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Party tips and Games

For many kids, their birthday is their favorite holiday. And why not -- it's a day dedicated entirely to them, complete with cake, balloons, singing and presents. Although many parents stress at the idea of planning a birthday party, the preschool age is actually an ideal time to throw one. Here's how to keep your sanity while ensuring that everyone has a good time.

1. Age is an Important Number

Make sure everything, from activities to goody bag treats, is age-appropriate for the majority of your guests. If there is a wide range of ages, use the age of the birthday child as a guide. Age also plays an important role in setting the theme and deciding where to have your party. Younger children might be comfortable in a home but feel your child out to get a good read on the situation.

2. Organize the Fun

Spontaneity is always fun, but for a preschool birthday, scheduling (with some wiggle room) is the way to go. Try planning activities over a short time span -- 10 to 15 minute intervals. And if you have anything special planned, do it before the cake, a surefire sign that the soiree is winding down. Remember, simple is best when you are dealing with young children with short attention spans, so you want to try to avoid activities where kids have to wait for their turn, especially if there are lots of other kids at the party. Think bubbles, coloring pages and books, freeze dance or even a craft station, complete with clay, paper, glue and other assorted items that kids can create with. Try to have at least one adult helper for each activity.

3. Watch the Clock

If your party is at home, it is important to have a beginning and ending time. Don't leave the party open-ended as it could confuse guests and not allow them to plan for the rest of the day. For parties for kids under 5, figure for about 90 minutes, two hours tops.

4. Invitation Information

An invitation should include all the basics -- address, date, time and the guest of honor, but there are other important nuggets that parents may be wondering about. Indicate if a child should be dropped off or if you'd prefer an adult to stay. (Dropping off usually begins around age 5 or 6, but it's still a good idea to let your preference be known.) If parents do leave their children, get a phone number where they can be reached if there are any problems. Also note if you are serving food so people know if they need to feed their kids, and if possible, let them know what's on the menu to alert those parents who have kids with allergies. Include an RSVP date and don't feel funny about following up with a phone call if you don't hear back.

5. Determining the Destination

If you don't have the room or the inclination to host the party at home, there are plenty of places you can go instead, but you should book this type of party several months in advance if possible. Good places fill up quickly, especially those that can only host one party at a time. If you choose to avoid the pre-planned party route such as Build-a-Bear or bowling, consider privately-owned recreation rooms (possibly owned by a church or fire house), a park (have a rain date), or even your local day care center. These are great places because they are generally closed on weekends, parents can often hire the teachers to work the party and the kids are comfortable because it is a place they are familiar with.

6. That's Entertainment!

When hiring an entertainer for your child's party -- whether you have it in your home or at an outside destination, ask key questions like how long their performance is, how much space they need, and what kind of experience they have. Do they have a website? How is their approach on the phone? Do they offer little extras?

7. What's On the Menu?

Pizza is most commonly found on the menu of many preschool parties, but it certainly isn't the only option. Chicken nuggets, small sandwiches, hot dogs, bagels, vegetables and dip and fruit on skewers are all great choices and kid-favorites. They are also quick to prepare and are likely to please your adult guests. The reality is, this is one area you can probably not have to worry about spending a lot of money. Chances are your pint-sized guests won't eat that much -- so occupied will they be with all the excitement of the day.

8. Think About Themes

Whether your child loves Dora, Thomas, or the Backyardigans, chances are you can find birthday party goodies that span the spectrum, from plates to wall hangings. And it's not just about decorations. Popular characters lend themselves to other facets of the celebration, like games, food and crafts. At a Dora party for instance, you can set up an adventure course and make an animal mask. Serve up sandwiches you cut from train-shaped cookie cutters at a Thomas the Tank Engine party. And if you are so inclined, the big finale can be when the birthday child's favorite character shows up. No matter where you hold the party, the theme is something your child is going to want to be involved with, so make sure to get their input.

9. Sweet Endings -- the Cake

Talk to your child about what they would like. A cake is a good option, but so are cupcakes, ice cream sundaes or even big cookies. You can incorporate the theme (if you have one) either by baking your own cake and decorating with small toys or even trying your hand at drawing something. Local bakeries, grocery stores can also make theme cakes to order. You may even want to let your young guests get in on the act -- bake a bunch of cupcakes, put out icing, sprinkles and other decorations like chocolate candies and let them get to work creating a culinary masterpiece.

