

BANANAS HANDOUT

Birthdays!

"Birthdays come but once a year and when they come they bring good cheer."

Or do they? Many parents seem to dread their children's birthdays, or more precisely, the birthday parties. Perhaps there are ways to plan those annual events to satisfy the birthday child as well as yourself and the other members of your family. Remember that birthdays mean something different to each one of us – some of us love them, some of us feel very blue on that day. So take these individual differences into consideration when you read the following suggestions. Your do's might be your neighbor's don'ts. When thinking about or planning your child's birthday, keep in mind that the birthday is actually an important day for both of you. It's a good idea to take a few moments by yourself and think about your child's actual birth day – what that day was like, what having this particular child meant and means to you, how the child has grown since then, how you have changed. After your own reflections, plan a birthday that will tell your child what a very special person s/he is. From the "good morning" to the "good night" you can treat the child with a tenderness and caring which says "I'm glad you were born."

If your family or lifestyle has changed or if your family is smaller or larger than before, some extra planning may be in order. If you are separated or divorced, decide if the birthday child will see both parents on the actual birthday (if this is possible) or talk to the parent who is out of the home. If you have joint custody or if you live in the same community as the child's other parent, decide before the birthday if there will be a party, where it will be held and if both parents will attend (or, if one parent doesn't attend, decide when s/he will see the child to celebrate). Then, tell the child clearly who will be where and when. There are no right or wrong ways to decide these questions – try to come up with solutions which are as comfortable for everyone as possible. Birthdays may remind a child of an absent parent. Having a simple explanation ready should a child have questions will make the situation easier for you.

Other children in the family may find a sibling's birthday hard to take. Discuss feelings of jealousy that may arise. A matter-of-fact reminder of their own birthday is in order. This might be a good time to share old birthday pictures to

remind a jealous sibling that his or her special day was celebrated as well. Depending on the age of the siblings, enlist their help in planning a party. Or, read *A Birthday For Frances* by Russell Hoban for the sibling's point of view.

But, be prepared for some difficult behavior which may be especially hard to handle if it occurs during the busy preparations for the party or at the actual event. Teasing, being bossy and aggressive, sulking (hitting, biting, etc. if younger) are common sibling behaviors. Try to channel this energy into constructive activities beforehand, like decorating or organizing the games. Older siblings may enjoy having a specific assignment during the party. Other options for helping siblings get through the day include allowing them to visit friends while the preparations are going on (with instructions to come home or be ready to be picked up at party time) or allowing them to have one special friend attend the party with the other birthday guests.

The birthday child is also vulnerable on the Big Day. Many children feel "invaded" by the guests – even if they are good friends who visit them often on the other 364 days of the year! Plan ahead for this possibility by discussing which toys, other possessions and rooms are off limits during the party and exactly where the party will be held. Respect these decisions at party time so your child will feel some sense of control over the situation and so you will avoid last minute confrontations. (Of course, your child, once comfortable, might decide that all the guests really are invited to play as they usually do.)

But, despite the best preparations, even very young children might become overwhelmed on their birthdays – not so much by the idea of a birthday (as we adults often are) – but by being the center of so much attention. There has been many a child who bursts into tears when the guests arrive or during the singing of "Happy Birthday To You."



And, there has been many a child who missed the party altogether because of hitting, temper tantrums, etc. Taking your own child's personality into consideration when planning for the birthday and sharing the planning process are the best ways to help the birthday child, the siblings and everyone else have a good day.



Now Forge Ahead

Once you've sorted through the bits and pieces of past and present birthdays, and decided you want to have a party, it's time to get underway planning the event. Family celebrations are often best for the birthdays of very young children who haven't yet learned the social conventions. And, it doesn't take very many toddler guests to make for a very busy birthday party. When having a larger event, try to make and then stick with a final decision about how many guests will be invited and who will be included – only neighbors, only school friends, children and their parents, etc. Some people invite the same number of guests as the child's age – 7 for a 7th birthday. Others alternate between having a larger party one year and a small one the next. Whatever decision you come to about the number to be invited, the birthday child should help draw up the actual guest list.

