

Healthy Alternatives to Excessive Birthday Parties

by Dr. Jenn Berman

A “makeover party” complete with manicures, pedicures, and hair styling.

A limousine ride to a concert complete with “virgin” cosmopolitans and backstage passes.

A party with live exotic animals.

A tented, catered birthday bash for 200 people.

A \$38,000 private sleepover at the FAO Schwartz toy store.

Did I mention that these were all children’s birthday parties?

Children’s birthday parties have become increasingly extravagant and parents report feeling tremendous pressure to create the “perfect party.” In a poll of 28,000 parents for Parenting Magazine, 82% of respondents reported that children’s birthday parties have become too over-the-top. The party industry for kids is stronger than it has ever been. Hallmark estimates that people spend over \$600 million on kids’ cards, gift-wrap and party ware every year. Children today have come to expect entertainment, gift bags and expensive presents.

This problem is not exclusive to the wealthy or even just the middle class; it has become so big that it crosses all socioeconomic lines. Nobody wants

to let their children down and so people who don’t have the money to spend feel pressured to spend more than they can afford, and those who have money feel compelled to show their love through these outsized and non-age appropriate events.

Keeping Up with the Jones

Many parents feel obligated to throw expensive and extravagant parties because that has become the norm in their community, while others feel compelled to compete with their neighbors. According to Deena Yellin, a mother and journalist for The Record, “Birthdays have become the battleground in which parents prove their economic and party-planning prowess.”

But parenting is not a competitive sport.

Regardless or whether or not you can afford a \$38,000 sleepover at a toy store, you have to examine the message you are sending your kids. Birthday celebrations are supposed to be about family, friends and connection, not gifts, party bags

and one-of-a-kind entertainment.

Kids live in a society that has become far too materialistic and it is up to parents to counter that in the home life they present to their children. It has been estimated that in 2006 children between the ages of 4 and 12 will have spent more than \$50 billion dollars a year and influenced an estimated \$200 billion a year that their parents spend. Advertisers have gone after children with unprecedented focus and fervor helping to create a culture of mini-consumers who expect material goods in greater and greater excess. It is hard for parents to say “no” especially when all the other parents around them are paying for extravagant parties.

At times, the decadence becomes about the parent, not the child. Many busy parents use birthday celebrations as an opportunity to assuage their guilt for not spending more time with their kids. Their intentions are good but the outcome is poor. Giving “cool” gifts or an expensive party does not replace time with a parent. Parents who try to prove their love this way send a terribly materialistic message to their children.

Me! Me! Me!

Since a birthday party is only one day out of the year, you may wonder what the problem is with creating an over the top birthday party. However, when parents spend thousands of dollars on entertainment and gifts they create kids who feel entitled. What they learn by this is that if they want something, regardless of the price, someone will buy it for them. Our children don’t learn anything about life or themselves by receiving big gifts; they learn important life lessons by saving up for that expensive toy or game. Even if you can afford to give your child everything he or she wants, you shouldn’t. Likewise with buying pricey gifts, excessive birthday parties send a message that birthdays are about materialism and in the overly materialistic society in which we live, it is important to look for excuses to buy less, not more.

If the over-the-top spending were limited to birthdays, it would be a more manageable issue. Unfortunately, these parties are the tip of the iceberg for most families. These celebrations are part of a pattern of behavior in which children are given everything they want and never taught about delaying gratification. Spoiling children is actually more dangerous for their well-being than you might imagine. According to a nationwide

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study of over one thousand families, girls who describe themselves as "very spoiled" are three times as likely to have driven drunk and twice as likely to have smoked marijuana. They are also at high risk for poor grades, bulimia, smoking cigarettes, cheating on tests, and skipping school. According to that same study, boys who considered themselves "spoiled" were found to be at a higher risk of behavioral problems like lying, cheating, anxiety, depression, skipping school, underachieving academically, using creatine or steroids, and drunk driving.

Children don't want to feel more powerful than their parents. When parents spend excessively on their children, creating extravagant parties and showering them with expensive gifts, they create spoiled, self-important children. Given the current trend of parents bending over backwards to make their children feel privileged, it is not surprising that studies show each generation of kids are becoming more narcissistic than the last.

What's a Party Girl to Do?

You don't have to give in to throwing an over-the-top party if that is not consistent with your values. Figure out what feels right for your family and follow your heart. There are a few other things you can do to set party limits.

Set a limit on the number of guests invited. Camille Chatterjee of Parenting Magazine recommends inviting the child's age plus one. In other words, your two-year-old could have three friends at her party. This prevents children from getting overwhelmed and parents from spending a fortune.

Rebel with other mothers. One mother who became tired of spending hundreds of dollars on gift bags rallied together a group of other mothers at her child's school who all put a moratorium on birthday gift bags.

Set a budget, even if you don't have to financially. Decide what you think is reasonable to spend on a child's birthday party and don't exceed that limit.

Be creative. Find ways to make a unique, fun and exciting party without spending a fortune.

Be charitable. If your child loves dogs have a dog themed party where children get a photo of a dog that was rescued in their name instead of a gift bag.

Dr. Jenn is a licensed Marriage, Family and Child Therapist in private practice. She is the author of the Los Angeles Times bestselling book *The A to Z Guide to Raising Happy Confident Kids*. Her "Dr. Jenn" column won the prestigious Parenting Publications of America award in Parenting and Child Development. She has appeared as a psychological expert on hundreds of television shows including *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *The Today Show*, and *The Tyra Banks Show*. Dr. Jenn lives in Los Angeles with her husband and twin daughters. For more information, email Dr. Jenn at drjenn@familymagazingroup.com.



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