10. In Good Favor

Hand out goody bags at the end, as the children leave, so you greatly reduce the chance of lost items or misunderstandings. There are plenty of options -- if you are having a Mickey Mouse Clubhouse party for example, purchase favors related to that theme – stickers, notepads, pens and more at all different price points. A popular favor, no matter what type of party your child may be having are drink cups. They serve a dual-purpose -- you can use them at the party and then send them home with the guests. If you aren't thrilled with the idea of buying a bunch of small toys, consider buying one item -- a shovel and pail, a book or even coloring books and crayons. Make sure whatever you choose is clearly labelled with the child's name.

11. No Time Like the Present

Probably the best part for your child, presents can be a highlight of the special day, although with younger children, it might be best to unwrap them after the party is over. If you decide to open them during the festivities, you may need to coach your child a little -- if they get a duplicate or something they doesn't like, make sure they understands they shouldn't announce it to the world. Make sure the toys stay in their boxes to avoid losing pieces. And when all is said and done, be sure to mail (no e-mail) thank you notes. This job will most likely fall to you, but your child can certainly draw a picture or write their name (if this is something they are capable of doing).

GAMES TO TRY

Duck, Duck, Birthday?!

For this game it is a variation of Duck, Duck, Goose. Have the kids sit cross legged in a circle. The person who is it, goes around the circle tapping the head of each person and says "Happy Birthday". When they get to the person they want to race against, they have to say "Happy Birthday Name of Birthday child", then they run one direction, and the person whose head is tapped runs the other direction. The person who gets back to the seat last, continues to tap heads another round. ANOTHER variation to this is to have the kid whose head was tapped run AFTER the head tapper and tag them before they get back to the seat. This way eliminates potential crashes when the runners meet running opposite directions!

Stick the nose on the Birthday Child

Get a larger picture of your child's face printed up and then pick up some adhesive stickers (round ones, they come in 4 colors, found anywhere stationary is sold). Stick the picture on the wall, blindfold a child, spin them around, hand them one sticker and they have to try to stick it on their nose. This is a variation of the game, "Pin the Tail on the Donkey". Award a prize to the person who gets closest to the nose.

Musical chairs

Pick some of your child's favourite songs to play, and play musical chairs. Have the chairs in a circle, or if played outside try one big line of chairs. Play the song and the kids dance and groove to the tunes until you hit stop. In this version, rather than eliminating a person and having sad kids, you only eliminate a chair each time and kids have to share the chairs or have their friends sit on their lap. It is a lot of fun. Eliminate chairs until the laps get too full, then you reverse the game and after each stop of the music you ADD a chair back until the final round where

everyone ends up back on a chair. If you want to have a “winner” secretly stick a sticker under one of the chairs and whoever ends up on that chair wins! If you don’t have enough chairs, exchange them for towels, facecloths or placemats that the kids have to sit on!

Spaceships

Space Ships is really based on the old game, called Corners, Again, there is no elimination and it gives everyone a chance to race around, using their imagination to fly around in their spaceships! Firstly, obtain four mats, coloured Red, Green, Yellow and Blue.

Secondly, obtain some space ship music, with effects such as space ships flying, lasers shooting, and explosions, etc. Position the mats in the outer four parts of a large circle. The centre area represents outer space. Each mat becomes a planet, i.e. red planet, green planet, blue planet and yellow planet.

When the outer-space music plays the children have to hold their arms out, as though they are flying, and run around in an anti-clockwise circle, as though they are flying in outer space. When the music stops, they have to fly back to the planet of their choice, that is, to one of the coloured mats. Announce in a deep Darth Vader voice that one of the planets is about to blow up. If the group of kids are on the chosen planet their spaceship will become damaged; consequently they will have to fly their space ships more slowly. This stops the more boisterous boys from racing around and crashing into each other.

The next time, announce that you are Darth Vader’s brother/sister, and will be chasing them as they fly around. Hold up your arms as though flying and run around with the children. When you feel the game is exhausted(or you are ☺), just announce that they are all winners and will get a prize at the end of the party. So, this game is really Corners with just a simple modification to the game. It is now very fast paced, all are involved all of the time, with no elimination and all are winners! If you aren’t much of a Star Wars fan(or a runner) get one of the older cousins or men to assume that role!

I hope this little resource is helpful to you. I would be delighted to assist you in any aspects of planning your event. Thank you for your interest in my services. I look forward to being a part of this special time!

Magically,

Randy Burtis