

it's uncle stevie time!

A babysitting bachelor lays out his cookie-baking battle plan. But his nephew, niece—and Barbie—have their own agendas. BY STEVE FRIEDMAN



Step One Coax staff to the table.

Ask the children if they're ready to turn off *The Princess and the Pauper*, starring cartoon Barbie, and have some great fun making cookies. Tell them it's cookie-making time. Inform them that Mommy will be upset if she comes home and they haven't helped Uncle Stevie make cookies. Rub head. Wonder, not for the first time this afternoon, why you promised your sister you would babysit for five hours. Tell staff they can watch *The Princess and the Pauper* for five more minutes and then that's it, they're going to make cookies.

Twenty minutes later, promise Isaac, the 7-year-old, that if he comes to the table right now he can watch *Shark Tale* and *Finding Nemo* and *Shrek* and *Shrek 2* when Mommy comes home, and of course he can read a few chap-

ters of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* before bedtime, and that yes, why wouldn't Mommy fight a best-of-seven sword-fighting duel with him and then sing songs to him until he falls asleep? Assure Iris, the 3¾-year-old, that, affirmative, if it's important to her you will henceforth address her as "Little Dog," because "that's my name today," and certainly she can eat as much cookie dough as she wants before you make the cookie balls.

Step Two Establish chain of command.

Demand that your staff identify themselves. Ask, "Who are you?"

"We're kids," Iris says.

"No, we're not," Isaac barks. "We are cookie-making soldiers!"

Lower your voice. Adopt a stern tone.

"You're what, soldier?" ►

"If Barbie is so popular, why do you have to buy her friends?"

—Steven Wright, comedian



Tell your niece that, yes, her Barbie can make a cookie by herself. Yes, it will be a beautiful cookie, and no, Isaac will not be allowed to touch it.

"We're cookie-making soldiers, sir! Uncle Stevie, sir!"
"Very good, soldier, now—"
"Blieeee!!!!" Iris is crying. "You scaring Barbie!"
"It's okay, Iree, I'm just—"
"My name is Little Dog!" she screams.
"You have to say, 'Yes, sir, Uncle Stevie, sir,' first," Isaac reminds her.
"You shut up!"
"No, you shut up!"
"C'mon, kids, let's all—"
"We're not kids, sir, Uncle Stevie, sir!"
"No, I know, Isaac, you're soldiers. But let's just relax. It's okay, Iree, you don't have to cr—"
"I'm not Iree, I'm Little Dog!"

Step Three settle the troops.

Redeploy both soldiers to the couch. Preheat oven. Gather cookie-making ingredients. Sneak a glance at *The Princess and the Pauper*, starring cartoon Barbie in both roles. Realize, not for the first time, that cartoon Barbie is really kind of fetching. And smart too. Why can't you meet someone like cartoon Barbie?

When the ingredients are laid out, call the troops back. Call again. And again. Welcome Isaac back to the cookie staging area. Well done, soldier. Continue negotiations with Iris. "Barbie hates cookies," Iris says.

"Now, why would Barbie hate cookies?"
"I'm very angry at you, Stevie!" Iris shrieks. Such a tiny thing. Such a large sound.

"I know you're angry, Iri—"
"Little Dog! Little Dog! Little Dog!"

Step Four Assign titles.

Tell Little Dog that she will be your assistant. You read somewhere that giving children titles helps them feel empowered. "So when I want you to do something, I'll say, 'Assistant, please help me,' okay?"

"Only if Barbie can be my assistant."
"That's fine, Ire, I mean, Little Dog."

"Sir!" says Isaac. "Uncle Stevie, sir! I suggest that Iris start at something lower than assistant, because she's little, and sometimes she doesn't get things right the first time. She's sort of rambunctious."

Thank God that Iris is so busy making Barbie jump on the bags of chocolate chips, she doesn't take offense.

"And since I was already assistant, Uncle Stevie, sir, I think I should have another title."

"Okay, soldier, what title do you want?"

"I think I should be 'apprentice.'"

"Okay, Isaac, soldier, you're apprentice."

Rub head. Rub eyes. Wonder how your sister does it, day in and day out. Wonder how any parent does it.

"And if I do a good job, I think I should be promoted to sous-chef."

Step Five Establish hygienic standards.

Announce hand-washing maneuvers. Include Barbie.

"Uh-uh," Iris says. "We didn't just go potty, so we don't haveta."

"She's right," Isaac says. "That's the rules."

Reflect upon the places you have seen the children's hands since you arrived earlier in the afternoon, and wonder that

you haven't already started manifesting symptoms of diphtheria, Ebola, and dengue fever. Marvel that all parents on earth aren't in bed, shivering with fever and exhaustion and shattered spirits.

Explain that while everyone present loves and respects Mommy, it's Uncle Stevie time, with Uncle Stevie rules. Pray that no one you know ever learns you used the phrase "It's Uncle Stevie time, with Uncle Stevie rules." Beg your apprentice to persuade your assistant to participate in hygienic maneuvers and promise him sous-chefdom by day's end if he succeeds. When your assistant informs you that under no circumstances will she wash her hands, and that you're stupid and mean, just like her brother, and that Barbie hates both of you, try this: "If you don't wash your hands, some really horrible mean germs that make you throw up and give you diarrhea might get in the cookies and everyone will eat them and then even Barbie will probably get diarrhea!"

Spend a few minutes drying 3¾-year-old tears and hating yourself.

Step Six **Complete campaign.**

Make cookie dough. Form cookie balls. Help Little Dog make cookie ball for Barbie. Allow Little Dog to gobble as much cookie dough as she can hold. Promote apprentice to sous-chef. Place cookie balls in oven. Settle staff back on couch in front of DVD player. Cue up *The Princess and the Pauper*. Sink onto couch. Hold face in hands. Breathe. Don't forget to breathe.

"Stevie?"



"Yes, Little Dog."

"Barbie's cookie will be the prettiest."

"I think you're right, sweetie."

"And Stevie?"

"Uh-huh?"

"Barbie says she loves you and can we make cookies with you tomorrow, if we promise we'll wash our hands and remember to call you Uncle Stevie, *sir*?"

Don't let your staff see you weep. ●●



Steve Friedman's work has appeared in *The Best American Sports Writing* many times. His nephew Isaac has decided he's going to become a doctor. Or maybe an artist. Or a basketball player. Iris denies she ever liked the name Little Dog.