

Vetting Play Partners: A How-To Guide

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Introduction

Spanking. Bondage. Fire play. Humiliation. BDSM play is intimate stuff, and we put a lot of trust into the people we play with.

Yet our strong desire to do this stuff may lead to playing with someone we don't really know all that well:

- Some people are predators (but they may come across as caring and experienced)
- Some people may be insensitive or uncaring
- Some people may simply be inexperienced

We created this guide with the intent to:

- Increase your level of risk-awareness.
- Get you to think more about the people you play with (Potential Play Partners, or PPPs)
- Offer strategies to avoid common pitfalls that might put you into a situation that could lead to a bad experience.

This is the condensed, "quick-read" version of our guide. A longer version is available.

General Considerations

- What is it that you want to experience, and whom do you trust enough to experience it with?
- Whatever it is that you are searching for, know what you do and do not want and clearly *communicate* that.
- Maintain a long-term perspective, resisting any feelings of immediacy.
- Communication is everything!
- Be on the lookout for “red flags” and keep the following question in mind: “Can I trust this person to have my best interest at heart?”

Red Flags

A “red flag” is a common term used to identify or draw attention to a problem, danger, or irregularity that should probably be addressed. How you treat red flags will depend on your personal risk profile. Take what works for you and leave what does not.

Some examples of red flags include a PPP:

- Applying pressure/asking to meet or play after already having been given a “no” answer.
- Deflecting questions about limits and safe words, or saying they are not important.
- Making misogynist, transphobic, homophobic, sexist, or demeaning comments.
- Leading with their genitalia/kink to such an extent that they are not engaging on a personal level.
- Having a pattern of only playing with newbies.
- Being vague, evasive, or lying about prior or current relationships.

- Irresponsibly using alcohol or any drugs prior to play and/or pushing these substances on you beyond your comfort level.
- Not asking and/or ignoring any relevant medical conditions or traumatic past experiences that may trigger a negative response when negotiating play.

See the full version of the guide for more details and additional examples.

Vetting a PPP for Long-Term or Private Play

Here are some available tools to help you determine whether the person you are vetting is actually the kind of person you are looking for. Keep red flags in mind as you make use of them. As always, remember to take what works for you, and leave what does not.

Online Research

- Browse social media, including FetLife. Do you have any common contacts? If so, reach out to any trusted mutual friends and ask them questions that can help you assess the PPP's suitability. Read the full guide for some important caveats.
- Make use of Google or another search engine.
- Consider searching the sex offender registry and/or running a background check. Again, there are some important caveats.

Live Research

- Observe how the PPP interacts socially with others at group events (munches, meetings, social space of play parties) and during play at play parties, if possible.
- Identify people who you have noticed interacting socially with the PPP, and ask for their opinions about the PPP—both in regards to the PPP as a play partner and as a human being in general.
- Ask for references:
 - Is this person involved in the local community? Ask community leadership whether there are known consent issues with this person.
 - Identify people who have played with the PPP before.

Meet with PPP in a Public Space

- Reach out to the PPP on FetLife, or approach them at a munch or meeting, and ask if they would be interested in meeting publicly to discuss potential future play.
- It may not be a good idea to engage in a longer discussion at this initial reach-out.
- This initial conversation should:
 - Talk about play experience level and involvement in the BDSM community.
 - Confirm that you have common mutual/reciprocal play interests without going into extensive detail.
 - Ask about marital and relationship status and other play partners.

- Establish a friendship ramping period (see next section). Discuss the parameters with the PPP and make sure you are both clear on what those parameters are.

Friendship Ramping Period

The “friendship ramping period” is a period of time where you and the PPP get to know each other on a vanilla basis, with the aim of developing a friendship. The length of this period should be established during the initial public meet-up described above. The length and conditions are entirely up to you and your comfort level, of course.

The goal is to give yourself a period of time to get to know the PPP as a person before jumping into the kinky stuff. Do I like them as a person? Are they trustworthy? Do they stick to the agreements we made and the boundaries we set?

First Play At A Play Party

After the friendship ramping period, you can begin a conversation with the PPP about playing at a play party. (Please see the separate section on Vetting Groups and Play Parties below.) Once again, we encourage you to take what works for you, and leave what does not.

- Prior to your first play scene, make sure you have negotiated/navigated fully.
- Your first scene together should probably be a “lab-style” play scene. If either of you is new to the BDSM community, then the first 2 or 3 scenes you do together should also probably be “lab-style.”
- Arrange to have a trusted friend on hand as a wing-person to observe the scene and the PPP, watching for any potential red flags while you are playing.
- Never drink irresponsibly or get high prior to playing.
- Keep all play dates to “play parties only” for a substantial length of time. Once both of you feel ready to start playing in private, state your readiness and ask to hold off for at least one month.

First Private Play

- Never play privately for the first time at a venue you are unfamiliar with, like the PPP’s home.
- Arrange a safe call (see the full guide for details).
- Before your date, make sure you have fully negotiated.
- Have safewords in place.
- During your date, before playing, do a recap of what you’ve negotiated/navigated.
- Your first few private play dates should not involve restraint from which the bound person cannot remove themselves. (This should be part of your scene negotiation.) Keep your cell phone within easy reach of the play scene, and keep in mind that you can revoke consent at any time.

Pick-Up Play At A Play Party

“Pick-up play” is play that has not been planned in advance and is negotiated “on the fly.” It is common at play parties, public dungeons, and any other public play setting. Before engaging in pick-up play:

- Learn as much as you can about the PPP from other people at the party.
- Observe the PPP playing with others at the party.
- Socialize with the PPP about vanilla topics first.
- Spend at least 20 minutes negotiating/navigating your play scene before playing.
- Make sure at least two trusted friends are on hand to observe your scene.
- Use safewords. Always!
- Never engage in play that approaches the edge of a person’s boundaries with a stranger.

Vetting Groups and Play Parties

Lots of play parties are advertised on Fetlife, and there are a bunch of groups and venues that host parties, which can be fun! Here are some questions to consider to help you determine if the organizing group or venue is a safe and sane choice for you:

Questions to ask:

- How long has the group been around?
- Does the group have posted sets of rules (such as bylaws) and guidelines for play?
- Does the group offer educational discussions, demos, and materials?
- Will the party have dungeon monitors on duty? Are they trained?
- Does the party have a first aid station?
- Is the party invitation-only? How are invitees and their guests vetted?
- What are the party policies on smoking, drinking, and drug use?
- What are the party policies on sexual intercourse?
- What are the party policies on protective measures against sexually transmitted infections and other communicable diseases?
- Are there prohibitions or special arrangements for particular categories of play (fire play, watersports, long-tailed whips, and needle play are some to consider)?

Summary

Whether vetting groups, events, or potential play partners, it is essential for you to do your due diligence in learning about that group, event, and/or person to help ensure your safety and enjoyment. Know what you want. Resist the feeling of immediacy. Ask questions and carefully consider the answers. Research, research, research! Pay attention to any “gut” feelings. Watch for any “red flags” and respond appropriately.

We hope you have found the information included in this document useful—we encourage you to read the full version of the guide for more detailed considerations.