things to different people. So too do the words “childhood” and “children.” The first body of literature with which this book engages is that dealing with the commodification of childhood and parental reactions to societal constraints. Sharon Brookshaw, a museum studies professor, demonstrates the multiple meanings of childhood and children through her studies of museum content. By examining museum artifacts and the archeological literature, she shows how meanings of childhood have changed from the prehistoric period to the twenty-first century throughout Britain and how ultimately childhood should be understood as a cultural construction. According to Brookshaw, museums tend not to display artifacts that deal with discipline, work, and health, reflecting how modern Western society has romanticized the meaning of childhood, and how parents want to protect children from the appearance of societal constraint. At the same time, her research shows how children become controlled by adults and society and turned into commodities as evidenced by the lack of homemade toys on display in British museums and an increase in mass-produced items such as books and clothing. Children are placed in a material culture with purpose, meaning that adults have chosen the toys that ought to be displayed as a symbol of children’s play and, in doing so, have not included the toys that children make out of scraps of material
and play with, something that when all technology is taken away they still manage to create. This is similar to what occurs on playdates.

This book will show how parents can manipulate children’s interactions in the playdate by carefully choosing the participants. The playdate becomes synonymous with “childhood” and consequently with the material conditions of childhood, which include specific objects, such as toys that define class status, and specific people who are allowed to interact with children of a certain class. In other words, in the same way that parents impose material objects such as toys purchased on behalf of their children that may signify to others a particular class stratum, they also impose playdates as a means of gaining cultural and social capital for themselves and their children and as a means to achieve homogeneity within an urban center.¹⁰

Multiple theories about childrearing, education, and the meaning of childhood inform the outlook of today’s parents. Perhaps the earliest theory of child development is known as the Augustinian model, which suggests that children are innately wicked and vain, similar to what we see later in the twentieth-century novel Lord of the Flies, in which kids who are left to their own devices on an island beat and kill each other. This philosophy confirmed for parents that in order to save children from their own inherent “sin,” adults should beat and corset them, and should protect themselves from children’s bad behavior. This physical disciplinary approach lasted for centuries and continues today to some degree, though many view it very negatively.

Arguments against the Augustinian model were elaborated as early as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In his 1693 work Some Thoughts Concerning Education, Locke offers this critique: “Beating is the worst, and therefore the last means to be us’d in the correction of children, and that only in the cases of extremity, after all gently ways have been try’d, and proved unsuccessful; which, if well observ’d, there will very seldom be any need of blows” (section 81). Locke proposed that a child’s mind is a blank slate
(tabula rasa) that is affected solely by its environment. It is the child’s environment and social interactions that will determine her or his behavioral outcomes or life chances. The child will reflect whatever it is that we put into him or her, and so Locke suggests that parents should raise their children to understand virtue and develop good habits through the process of education.

Rousseau, on the other hand, saw children as pure and good by nature. His theory suggests that children should be allowed to simply play, forget society, forget science, and develop naturally. If a child intentionally breaks a cup, then she or he will learn that he or she will not be able to drink: “Give nature time to work before you take over her business, lest you interfere with her dealings. You assert that you know the value of time and are afraid to waste it. You fail to perceive that it is a greater waste of time to use it ill than to do nothing, and that a child ill taught is further from virtue than a child who has learnt nothing at all. You are afraid to see him spending his early years doing nothing. What! is it nothing to be happy, nothing to run and jump all day? He will never be so busy again all his life long.” Locke, however, would suggest that parents explain to the child why he or she shouldn’t break the cup and then give the child a new cup. These two different philosophies have informed the study of childhood in both psychology and philosophy for centuries. These ideas permeate today’s parenting magazines, leaving parents with opposing ideas of how to raise their children and asking themselves, “Do we allow children to explore freely and discover, or do we give them parameters through education to prevent failure?”

These opposing ideas are further analyzed by the sociologist Markella Rutherford. In her book Adult Supervision Required, Rutherford discusses how parenting magazines promote parenting ideals and philosophies, leaving families few options to choose from. She also shows that when children do have a voice and autonomy in the household to make choices and decisions that affect their own lives, their autonomy is stunted by outside controls such as surveillance in the public sphere by other parents and authorities. On the one hand, children are expected
to make independent decisions, but once they are confronted outside the home, this is all mediated by other adults. This book will show how mediation occurs not only outside the home, but inside the home as well in the case of the playdate.

