

PLANNING THE PERFECT KIDS'

BIRTHDAY PARTY

Tips to make your child's special day a memorable one for years to come

BY KERRY SERZAN

PINT-SIZED PARTYGOERS

While presents, piñatas and pointy hats may never go out of style, kids' birthday parties today have evolved to include an abundance of various themes, activities and experiences.

Planning a magical, memorable party of your child's dreams should be a fun and rewarding experience, but too many choices can make the process feel like a nightmare — and that's before you go down the infinite rabbit hole of Pinterest (if you dare). Should you host the party at home or at a venue? Indoors or out? What if it rains? Should there be a theme?

Activities? What if the birthday prince or princess spirals into a royal meltdown? How do you make sure pint-sized partygoers have fun and stay safe? Will your furniture ever be the same?

First ... take a deep breath. Your wish to enjoy your child's special day can come true. These tips from some of New Jersey's party planning experts will help you organize and pull off a celebration for the ages.

Begin With The Basics

For starters, decide how much you want to spend on the event. This will help you to make other key decisions — such as where you will host the party and how many guests you will invite. Once you've settled these key details, choose a date and send out invitations.

Consider the child's age and tolerance level when choosing how many guests to invite, since young children may be easily overwhelmed by a large crowd. Some experts recommend inviting as many kids as your child's age, plus one or two. For little ones, you'll want to plan the day around nap times. If your child is older,

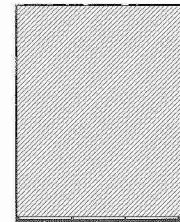




Photo courtesy of Action Gymnastics and JungleRRRific Party Gym

Action Gymnastics and JungleRRRific Party Gym in Millstone has activities for kids ages 1 through 12 — including a huge sponge pit, three large trampolines, a zip-line, swinging ropes and more.

Considering the birthday child's interests and personality are important to successfully pull off a celebration for the ages. West Berlin-based Diggerland USA does all that and more with over 30 fun construction-themed attractions.

Photo courtesy of Diggerland USA

check with their school to see if they have rules about invitations — some won't allow invitations in school unless you invite your child's whole class.

Enlist The Birthday Kid

Depending on your child's age, they may be interested in helping plan their birthday party. But take it easy — giving your little engineer too much pull in the planning department could send the birthday express off the rails.

Birthday kids also can pitch in with some of the party prep — such as addressing invites or assembling goodie bags — to give them a sense of pride and ownership of their event.

Go With A Fun Theme

When choosing a venue, theme or activities, consider the birthday child's interests and personality — you want them to stand out and feel special on their day. "Having a theme makes it fun and easy

to plan," said Melissa Silber, marketing director at Diggerland USA construction theme park in West Berlin.

At Diggerland, families can drive, ride and operate real machinery. More than 30 fun, construction-themed attractions include dump trucks, excavators, a ropes course and zip line. "Construction-themed birthday parties are interactive and creative, with themed décor and tons of fun activities and ideas for thank you gifts and prizes," Silber said.

Seek Help

A balloon bonanza in the backyard sounds delightful — but all that planning, prep, setup and cleanup could leave you feeling deflated. With the pressure on, it can be hard to relax and enjoy the day with your child.

"The choice to host at home is a great one until you realize how much time, work and money it takes. Hosting at a venue that does most — if not everything — for

you is the way to go ... especially if you don't want 20 plus children running amok in your home!" said Marisa Collazo, party planner and owner of My Little Party Place in Berkeley Heights.

Birthday party venues can take a lot of the pressure off parents, letting them be as creative and hands-on as they wish, Collazo said. At a venue like My Little Party Place, "you can show up with your child five minutes before their party starts and leave with your child and their gifts. That's it. Everything is included, down to the candles."

Combine Fun And Learning

It's a recipe for success when kids can have fun while learning something new, Collazo said. "More parties feature a 'how-to' activity as the main attraction — how to cook, how to paint, how to create. Kids love our spa and dress-up parties because these are fun things





Birthday party venues, such as My Little Party Place in Berkeley Heights, take the pressure off parents by handling planning and execution so that they can focus on their child.

Photos courtesy of My Little Party Place

Not all birthday parties need to feature the same staples. Try mixing it up by adding a hands-on activity, such as painting.

Providing food options for those with allergies and restrictions is essential so all partygoers can have a good time.

Photo courtesy of Getty Images

they don't regularly do at home. Other children love our slime, potion and pizza-making parties because it's something they've never done before."

Plan Activities That Are Age-Appropriate And Organized

Depending on your guest list, you may need activities that appeal to different age groups. A party planner can provide activities that all your guests can enjoy and keep things running smoothly, said a representative at Action Gymnastics and JungleRRRific Party Gym in Millstone, offering party services and after-school gymnastics for ages 3 to 18. "We have activities for kids ages 1 through 12 – including three large trampolines, a huge sponge pit, a zip line, swinging ropes, a large ramp into the sponges and a fun section for children (ages) 3 and under."

"Planning a memorable and fun birthday party can be so simple," they added. "We assist you from beginning to end. A professional party planner will give you all the information you need to book a private celebration and review our

different party packages geared to your needs. All party activities for the kids are structured and led by our party hosts."



Photo courtesy of Getty Images

Consider the child's age and tolerance level when choosing how many guests to invite, so he or she doesn't feel overwhelmed by the moment.

Take Special Needs Into Account

Be sure to ask ahead of time if any party guests have food allergies, dietary restrictions or other needs. It's always a good idea to have peanut- and gluten-free options, just in case, said Elisa DiChristina,

manager of GlowHouse Kids, a unique glow-in-the-dark, blacklight reactive facility in Pompton Lakes. Party planners and venues can often help with necessary accommodations so that all partygoers can feel included on the day.

Expect The Unexpected

It's inevitable – even great plans can go awry. Knowing this makes it easier to roll with the punches when things don't go the way they should. If planning an outdoor party, make sure you have alternatives – like a rain date or indoor location – in case the weather is uncooperative. Pack a first aid kit or make sure there's one at the venue. Make extra party favors and have extra food in case your "no" RSVPs show up unexpectedly or siblings tag along, DiChristina recommended.

"Glow" With The Flow

"Let kids be kids!" said DiChristina. "Let the magic moments happen within the structure of the party. Timing is important; however, lifelong glowing memories are invaluable, so roll with the activities." ❖