

Vetting Play Partners: A How-To Guide

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Introduction

Finding and vetting a potential play partner (PPP) can be a daunting task. If you are new to the world of kink, you might be eager to experience new things, meet new people, and explore all that the community has to offer. While this can be an exciting time, it can also leave you vulnerable to real predators and/or bad experiences, particularly when the expectations, goals and limits of everyone involved are not clearly communicated.

We—a group of kinksters of varying skill levels, experience, ages, genders, and world views, just like our intended audience—created this document with the intent to empower new and experienced kinksters alike to have better, safer experiences in the kink community.

Content Warning: The following guide references instances of non-consent which may elicit a traumatic response from some readers.

How To Use This Document

Our goal in creating this document is to help you think carefully about what you actually want to experience, and whom you trust enough to share that experience.

A number of bullet points are included in this document. Even so, please understand that these lists are not comprehensive, as it is an impossible task to cover every possible scenario that can arise from personal interactions with an endless variety of human beings in an ever-evolving world. There may be points that do not apply to you and your specific situation. Furthermore, what one person may perceive as a ‘red flag,’ another may perceive as insignificant. As such, we advocate that you adopt a “Take what works for you; leave what does not!” approach when reading through the information provided—everything here is something that at least one author felt was important enough to include, but none of the authors personally subscribe to every single thing listed in this document.

Of note: Predators in the community may use these lists to “cross off” red flags in an attempt to convince potential victims that they are safe. Therefore, please focus on the intent behind each of the points included in these lists, instead of using them as simple checklists.

General Thoughts

BDSM relationships—even those that contain significant amounts of power exchange—do not fundamentally differ from other kinds of human relationships. Like any healthy relationship, a BDSM relationship should be one you feel positively about most of the time with someone you feel positive emotions towards most of the time.

You do need to “prove yourself” in BDSM relationships in the same way you would in any other type of relationship: through trustworthiness, honesty, respect for boundaries, constructive communication, and so on. If any PPP wants you to “prove yourself” by coercing you into something you’re uncomfortable doing, they are demonstrating predatory, controlling, boundary-pushing, consent-violating behavior.

Culturally, children are not usually taught that they have the right to control their own bodily autonomy, which undermines the foundation for a healthy relationship with consent. Examples of common societal messages that strip children of their bodily autonomy include demands for the child to “Come sit on Grandma’s lap!” or “Give your uncle a kiss!” Our society also teaches us from an early age that our comfort is secondary to others’ desires, and that pleasing another person in a way that makes us uncomfortable is normal and expected. Examples include “You don’t want to be rude and cause a fuss.” or “Just grit your teeth, and it will be over soon.” Therefore, in kink and vanilla settings alike, it is important to learn to effectively define and communicate your own needs and boundaries, as well as be sensitive to the fact that others may have difficulty defining and communicating their own needs and boundaries due to the societal messaging surrounding consent that most of us have grown up with.

Predators will often deliberately cultivate friends that they treat differently from potential victims in order to gain legitimacy and plausible deniability. Just because someone is kind to you and doesn’t make you uncomfortable does not mean that they treat everyone the same way. It is possible for someone to be a genuinely good person 75% of the time and a horrible person 25% of the time. Trust your gut! If you get any type of “creepy vibe” or feel concern arising from your initial interactions with a PPP, do not discount your feeling in order to make play happen. Being overly keen to play can easily put you in dangerous situations.

Look for a compassionate, caring approach in a PPP. No matter how intense, masochistic, or rough the desired play may be, all participants should be concerned with and actively care about the physical and mental well-being of their partner(s).

General Vetting Strategies

- Be clear with yourself about what it is you are actually looking for. Are you seeking a PPP for pick-up (spur of the moment) play? A longer-term play partnership? A relationship? Sexual or non-sexual play? Whatever you are searching for, know what you do and do not want, and be ready to communicate that clearly.
- Maintain a long-term perspective. Be patient, and resist that feeling of immediacy. Being too eager can put all potential participants in danger. “The problem with rose-colored glasses is that all red flags just look like flags.”
- Communication is everything! More specifically, it is all about asking questions and actively listening to the answers.
- 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. Think of each red flag as an indicator of increased risk. Depending on your level of risk acceptance,

you may wish to engage in additional scrutiny of the PPP to address your concerns about that particular red flag. For example, a red flag may be a reason for further conversation, or you may decide that that red flag is a reason to never play with that person.