Given such philosophies shaping how parents interact with their children, and given the idea that childhood is a commodity, the question of how children influence the economy began to take shape in the twentieth century as labor laws changed. The economic sociologist Viviana Zelizer shows that prior to the 1920s children were thought of as villainous if they were idle, and parents maintained childrearing practices that embodied the belief that children should work hard. In her book *Pricing the Priceless Child*, Zelizer explains that it was not until the 1920s that child labor laws began reshaping the attitudes of parents, who over time came to see children as “priceless” and not capable of making a significant economic impact. The new laws emphasized the “rights” of children, affecting how parents interacted with and raised them.

While other disciplines have delved into the psychological impact of parenting on children, there has been a significant body of sociological work that tends to be overlooked. In the 1970s, the sociologist and feminist scholar Alice Rossi discussed the biosocial effects of parenting by looking at how stress in a pregnant woman’s body impacts a child’s behavior after birth, how birth order acts as a determinant for parenting, and how childcare historically focused on women entering the workforce instead of the child’s welfare. Rossi concludes that families living in close quarters would benefit from maintaining their traditional extended family structure, lowering maternal stress by having other “mothers” share in the responsibility of raising children. There is no discussion of how men are integrated in the raising of children, because as Rossi put it, “Men are rarely involved in the care of the very young. . . . The male is more apt to deal only with older children.” While this may have been true of the seventies and earlier decades, Rossi’s theory does not hold true today. The present study shows how men are involved with their children today and how some of what Rossi states about mothers
sharing in childrearing is reflected in playdates. In other work, Rossi discovers that men and women are less prepared for parenthood than they are for marriage and occupations. Parenthood thrusts them into dual roles that are not traditionally “male” (sole provider) or “female” (stay-at-home mom). She shows how parenthood occurs in developmental stages over time and how roles are negotiated and shared between men and women depending on the social climate. This book will argue that the twenty-first-century social climate, including heavy media coverage of crime, directly impacts how parents control the play of children while at the same time creating a social event for parents and children in the pursuit of reifying class status.17

While Rossi analyzed biosocial effects of parenthood, family sociologists Adrianne Frech and Rachel T. Kimbro look specifically at how the psychological well-being of mothers impacts parental behaviors, especially in low-income neighborhoods.18 They show that “investing time in activities beneficial for children may increase mothers’ self assessed parenting skills or self-esteem.”19 While these two authors discuss child activities such as playing at home alone or outdoors, they do not focus specifically on playdates. However, they do indicate that mothers’ fears of neighborhood violence, more pronounced in low-income neighborhoods, lead them to let their children watch more television and play more video games, thus decreasing the mothers’ ability to interact with neighbors and the children’s interaction with others in the community. Frech and Kimbro conclude that there is a need for neighborhood intervention (quality neighbor interactions) to decrease depression among mothers in low-income neighborhoods and for parental interaction to become more positive. What they do not address fully, however, is that lower-income parents may have multiple jobs or work at odd hours, causing fatigue and preventing them from engaging fully with their children. Playdates, as outlined in this book, are viewed as an antidote to the fear of violence that is portrayed in the media according to the middle-to upper-middle-class families interviewed. Yet the seemingly forced separation from community that leads lower-income kids to watch tele-
vision is seen as dysfunctional by their middle- and upper-middle-class counterparts. It is this control through the playdate that mediates how classes of people reproduce cultural and social capital.

Parents have control over children, but so too do social policies. In Britain, the sociologists Adrian James and Allison James show that policies affect how society views and shapes “childhood.”\(^{20}\) James and James argue that higher regulation of educational standards equates to more social control over children and that this new curricular intensification, while masked as a way to ameliorate the gaps between learning in school and at home, is simply another way of socially controlling children, particularly teenagers, in their out-of-school lives, including their socialization with peers. In Britain, police now have authority to stop children not in school during the schoolday (something that U.S. police have long done), parents are held accountable for what children do during school, and ultimately, James and James argue, children lack any agency under these new laws while they are increasingly being monitored and regulated. Though the authors admit that there are some benefits to the new policies, they maintain that adults ultimately shape how children are seen or not seen as citizens. Like government officials, parents believe that children are incapable of making good choices on their own. While many children in this book show some agency in “choosing” playdate partners, parents admit to shaping the choices their children make or simply dictating through action their children’s choices. These choices are used to ensure that parents maintain social and cultural capital gains and promote their children’s future because children are increasingly seen as only part of the culture of America and not as full citizens. A parent’s control through the playdate is a reflection of the social institutions that children will learn to navigate on their own as well as a reflection of parental anxieties. Parents are massaging how children socialize by creating a commodified version of children’s play through the playdate.\(^{21}\) We can assume, then, that middle- to upper-middle-class parents have imposed a model of the playdate on children as a response to societal anxieties, including parents’ anxieties about having to work
long hours and therefore attempting to bridge the gap between school and home life.

