

Planning the Perfect Party

BY KAY KOSAK ABRAMS, PH.D.



Illustration by Jana Christy

Dear Dr. Kay:

My husband and I are planning our 6-year-old son's birthday party. Many of his friends have parties with 20 or more guests. Worse, our son comes home with expensive party favors, like a small game or a craft kit. We feel ridiculous admitting to a kind of peer pressure as grown adults. Yet, we definitely feel the pressure of this trend. We believe a small celebration should be enough, along with a special family dinner. How do we compromise in the face of potential disappointment?

Dear Parent:

You have my full permission, should that help to empower you, to stick to your values and draw the line. Do what is best for you and for your child, in accordance with your values. Compromise does involve sacrifice, but remember, less is more when it comes to less stress, less cost and fewer toys to take for granted.

The first step in parenting is values assessment. Such assessment requires taking the time to think about what makes sense for you and your children. All of our parenting decisions are driven by values, and we need to take the time to think about what we intend to be teaching, and modeling, for our children.

No doubt, some birthday parties in the metropolitan area are much too large; the celebration becomes more about the presents than the meaning of the day, which, in this case, is about celebrating the gift of life, literally.

The celebration is in the sentiment and in the connection to friends and family, rather than the material gains, which often result in an overabundance of plastic toys. The novelty of toys often wears off quickly, but a brief and memorable occasion to celebrate is a lifelong memory. When cash and flash outweigh meaningful moments and connection, we run the risk of encouraging a sense of entitlement. When children begin to count or compare the goods, a red flag should pop up in our conscience.

While societal standards do impact our measure of normalcy, we parents must keep an eye on ourselves as we set the bar regarding those norms. Your children can tolerate setting a different example, as long as you communicate the values behind the choices. If facing embarrassment or disappointment is a real possibility, there is a valuable life lesson here, too.

Whatever you decide, take heart in knowing that birthday celebrations are a privilege, not an obligation. Here are some tips for teaching moderation and gratefulness.

- Stick to the good old rule of thumb equating the number of guests per year of age (i.e. five guests for a 5-year-old), which is a good way to

prevent children and parents from being overwhelmed and overburdened. Even with a hired entertainer, small parties can be intimate and homemade.

- Alternatively, we can teach our children to say, "I am having just a small celebration this year." That is sufficient and certainly a family's prerogative to be respected.

- Consider cupcakes for the whole class or sports team, and mail invitations for just a few close friends and family.

- There is nothing wrong with letting other parents know, particularly if they ask, what your child might like, in order to avoid too many "plastic toys" that may quickly end up in the trash can.

- Alternate the year for a party with friends versus a special outing out with family. Just make it the birthday ritual.

- Opening presents after your guests are gone helps to prevent feelings of competition and hurt. Be sure to teach your child to write "thank you" notes. Taking the time to do this fosters the sense of appreciation.

- Let your child open all the gifts, but then set some aside rather than allowing him to play with all of the toys at once. Your child will appreciate each gift when you bring it back out for play.

- Speak up kindly to family and your child's friends' parents about the amount of presents. For example, let them know that your house is overflowing with toys. Then ask them to keep it simple and useful. Most parents will appreciate the permission to keep the gift reasonable, i.e. some paints or colored pencils.

- It is especially thoughtful to buy a gift that suits the child's tastes, so be sure to ask your friends what their child might like!

- Hold a party where the guests actually create and make something for the birthday boy, asking them not to bring extra presents.

- Keep party favors a "favor." Homemade anything, particularly something your birthday boy makes, is much more sentimental than a toy. You might inspire other parents.

- Consider giving toys away when your child receives one that he doesn't like. Help him decide who might like it so he can experience the gift of giving rather than the loss of a gift.

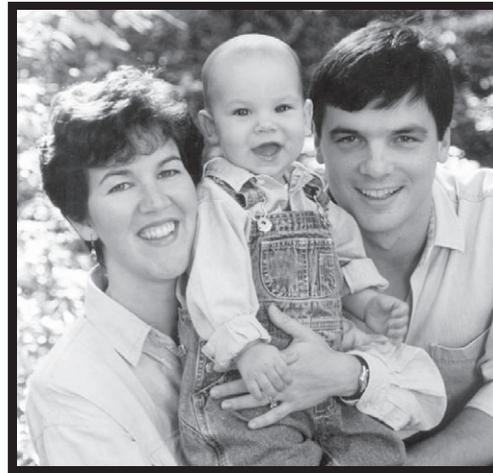
- There is nothing wrong with the early life lesson, "It's the thought that counts." We do not always have to replace the gift, although some parents prefer to buy it from the child and put the money in his bank to select another gift. Do your thinking about which lesson you wish to teach.

- It is important for privileged children to learn the value of money and remember the adage that money "does not grow on trees." This lesson is learned through our actions. To inform our children that we cannot take 20 children for laser tag based on the costs is also a valuable lesson.

- Save your money for the really big life cycle celebrations you hope to host, like the "sweet sixteen," a family reunion or a graduation party.

Birthdays are a time for connection and sentiment. Being with close family and friends may be more meaningful than a large party. Assess what matters to you, and don't be afraid to challenge the norm by discussing values and practices with other parents in your community. For some parents, a big bowling party for a lot of kids is convenient, all-inclusive and easy, for others, it is overwhelming. For others, hiring a magician or clown is the happiest solution. None of us need to feel obliged and under peer pressure to keep to a standard that sabotages the meaning and the value of the life celebration.

Kay Kosak Abrams is a psychologist in private practice in Garrett Park, Md. "Parenting with Confidence" coffeehouse sessions take place on-site at area schools, as well as on the second Wednesday of each month at the Garrett Park Town Hall, October through June. Visit www.kayabrams.com for more information.



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