Remembering to take what works for you and to leave what does not, some examples of red flags include a PPP:

- “Forgetting” about a verbal agreement made earlier.
- 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.
- Passing off violence against others and/or marginalized communities as “just kidding.”
- Saying “no” when asked if they’ve ever violated someone’s consent.
 - *Why is this a red flag? If we are honest with ourselves, we have all violated someone’s consent in our lives in one way or another. For example, if you have ever given someone a hug without asking whether or not that touch was okay, that was a consent violation. What we seek in a partner is someone who understands and is willing to reflect upon their own actions, recognize any missteps, and work to change their future behavior.*
- Lashing out or assigning blame when upset.
- Being passive-aggressive.
- Leading with their genitalia or kink to such an extent that they are not engaging on a personal level.
 - This may include sending you unsolicited photos of their genitalia, asking for nudes immediately, detailing what they want to “do with you,” asking about the color of your underwear, and so on.
- Making assumptions about you and/or your preferences rather than asking.
- Expecting your behavior in social interactions to be submissive or dominant without prior negotiation and/or consent.
- Hugging you or touching you in ways that make you uncomfortable and/or without first asking for your consent.
- Failing to acknowledge any feelings communicated about any sort of uncomfortable interaction.
- Using BDSM as a cover for social, emotional, or physical abuse.
 - For example: “Oh, I’m just role-playing.”
- Being vague, evasive, or lying about prior or current relationships.
- Cheating on another partner, or not allowing you to verify their ethical non-monogamy practice with any current partner.
- Suggesting violence as a resolution to social conflict.
- Having a pattern of only playing with newbies.
 - *Why is that a problem? Predators often target newbies, as they may be easier to manipulate into non-consensual activities, are more likely to blame themselves for what happened, and/or may feel less empowered to speak up about their experience.*
- 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.
- Attempting to re-negotiate play parameters during play.
 - *Why is that a problem? Play can create a headspace that limits your ability to make sound decisions, which can result in not being able to fully consent to unexpected changes during play.*

Steps for Vetting a PPP for Long-Term or Private Play

Now that you know about some general red flags to look out for when evaluating PPPs, 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. As always, remember to take what works for you, and leave what does not.

Please note: Doing things such as reaching out to mutual friends via social media or running a background check without any prior discussion with a PPP could potentially be viewed as a consent violation. It's important to do your due diligence but it's also important to protect the feelings, safety, and privacy of everyone involved. Checking someone's social media profiles and looking at publicly available information about them online without prior discussion is fine, as that's something anyone can do and shouldn't be considered a violation of privacy by a reasonable person.

Online Research

- Read the PPP's FetLife profile (if available) and notice whether or not there are any red flags present.
 - 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.
- Google the PPP and determine whether or not there are any red flags about this person.
- Review the PPP's social media accounts, which may include Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc, and ascertain whether or not there are any red flags.
 - While you may have common contacts on these platforms as well, be very careful not to "out" your PPP to anyone should you choose to reach out to any trusted contacts on these platforms. Because these are platforms used by numerous vanilla people as well as those who engage in alternative lifestyles, they may not be aware of the PPP's involvement in kink and/or non-monogamy, or know of the PPP's gender identification and/or sexual orientation, etc.
- Search the sex offender registry: <https://www.nsopw.gov/en/Search/Results#searchDiv>
 - The site allows you to search using a specific name (which you may or may not have), as well as to search by county, zip code, or within a few mile radius of a specific address. Each listing of a registered sex offender found in your search will include a headshot, name, age, and known addresses for that person. This should be enough to identify whether or not a PPP is on the list. *Please remember that only a small percentage of sexual assaults end up in criminal convictions that place someone on the sex offender registry.*
- Run a background check.

- There are a number of different services that will run a criminal background check on someone. These services usually charge a fee and require quite a bit of personal information in order to run the check. Most background checks are designed to be used by landlords, for example, and will have limited utility to the majority of individuals in an interpersonal setting. Running a background check as a habitual part of vetting does not make a lot of sense, but running one if you have suspicions about someone's honesty concerning their criminal, financial, or marital history does.

Please note: The justice system that produces sex offender registries and background check data also demonstrably fails to keep us safe as a larger community. Trying to enumerate all of the systemic failures and biases of the carceral state would be impossible, but we strongly caution against relying too heavily on sex offender registry searches and/or criminal background checks. In addition to their more practical limitations, they are built around institutions that are not only racist, sexist, and LGBTQ-phobic but are also very kink- and sex-negative.