Although policies can shape how children are monitored by society or by parents, so too can the spaces where children play. Holly Blackford, an English professor at Rutgers University, studied the panoptic effects of children playing in a park versus playing in McDonald’s playspaces. She noted how playgrounds are monitored by adults, mostly women, who occupy the benches at suburban parks in San Francisco. Children internalize that they are being watched even if they are not being seen in each transgression. She posits that children begin to self-monitor in this setting and surveillance is internalized, much like Foucault’s theory of the Panopticon. Foucault’s concept of the Panopticon, which was originally theorized by Jeremy Bentham in the late eighteenth century, suggested that when inmates are visible from a central post that controls and monitors their behavior in order to implement discipline, the inmates eventually begin to monitor each other’s behavior even when there is no authority figure in the central post. The inmates themselves become self-disciplined. Blackford noticed the opposite in commercial spaces, such as the ones in McDonald’s. In commercial spaces, kids are not monitored in the same way as in the playground because there are tunnels that block the children from parents’ vision. Parents tend to sit on the periphery socializing without constant monitoring and therefore, this type of play is more reflective of how working-class children played in the streets without supervision in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Playing in the street in earlier times was sometimes synonymous with both danger (since children could get into trouble without adult supervision) and autonomy (since they could make up their own rules during play). In a commercial setting, kids appear to have more “free play” than in the playground, but it is also a site of consumption and control in that parental interaction is limited to how much food is eaten in the McDonald’s playspace. This type of interaction is perhaps why we see a proliferation of indoor spaces catering to children’s
play in New York City. Commercial spaces cater to the child’s sense of freedom although they are entirely controlled, involving as they do the consumption of food and spending of money; many of the popular indoor spaces in New York cost a good sum and attract mostly middle- to upper-middle-class families or the caregivers who work on their behalf.

Consumption and control have thus impacted the parenting of children. But how have commercialism and merchandising impacted children and their families? The sociologist Alison Pugh’s book *Longing and Belonging* looks at children in the Oakland area and how merchandising and consumerism give these children a sense that they deserve certain products, as well as a sense of belonging to a social group, or what she calls “economy of dignity.”26 She discusses how children “need” certain toys and if they do not have them they risk a sense of not belonging. Pugh talks about this shift from “wanting,” or fulfilling desires, to an actual need, in which if your child does not have a portable game console, then she or he is not like everybody else and thus loses a sense of belonging. In order to maintain this belonging, you actually need these material things. However, she also argues that middle- and upper-middle-class parents become ambivalent about this consumption and attempt to restrain excessive consumer habits through the administration of allowances and specific rules about spending, although, as she points out, consumption eventually prevails. As one of my interviewees said, “If they [other children] have the Playskool [toy house] that costs $3,500, do I have to buy a Playskool so that my child has what other children have?” Longing and belonging were evident in the ways participants in my research discussed the idea of a playdate. Parents wanted to ensure that they were keeping up with other families in terms of the food they offer at a playdate or the types of birthday parties they throw for their child even if at first they downplayed its necessity. These various childrearing philosophies that parents have been socialized with, as well as the more contemporary literature of how children fit into a capitalistic model of consumption, subconsciously shape how parents
begin their journey into parenthood. This book takes the playdate as an event in which these various meanings of childhood, parental anxieties, socially controlled “nature,” and material conditions converge.

The second body of literature and theoretical framework deals with class reproduction and the inevitable exclusion that comes along with it. The sociologist Annette Lareau’s analysis of class and race (in terms of preparing children as future citizens) uncovers how middle-class children, or what may be deemed “over-class” children (those with too many privileges), have a number of advantages, including a hyper-scheduled daily life, that confer specialized social skills that play out later in life. Other scholars have also shown how these hyper-scheduled lives ironically can be seen as a disadvantage for some families. This structured life may include activities such as sports, music lessons, or scouting programs. This schedule is run very much like a business, often reflecting not only work positions of middle- to upper-middle-class jobs, but also how children and their parents plan rigidly scheduled leisure time. Some may call overscheduling an effect of the rationalization of modern society with its “emphasis on efficiency, predictability, control, and calculability.” Such scheduling of activities by middle- to upper-middle-class parents is done in order to confer advantages on their children in what Lareau calls “concerted cultivation,” but since parents rarely know what skills their children will ultimately need in a rapidly changing economy, they tend to give their children broad experiences. In this work, I will examine how playdates are not only a site for consumption, but also a product of social class reproduction that results in exclusion under structural conditions that allow parents to reify inequality among families.