Conflicts can arise when the parent insists "if you invite child x, you must invite child y" and the child prefers only one. Sometimes the best compromise is to invite neither. Or, the guest list could be expanded so that no one your child really wants to invite gets left out for someone you feel socially obligated to include. While you as an adult may have some guests you feel must be invited, remember, that it is your child's birthday – not yours. On the other hand, there is nothing wrong with reminding your child how hard it is to be left out of a party (maybe this has happened to him/her in the past). Learning to be considerate of others is an important part of growing up. Hopefully if approached in a spirit of compromise, planning the guest list won't be too painful.

Consider having a different sort of party, like a breakfast on Saturday morning (little ones are up anyway) or pack a brown bag lunch and picnic at a park. For older children, other party ideas are: a slumber party in a nearby park which allows camping, a cook-out, a movie or play, a trip to the beach, ice skating, bowling or inviting a special friend (or two) to dinner at a restaurant. Local programs like Fairyland, the Lawrence Hall of Science and the Exploratorium can be a fun location for a party and some offer special birthday services.

Surprise parties work best with older children and the surprise will probably be successful if you schedule the party a few days before the actual birthday. You can also do a reverse surprise party by



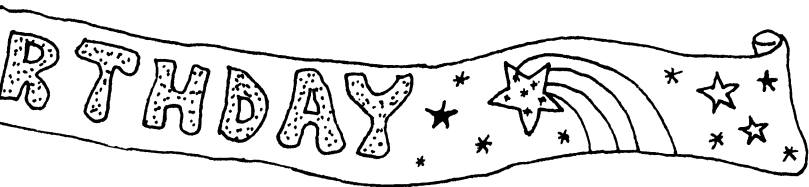
informing the parents but not the guests about the event and then picking up the unsuspecting guests one by one! Choose a location for the party where you will feel confident that you will be able to supervise the children. This is true even if you have the party at your house. If you don't want the children to eat the living room plants or get stuck in that backyard crawl space – remove the hazard or plan the party elsewhere in your home.

If you send invitations, allow the birthday child to participate in the process. Child-made invitations are fun and by using a copy machine you can capture the original art while cutting down on the work. An older child can help with the writing; little ones can seal envelopes and lick stamps. Older siblings are very useful here. Teachers and child care providers usually don't like you to send invitations to school or child care situations unless everyone is invited. Don't want to bother with written invitations? – You can simply call the parents of the guests in advance. In any case, invite guests well ahead of time. If you wait until the last minute, many guests may have other plans. If the parents are welcome to attend the party, make that clear in the invitation. Otherwise, be sure you include a definite pick-up time.

Have a written overall plan for the party and then be prepared to abandon certain elements of the plan if they aren't working well. Or, be ready to pull additional ideas out of your hat if you've completed your one hour plan in 20 minutes. How long a party should last depends on the age of the child but 1 hour is certainly long enough for two-year olds and their parents. Two hours is a nice length of time no matter the age unless a special activity or outing is planned.

One easy way to make a plan is to first list the activities which must be included (i.e. cutting the birthday cake, opening the presents, etc.) and then fill in the remainder of the time with games or other activities. Since all the guests never arrive or leave a party at the same time, you will want to plan some "getting going" and "winding down" type activities for these periods. Don't feel bad if you don't cover all your plans (as long as the essentials are included) – it's better to be over-prepared, than to find yourself with a room full of children and nothing to do!

Decorations can be simple and inexpensive. A paper lunch sack with each child's name on it is nice for taking home treats and can also be used to mark the child's place at the table. The sacks can be decorated beforehand by



the birthday child (and siblings) or the guests can do the honors at the start of the party. Crepe paper streamers and balloons are festive but be sure to hang them high enough to avoid accidents. Popping balloons can scare the younger guests, and are extremely dangerous if swallowed.

Games, Games, Games...

