



Birthday Party Guide

Your birthday party guide for preschoolers and big kids.

It seems like parents have less time than ever to plan children's birthday parties, but try telling that to a five or six-year-old with his heart set on inviting the entire class for a dinosaur hunt. It may be only one day out of 365, but it can take on mammoth proportions. Whether parents work or not, they must still deal with their children's primal need for a big day, not to mention the pressure they feel to make children's parties special and unique.

Before you take out a loan to pay for your child's next birthday party, sit down and think through this whole birthday party craziness and what it means to you.



Deconstructing the meaning of birthday parties

What are birthday parties about, anyway? Plain and simple, they're meant to celebrate the "specialness" of someone. And "specialness" doesn't and shouldn't have anything to do with how much money the party costs. What makes a birthday party great? The fact that the birthday child had a wonderful, wonderful time, everybody laughed a lot and there were fun things to do, the birthday child had a cake with HER name on it. That's what makes a great party.

Preschoolers

For preschoolers, birthday parties are a time of socialization whereby they learn the party rituals of life—how to be the center of attention, and how to be a guest.

Preschoolers don't need to know too far ahead about their parties. You may be thinking about it for weeks in advance but to a child, a month is an eternity. A week's notice is much more in keeping with a young child's sense of time.

How many guests? One rule of thumb is to invite one guest for every year. Four guests for a four-year-old, etc. Another possibility is to plan a small celebration at preschool or the childcare site plus a family party at home.

At this age children are likely to enjoy repeating favorite activities from their everyday life at parties. Find out what games and songs your child likes in childcare or preschool and include them.

School-age

School-age kids have very different ideas about what makes successful parties: namely, at the best ones, they don't do the same things they do all week. And as children approach the preteen years, they develop a need for sophistication (or what they think passes for it).

Ask a child why he didn't like a friend's party and he'll complain about the food (not enough of it) and that there was nothing fun to do. Ask a child, especially an older one, what makes a party great and he's likely to say something like, "We got to stay up late." Feeling grown-up is what it's all about.

All children, all ages, honoree and guests, bring an enormous amount of energy to parties. They have high expectations of having fun. Successful parties let the partygoers express their exuberance, rather than forcing them to sit still like perfect little ladies and gentlemen. Parties that require them to sit through long performances, for example, don't give kids the outlet they need. They're out to boogie. Plan plenty of physical activities that are noncompetitive. Think about the interest level of the guests: your child may love four hours at a batting cage or a full-length ballet, but what about the other kids?

A few ideas

- To avoid hurt feelings, avoid passing out invitations at school—a power trip for some kids, a source of rejection for others. Even if you invite everyone, some invitations may get stuck at the bottom of backpacks for weeks.
- The best theme parties are tied to what a child is interested in at the time: dinosaurs, dolls, baseball, etc., NOT what parents think should be of interest.
- Take plenty of photos, individual and group shots, and include them in your thank-you notes later. Consider cut-outs or funny accessories such as Groucho Marx-style glasses.
- If you decide to give out favors, pass them out during the gift opening so every child feels involved and special.
- Alternatively, have guests make their party favors, such as yarn friendship bracelets.
- Parents often want to provide variety in favors or goody bags, but this inevitably leads to kids comparing colors and contents. Identical favors are safest. Make up a few extras in case they get lost or broken.
- Ultimately, only you and your child can decide what works best. Not all children need a big birthday party. Does yours? Or do you?