Social Class Reproduction

Looking at parents’ playdate participation, I was able to explain their interactions by using the concepts of social and cultural capital, terms originating in the social theory of Pierre Bourdieu and further elaborated
by Alejandro Portes and other sociologists. For the purposes of this book, social capital encompasses the potential resources stemming from intimate network relationships such as access to the skills of members of the group. Cultural capital is defined as the accumulation of education or other seemingly beneficial cultural knowledge.

Researchers in the United States already know that children’s outcomes differ according to class as determined by socioeconomic status and that patterns reproduce themselves, so that the likelihood of associating with the class in which you grew up, or the neighboring one, is great. Class structure in the United States is stratified according to income level and typically divided into three categories: the working class, the middle class, and the upper-middle class. For this book, the upper-middle class would include those with a household income in excess of $70,000, but typically more than six figures, including inheritances, along with at least one partner with a college or postgraduate degree. Indirectly, then, children who are getting such skills as learning to play the piano and talking to adults like peers will have a payoff at some point in their lives. At the same time, researchers also know that because of the privileges that come with class membership, children from the upper-middle class are going to have those advantages anyway. Also, those without the middle-class networks and experiences may have similar success to those outside their class or economic grouping, so it is not an exact science in terms of mobility and continuity. However, for the most part, as Lareau has stated, class reproduction is real and we can see the differences in children’s play: middle-class parents will pay for classes and more structured play, while the working-class and poor will have less structured activities, yet more creative play. As the working-class and poor tend to their basic needs, making sure they have food and other life necessities, middle- and upper-middle-class parents are able to splurge on rearing their children by using extravagant resources that shape and reflect class views. It is important to note here that these resources are shaped by the very work situations of the parents themselves. Many of the middle- to upper-middle-class homes have a parent work-
ing in a white-collar profession. This can provide a wider field for more independent thinking than in working-class jobs, where there tend to be more directives with less opportunity for creativity. These “social chits” that the middle and upper-middle class are actively engaged in developing may be leveraged in the case of the playdate.32

Why New York?

Certainly New York is not the only city where playdates occur. It is, however, a dynamic urban center where the sheer density of its heterogeneous population and housing makes it an unparalleled site of analysis. In New York, more families are staying in the city or moving into the city to raise their children than are moving out to the suburbs. According to the 2010 census, there has been a steady increase of families moving to New York City from 2007 to 2010, more than the number moving out of New York. In addition, the census shows that households in Manhattan with children under the age of five as well as married couples with children are on the rise since 2000, making New York City an ideal site for the study of families and children’s play.33 The gentrification of New York and its boroughs, especially Brooklyn, allows for a better analysis of how families are cultivating their interests (whether familial or other) in an increasingly diverse but segregated city. As the sociologists John Mollenkopf and Manuel Castells stated in their book Dual City, New York has seen some of the most polarizing racial and income disparities, which contributed to the class tensions seen in the 1980s.34 These tensions, alongside the increases in families and children and gentrification by the middle- and upper-middle-class and subsequent displacement of working-class residents, many of them blacks and Latinos, make New York a unique city to study, one central to understanding larger nationwide changes. Gentrification becomes relevant here, as it is spurred by typically white middle- and upper-middle-class groups and creates anxieties about class membership, since gentrifiers attempt to maintain their class privileges in terms of access to housing stock, amenities, and other
resources. Those living in gentrified neighborhoods are hypersensitized to the changes that are constantly occurring to their housing values and want to ensure that their class status endures.

According to the 2013 edition of *The Newest New Yorkers*, New York City exhibits unique diversity. A large portion (one-third) of its foreign-born residents arrived after 2000, almost half of its population speaks a language other than English, and currently its “unmatched diversity epitomizes the world city.” What’s more, there are far more small foreign-born groups, with Dominicans constituting the largest in the city, yet making up only 12 percent of the foreign-born. In 2011, “1.09 million immigrants lived in Queens while 946,500 lived in Brooklyn,” making Brooklyn one of the most diverse places to live.