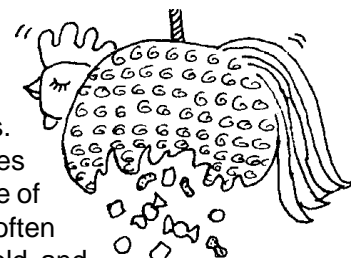
Which games to play depends on the age of the birthday child and the guests. Avoid competitive games unless everyone can win. Choose activities which your child really enjoys in everyday play or ones that can be easily mastered by a room full of excited children. Again, it is important to have the birthday child included when planning the party games. Here are some "tried and true" activities which seem to work – with some variations – for all ages:

- Scavenger Hunts: For little ones, looking for rubber bands, hunting for bags filled with snacks or little prizes; for older ones, as elaborate as appropriate – with teams, clues, puzzles, rhymes, etc. Everyone usually wins in a scavenger hunt.
- Pin The Tail On The Donkey (or any other animal): Watch with the little ones that no one gets too scared; for older ones, use more complicated variations such as a map of the United States with the object being to pin the flag on Pennsylvania, etc.
- Baker's Dough (or any other simple craft idea): Have all of the supplies prepared ahead of time and let the children make items like ornaments if the birthday is near a special holiday. Don't forget to label all the finished items so they can be identified and taken home.
- Fishing For Favors Or Treats: The "ocean" can be behind a couch, a low wall, a row of bushes or a sheet over a clothes line. Make it easy for little ones by having an adult attach the "fish" (prizes); for older ones, use magnets, etc. to make it more difficult.
- Musical Chairs: An old favorite with older children; it may be too competitive for little ones. Another variation is to have the children pass an object until the music stops. The child left holding the object is "out."
- Singing Games: "London Bridge," "Hokey Pokey," "Farmer in the Dell," etc. are familiar and fun to play.
- Relay Races: Make relay races as elaborate as the children's ages and your space allow – simple running to

and from a designated spot, carrying a ball then touching base, carrying objects in a spoon (eggs, oranges, jelly beans), passing objects, running around boxes, etc. Use your imagination and create an obstacle course to get your children ready for life!

- Partner & Team Games: Teams of two can compete with each other in egg or water balloon tossing contests or three-legged races with gunny sacks. Or, the whole group can divide into two teams for tug-of-war or kick ball.
- Dress-up: For little ones, gather lots of clothes and take pictures of the results! Older children can use clothes in conjunction with a relay like the "honeymoon" game. (The runner for each team carries a suitcase full of funny clothes to a designated spot, dresses up, runs back to the next person, undresses, packs the suitcase and hands it over.) Dress-up clothes can also be used to put on a "talent show" – each child can dress-up and sing a favorite song, etc. Picking an outfit to wear to the cake eating is fun for all ages.
- Piñatas: Make your own ahead of time with paper mache molded over a balloon. Have lots of space and supervision to insure safety. Keep everyone interested by limiting the number of swings with the stick and counting the swings as a group. Some commercial piñatas may need to be "cracked" by an adult before the party to insure they can actually be broken by small children. Little ones don't need to be blindfolded to miss.
- Storytime: This is a good activity for quieting down before or after eating or just before departure time. Have your child select some books either from the library or favorites from home to have on hand.
- Commercial clowns, face painters, magicians, puppeteers, etc.: Ask for and talk to parent references so you know exactly what you are getting if you are hiring entertainers. Agree on a price and length of time for the performance ahead of time. Very young children may be scared by professionals in make-up and usually can't tolerate a very long performance. Older children are apt to become disruptive if bored. (BANANAS has a file of clowns, puppeteers, jugglers and various "for hire" entertainers. Call or come into our office to look through the flyers in the information file.)

Alternating quiet and active games is good for children – and parents. Carry over some of these activities from year-to-year to create a sense of continuity and tradition. Children often feel more comfortable with the old and remembered rather than the new and surprising. Don't forget to allow time for conversation and good old-fashioned free play.