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. You can always ask the PPP for contacts, but be aware that someone who has had consent issues in the past is unlikely to put you in touch with people who have had bad experiences with them!

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.
 - *If the PPP shows any resistance to meeting publicly, or pressures you into a longer conversation after you've stated once that you'd like to hold off a longer discussion until your public meet-up, these are red flags.*
- Possible public spaces to meet:
 - A table during the social component of a kink group meeting
 - A popular coffee shop
- *Any suggestion by the PPP to meet "over drinks" (i.e. involving alcoholic beverage consumption) can be a red flag.* Intoxication makes it impossible to make safe and sober choices.
- When meeting a PPP, always have a safe call (detailed in the "First Private Play" section below) in place, or a trusted friend nearby.
- This initial conversation should:
 - Talk about play experience level and involvement in the BDSM community. Realize that:

- Being a big name or famous presenter in the community does not automatically make someone a safe choice. Predators can hide behind their public image and/or any fancy Fetlife photography.
- Remember that “time in the scene” does not necessarily equal “skill level.” If someone does not work on improving their skills, they can do something badly for a very long time.
- Not having much or any experience does not have to be negatively construed. What is important is that everybody involved is honest about their level of experience.
- Confirm that you have common mutual/reciprocal play interests without going into extensive detail.
- Ask about marital and relationship status and other play partners.
 - *Any indication that the PPP has not made a spouse or intimate romantic partner aware of your meeting is a red flag.*
- 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.
 - *Any resistance to your friendship ramping period parameters by the PPP is a red flag.*

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. For some, 2 months might be good. Others may need more or less time.

Whatever the actual modalities of your friendship ramping period may be, 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?

Remembering to take only what works for you and to leave what does not, examples for conditions that *could* be a part of this friendship ramping period include:

- You can only communicate electronically (email or messaging through FetLife) and meet publicly (kink group munches and meetings, at coffee shops, etc).
- All conversation should be 100% vanilla. No talk about play or kink that you would not have with a co-worker or family member.
- There should be no physical contact. Hugs might be an exception, but only if you’ve established that during the initial meet-up.

Any attempt by the PPP to violate any of the conditions agreed upon for the friendship ramping period is a red flag. Any attempt by the PPP to shorten the length or change the parameters of this period before its conclusion is a red flag.

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.
 - ***Negotiation is big topic all by itself and cannot be covered here in any comprehensive manner!*** Please see the “[Appendix](#)” below for more information about negotiation. There are also separate resources for learning more about this topic. We strongly encourage you to do your own additional research on the subject before negotiating with any PPP.
 - *Any insistence by the PPP to play before you feel fully comfortable in doing so is a red flag.*
- 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. *Any indication that the PPP has been drinking irresponsibly or getting high prior to play is a red flag.* Pour and monitor your own beverages for your safety.
- Keep all play dates to “play parties only” for a substantial length of time. At least 4–5 scenes at play parties are recommended.
 - *Any pressure from the PPP to play in private after you’ve stated an unwillingness to do so is a red flag.*
- Once both of you feel ready to start playing in private, state your readiness and ask to hold off for at least one month.
 - *Any pressure from the PPP to not wait is a red flag.*

First Private Play

- Never play privately for the first time at a venue you are unfamiliar with, like the PPP’s home.
 - Make sure to visit the space socially beforehand, without play on the table.
 - Check your cell phone’s reception during the social visit, and ask to see the play space.
 - Consider a safe call for the social visit, or arrange with the PPP to invite a trusted friend along.
 - *Any suggestion by the PPP to play during an initial social visit is a red flag.*
- Arrange a safe call. This is where you arrange ahead of time with a trusted friend to call them within a designated time window (between 9 and 9:15pm for example) within the period of the play date (from 6 to 11:30pm for example) with the play partner. The arrangements should include what actions the friend should take if they do not hear from you during the designated time window, which may include calling the police and/or having a trusted friend physically come check on you.
 - It is important to inform your PPP of the arrangements prior to your play date. *Any pushback from the PPP about a safe call arrangement is a red flag.*

- Call the friend during the designated time window.
- Before your date, make sure you have fully negotiated. (Please conduct your own independent research on negotiation. See also the “[Appendix](#)” for more information about this topic.)
- Have safewords in place.
 - Make sure that all involved know what they mean.
 - Use them if needed! Never hesitate to use a safeword if you feel you should. When in doubt, use them.
- During your date, before playing, do a recap of what you’ve negotiated/navigated.
 - *Any unwillingness to recap or any indication that the PPP has forgotten any portion of the previous negotiation is a red flag.*
- 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.
 - *Even the slightest reluctance by the PPP to loosen a binding is a super-huge red flag!! If this happens, use the safeword, call your trusted friend immediately, and get out of there as soon as possible.*

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?
- Are the group’s leaders elected?