New York’s outdoor spaces also create unique habitats for families diverse in race and class, and various ways to use such space. These spaces offer parents a variety of options in terms of play for children. Between the older public parks offering baseball, soccer fields, and sprinklers for water play, and destination parks that are now being built with modern elaborate climbing apparatuses such as Brooklyn Bridge Park at the end of Atlantic Avenue and Columbia Street in Brooklyn, caregivers have almost unlimited options for outdoor play. Public libraries, children’s zoos, and botanical gardens also give refuge to caregivers with small children in all the boroughs. Some of these places, however, require access to transportation such as the subway or buses, and depending on where one lives, it can take over an hour to reach a destination (as in many cities).

New York businesses have also become quite creative with their play-date options for parents due to the small living quarters that most reside in. In affluent neighborhoods of New York, indoor play areas that mimic the types found in malls around the country are constantly being developed for toddlers and their caregivers, ranging in price from six dollars per hour of play to annual memberships of $1,200. These bounded spaces may double as a dance or gymnastics studio during certain hours, with time set aside for indoor recreational play offering padded areas for
exploration with toys, books, and instruments. In Tribeca at the time of this study, the Moomah Café offered a one-hour playdate in its virtual green space room for sixty dollars. Many cafés throughout Brooklyn now have a dedicated corner with children’s books, games, and toys. New York also houses children’s museums where kids can touch almost all items on exhibit, have lunch, and participate in daily entertainment. All of these indoor areas offer relief to caregivers on days when going to public parks is not an option due to weather conditions. These spaces also give caregivers a place to congregate and create community with one another while attempting to break some of the monotony of their active days.

Even with all of these helpful resources, New York City, unlike some other major cities, epitomizes a fear of public spaces due to random crime reports and racialized fears that have permeated all city news cycles. Due to media portrayals, New York is seen as rough, chaotic, gritty, or some might say a scary place to live. There were racialized images of crime in New York from the 1960s that justified “white flight”; New York was highlighted as home to the Mafia in the 1970s, to drug addicts in the 1980s, to the extreme poor dispersed throughout, and to the housing project rappers of Brooklyn and Queens who make music about racism, violence toward black residents, and inequality. This image is compounded by the high rates of crime that plagued New York for decades. Although the negative image stands in most people’s minds, the truth of the matter is that crime in New York has been declining for two decades. Though a discussion of the law enforcement policies that have contributed to this decline is outside the scope of this work, I argue that the negative image is still prevalent in the media, including movies, newspapers, and television news.

The old newspaper adage is true: “If it bleeds, it leads.” Starting in the late 1970s with the kidnapping of six-year-old Etan Patz in Manhattan, and continuing throughout the 1980s, the media created a moral panic around child abductions, prompting the milk carton phenomenon, the placement of a missing child’s photograph on the back of milk cartons
to ensure maximum possibility of identification by the population. The cultivation effect, or long-term effect of media consumption, magnifies kidnappings (although many do go unreported) and glorifies prototypical characteristics.41 This was evidenced further with the reopening of the Patz case in 2012, which rekindled the public fear of kidnappings. For three decades, one child’s kidnapping has defined New York’s fear of letting children walk to a bus stop on their own, thus creating a moral panic. For other parts of the country, the prototypes do not end there. The media will generally lead with a young white girl with blonde hair from some safe suburb in the country who was kidnapped by a stranger without acknowledging that most kidnappings that are reported are carried out by parents, stepparents, and family friends.42 We hear about the stereotypical case out of proportion to the actual threat. Even though the actual threat is statistically minimal, parents are left to wonder, “If
these kidnappings could happen in a safe suburb, what is the chance that it could happen in a city that is stereotypically dangerous?” This moral panic, as considered later in the book, is discussed by almost every participant in my research as something that influences their decision to organize playdates, including parents who grew up in New York and those who did not.43

More than all of this, New York has a higher concentration of diversity (economic, racial, and ethnic) and, as C. Wright Mills terms it, of the power elite (financiers, corporations, those with institutional power) who determine the economic course the rest of the nation takes, which makes New York unique. There are limitations to this study due to this concentration of diversity and institutional power in that it is not representative of the rest of the country. Therefore, it is important to understand these limitations with regard to generalizability across various states.