A word about party favors – they don't have to be elaborate or expensive to be enjoyed. Little trinkets make a big hit with children. Plastic jars of bubbles are an all-time favorite for little ones and can be a winding-down activity. Do have extra favors on hand in case they get lost or someone brings an unexpected guest. Have a place (bag, etc.) to keep favors (giving them out near the end of the party can help prevent losses). Special prizes given only to the lucky winner of competitive games can lead to hurt feelings. Games in which everyone wins something (like fishing or a piñata) keep all the guests in a more festive mood.



birthday child choose first! You can't invest much in the actual candle blowing out and cake cutting ceremony. Some children love it; others (especially little ones) may be overwhelmed. Trick candles (the ones which don't go out) are only recommended for a child with a very good sense of humor. The key to the whole birthday cake process is to, as rapidly as possible, deliver the cake and ice cream to all the guests. Patience wears thin when waiting for your piece of birthday cake.

Food

Food is an important part of any party. If you are planning to serve a meal, choose foods you know your own child enjoys and ones which have a chance of success with other children – hamburgers, spaghetti (plain or with sauce), grilled cheese sandwiches, etc. Children enjoy serving themselves, e.g. creating their own fruit salads from bowls of pre-cut fruit, “doctoring” their own hamburgers, decorating individual cupcakes, or making their own ice cream sundaes. Sandwich faces are another do-it-yourself favorite. (Cut out rounds of bread and cover with peanut butter, cream cheese or cheddar cheese spread. Then let the children decorate as faces using raisins or nuts for eyes, grated carrots for hair, etc.) Older children enjoy putting together their own pizzas, tacos or burritos. Allow plenty of space and time if these activities are part of your menu planning.

With or without a meal, snacks can keep a party going. And, by serving a nutritious snack before the traditional cake, little ones will be less likely to gorge on sweets. Plan your snacks based on the age of the children avoiding any foods which might cause the age group of your invited guests difficulty, i.e. avoid nuts, popcorn and other difficult to chew foods with toddlers. Some snack suggestions: finger jello (made with fruit juice), raisins, sliced fruit, popcorn, carrot or celery sticks, olives, pickles, frozen yogurt or juice bars (particularly good after active games). Snacks can also be combined with activities, e.g. have a peanut hunt (if children are old enough to eat peanuts) and eat what you find, or thread dates on strings, divide the children into teams of two and see who can nibble his/her way to the “prize” first. (No fair using hands! “Losers” get extra dates from a bowl.) For peace of mind about spills and to minimize clean-up, whenever possible serve meals and/or snacks outside.

Some people enjoy making fancy birthday cakes; for others this task is best left to someone else. If time is a problem, you can buy or make a plain cake and decorate it with a variety of candies. Let the children pick out the specific piece of cake they want – a sure hit but let the

Presents

Presents shouldn't be the central focus of the party. It is appropriate to make it clear to both the birthday child and the guests that all children are welcome with or without a present. And, because present-opening time can be stressful for all concerned, some pre-planning is useful. There are several approaches which you can consider. Some people allow their children to open the presents as each guest arrives. Others schedule this event as late in the party as possible or plan a very exciting follow-up activity to interest the children. Whatever the plan, talk to your child beforehand so s/he will understand exactly when the presents are going to be opened (suspense can add to the stress of a birthday party). Also, decide together whether the presents are to be put away or played with by the guests. Having a new toy lost or broken before your child is even able to try it out, can be the last straw for a child on the edge!

If the present opening is done as a group event, it helps if the birthday child sits where everyone can see as the gifts are opened. Remind older children before the party to read every card before opening the gifts. Sit with younger children to guide them through this process. Even if the gifts are to be put away, it's nice to pass them around for all to see. Now can be a good time for the guests to receive their party favors from the birthday child as host or hostess. After the party is over, you may want to sort through the “spoils” with your child and put some gifts aside for use at a later time.

For yourself, be as flexible as possible during the party and give yourself over to it while it is going on. If you concentrate on the children, not the other parents, the party has a good chance of being enjoyable for everyone. Enlist some other adults to help with games, taking pictures, serving the cake, etc. Don't plan too far ahead and get your child overexcited. But, good planning is worthwhile. You shouldn't be disappointed if every detail of the party doesn't turn out the way you wanted it to be. We all learn from experience and children are much less critical about parties than adults. And, finally, plan the birthday party you've always dreamed about – for yourself, sometime....