- Will the party have dungeon monitors on duty? Are they trained?
- Does the party have a first aid station?
- Will the party have cleaning supplies on hand?
- Is the party invitation-only? How are invitees and their guests vetted? Is the attendee list cross-checked with the sex-offender registry?
- How is the venue address published?
- Have the party hosts considered window coverings, parking, how sound travels to neighbors, and what actions will be taken if police show up?
- Is photography allowed at the party?
- 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—please remember to take what works for you, and leave what does not. And most importantly, enjoy the journey!

Appendix

Negotiation

Before addressing the elements included in the acronym below, start negotiations by affirming what you are interested in, and what you want to do. Be conscious to use an “opt-in” approach that lists only things that are okay to incorporate into the scene; anything not listed is not okay to engage with during play. In contrast, an “opt-out” approach would list only things that are not okay to incorporate into the scene. Once you have that baseline established, then move on to the elements in this acronym:

S.M.A.S.H.T.

Safety/Safewords

Medical/Marks

Aftercare

Soft limits

Hard limits

Triggers

Safety/Safewords

Establish safewords, and make sure to include both verbal and nonverbal ones, especially if there might be some kind of gag or other reason someone may not be able to speak during all or part of the scene. Define exactly what happens when a safeword is called; for example, does “red” (which many people use to call an immediate and full stop to all activities) mean “back away and don’t touch” or “immediately offer physical comfort”? Also, if there are any safety concerns or considerations surrounding the type of play you are engaging in, this is a good time to bring them up. What is your risk profile? Is it relevant to the type of play you are going to be engaging in?

Medical/Marks

Is it alright if the play you are engaging in leaves marks? What if it is impact play that could potentially lead to bleeding? Is it okay if the play continues to that point? Do you have any medical issues that could affect the type of play you are going to be engaging in? You do not need to provide a complete medical history, but if you have a joint that bothers you if you stay still for too long, or if you get dizzy and faint if your blood sugar is low, or if you have allergies or asthma, or a pacemaker or something of that nature, it is important to discuss that with your play partner(s).

Aftercare

Aftercare varies drastically from person to person, and is a vitally important consideration for both the bottom and the top. Some people enjoy physical touch after the scene is over, some people want to be left alone. Many people just need a quick snack or a drink of water. Aftercare can extend beyond the immediate post-scene time to include a check-in the following day, or days thereafter. Whatever the

preferences, establishing everyone's boundaries and desires regarding aftercare before the scene begins is a very important part of negotiation.

Soft Limits

In this context, soft limits refer to limits or boundaries that participants have concerns about, but may be willing to try and push beyond. These can include activities that a bottom does not like but is willing to engage in for the sake of a D/s dynamic, or activities that participants do not enjoy, but are interested in creating conflict around for the sake of consensual non-consent play.

Hard Limits

These are limits or boundaries that should not be pushed or crossed under any circumstances for any reason.

Triggers

Triggers are things that create adverse psychological or emotional responses in someone. Common physical triggers include certain body positions, specific types of contact with specific parts of the body, and certain types of auditory stimuli; however, there are many other types of physical triggers. Verbal triggers are also very common. Most people who enjoy verbal humiliation and/or dirty talk have a handful of words that they really don't want to hear during a scene—the effects of hearing them could range from being an irritating distraction to causing a panic attack or worse.

Additional considerations when negotiating play

- Clothing: What is everyone comfortable wearing (or not wearing)?
- During impact play: Is it okay to touch whatever part of the body is being hit?
- “Sexual contact”: It is very common while negotiating a scene to say “No sexual contact.” Because the phrase “sexual contact” means different things to different people, it is important to be specific and define what that phrase means to you.
- For pain: During a scene, using a number system to delineate pain levels can be helpful. For example, the top can ask the bottom “How much does this hurt on a scale of 1 to 10?” During negotiation, define what the target number(s) is (are) for your play.
- Checklists: Yes/No/Maybe and similar checklists can be very helpful to do, especially during negotiation; however, it is important to note that checklists do not equal consent. Consent is not, and cannot be, a written document or contract because consent is never fixed and immutable. Consent can always be changed or withdrawn at any time regardless of what was said or written down a day, an hour, or a minute ago.