Its rich history, media image of violence, array of outdoor and indoor spaces, and unique diversity and concentrated institutional influence suggest that New York is a prime city in which to study the playdate phenomenon and to study how families are reconstructing their children’s play as a reaction to media sensationalism and other social forces.

Methods

For this book, I conducted forty-one semi-structured interviews from June 2010 to August 2011. There were thirty-four women and seven men, of whom four were in their twenties, nineteen in their thirties, fifteen in their forties, two in their fifties, and one in her sixties. From this group, there were thirteen people of color, including three who self-identified as black or West Indian, five as Asian, and five as Hispanic/Latino. Five white participants self-identified as Jewish (not white), while the remaining twenty-three white interviewees identified as Caucasian, mixed, white, or European. All interviewees except two had children. Of those who did have children, there were between one and four children in the
family, ranging in age from six months to twenty-eight years old. Annual income ranged from $20,000 to $500,000. All participants lived in the New York City area, with twenty living in Brooklyn, seventeen in Manhattan, three on Long Island, and one in Queens. I specifically included Long Island since many of the homes in that area are spread farther apart than the other areas. I thought this might provide some contrast in terms of geographical constraints in hosting playdates. Participants ranged in occupation from financial consultant, graduate student, and marketing researcher to self-employed entrepreneur, yoga instructor, realtor, or stay-at-home parent. Included among the participants were three people who worked as private childcare center directors, two who worked as teachers and organizers of a playdate website, one who worked as a children's studies professor at a public university, and one who worked as a charter school administrator. Each interview lasted anywhere between one and three hours. All names in the book, except those of the organizers of the website, are pseudonyms to ensure the confidentiality of each participant.

Initial participants were recruited using convenience sampling from parents I came to know at my children's school. While this accounted for only three of the interviewees, the other participants were recruited to the project through snowball sampling. One of the parents I knew worked for a children's product line and used social media to place my recruitment ad. It was from this source that I began snowball sampling. In addition, my research assistant, who interviewed ten participants, worked at a charter school in Manhattan and was able to use snowball sampling through the parents whose children attended the school. Her recruitment accounted for nine of the participants. While this book includes interviews conducted by the two of us, our data showed significant overlap and well-defined patterns, allowing me to posit conclusive arguments.

After most interviews (except those of interviewees without children), I was asked whether I had children, and I found that as I divulged
information about my family and children, this almost always resulted in more participant referrals. There seemed to be comfort for some interviewees in knowing that a parent was conducting the research and that I had a vested interest in the subject matter beyond simple research. Perhaps this humanized me in ways that suggested empathy or an understanding of childrearing. This perceived comfort at the end of most interviews could have been a result of my shared class or status level with many of the parents interviewed, since many were professionals. Those in working-class positions found ways to connect with me since we sometimes shared racial minority status. However, I believe that more often than not, any rapport at the end of the interview was due to our shared parenthood status. I occupied an insider status that my research assistant did not simply because I had children; however, this did not impact the data, only my ability to acquire more referrals at the conclusion of the interviews. It should be noted here that I did not bring my children to any of the interviews, and only two participants were interviewed with their children in the household. As Lareau and others have noted in their studies, most participants eventually fall into their everyday routine despite the interaction with researchers in private spaces. However, an interview-based method makes it challenging for participants to truly feel comfortable to the same degree as when a researcher becomes a constant presence in their life, as ethnographers do. For this reason, I found that it was key to connect with participants by divulging that I was a parent and earning their trust in a timely manner so that they would feel comfortable discussing the private intricacies of their children’s play that go beyond the superficial, which they tended to elaborate on after they answered the interview questions.

While this method of research significantly departs from my previous work in ethnographic participant observation, this project captures the detail necessary to fully understand the playdate as a phenomenon. I used my previous interviews about playdates and ethnographic observations at playdates with twenty-five Caribbean childcare providers from 2004 to 2007 to understand the experiences of these women in their
work on behalf of their employers. These providers were aged twenty-five to sixty-one and came from the countries of Grenada, Trinidad, Guyana, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, Jamaica, and Barbados. Their incomes ranged from $200 to $700 per week, but were not necessarily consistent, since these women labored in a precarious workforce with high turnover. I wanted to compare their experiences to those of the employers of childcare providers to answer questions such as, “How does it feel to have a playdate organized on your behalf?” or “How does the word ‘playdate’ become adopted by cultures that never used the term?” I use my personal playdate experiences as a parent sparingly to further illustrate how people interact throughout the playdate experience and to detail how complicated the whole ordeal can become.

To initiate this study, my assistant and I contacted participants and interviewed them individually in a location of their choice. Only two participants asked to be interviewed together with someone else, one with her spouse and the second with her coworker. We met at the homes of participants, in local public parks, at workplaces (including corporate offices and schools), as well as restaurants. Participants were first given a short survey to provide demographic information such as their educational attainment, household salary, and family structure. They were then asked general questions about their experiences raising children in New York and their own personal recollection of how they were raised in their hometown. Specific questions regarding playdates followed. It was important for me to understand how participants defined a playdate, how frequently they had them, what activities were involved, and what type of meaning was derived from the playdate experience. I also asked questions that targeted participants’ understanding of space (public and private), who was included or excluded from a playdate, and how the playdate was initiated. Lastly, in an effort to understand how playdates and birthday parties (hyper-playdates) contribute to community and society, I asked questions pertaining to job opportunities and networking as well as the extravagant nature of some birthday parties. While not an exhaustive account, these surveys and interviews helped to
tell part of the story of what it means to New York City parents to have their children participate in playdates.

Plan of the Book

This book begins by detailing the moral panic surrounding child safety (“stranger danger”) and how parents view their role as facilitators of their child’s play practices. Parents discuss this moral panic as disseminated through the media as one of the reasons they prefer to organize “playdates” rather than allow their children to go out to “play,” a distinction that parents are able to define.

The first chapter also looks at the playdate as a result of busy urban lives, in which parents are either working odd hours or expected to move at warp speed throughout the day, leaving only a tiny window of opportunity for the socialization of children. This chapter will describe how middle- to upper-middle-class parents use playdates to socialize their children into play in order to avoid perceived city dangers. The playdate essentially becomes framed as a date or a courting of other parents and their children.

Chapter 2 explains the logistics governing playdates, including where to have one, how many children will be invited, whether it is to be a drop-off playdate (in which parents do not participate), and what time of day is ideal. This chapter uncovers how even among affluent participants, certain playdates are avoided because they demand too much effort to execute.

Chapter 3 reveals which parents and children are excluded or included in the playdate experience. Full-time working parents appear to have less opportunity to immerse themselves in playdates and are therefore excluded by other parents due to their employment. The issue of the nanny’s involvement in playdates and who organizes the playdate is also discussed here. Chapter 3 also examines playdates as a predominantly white, upper-middle-class phenomenon. Some mothers of color whom I interviewed feel that playdates are “a white people
thing” that is used to exclude them from being members of this leisure class. Also in this chapter, parents discuss how playdates have contributed to their sense of community and even their sanity. Some began their playdate experiences as early as their child’s first week of life. Through previously organized “mommy groups” that were initiated by their doula (one who aids in a natural childbirth), obstetrician/gynecologist, or pediatrician, women were able to find a support system where they could share resources, ideas about parenting, or a simple glass of wine to take the edge off during days filled with diaper changes, feedings, and other household duties. These mothers yearned for adult interaction in their newly formed parenting world. Often, employed women were left out of these circles once they returned to the workplace, and thus further exclusions were made. This chapter shows how social and cultural capital are transferred from the parent to the child, either implicitly or explicitly, through the construction of a playdate with “people like them” and how this continues the cycle of class reproduction.

Chapter 4 takes a pragmatic approach to the question of playdates and how they are organized. Food for the children was an essential element in the playdate experience for most of the interviewees. If parents were present at the playdate, wine, other beverages, and some snack would be expected as well. Along with food, discipline was expected to conform to the standards of modern parenting (i.e., no physical discipline). A parent’s performance of “proper” discipline could also be seen as a marker of whether their family would be included in a repeat playdate and to gauge the success of playdates.

Finally, chapter 5 looks at birthday parties as hyper-playdates. While some see birthday parties as a private celebration for family and intimate friends, others discuss how one family can raise the bar of what is expected within an entire group of parents with an ostentatious birthday party. Pressure to ante up on what most would consider a modestly important occasion drives parents to impress others and ultimately establish a social circle of “people like us.”
Together, these chapters will help scholars and parents think about how children’s play has been redefined in recent years through the privatization of play. *The Playdate* will serve as a window into the reproduction of inequality while also shedding light on how parents are tasked with the complex job of raising decent citizens in a seemingly unpredictable urban environment.