

It's Party Time!

What Kids Want,
What Parents Want to Know

by Libby McNamee



For children, birthdays are right up there with Christmas, a celebration they look forward to all year long with unbridled anticipation. As a doting parent, you don't want to let them down, but you also don't want to cash in your 401K to fund the festivities. It's a balancing act worthy of the center ring to offer up something special and unique, yet restrain oneself from renting out a Manhattan disco. After all, what would you do to top that next year?

Perhaps the most important decision is picking a theme and venue that suit your child's current interests. Is it better to have the party at home or elsewhere? Lisa O'Mara celebrated her daughter Kieran's birthday at home with an inflatable slide and a bouncy house in her backyard. "It worked out really well. Since we were at home, we were able to have the party go on all afternoon. People dropped by whenever they wanted. We had a piñata, too, which the kids loved."

Having a party outside the home does not necessarily mean that it will be more expensive. Borrowing the idea from a friend for a modern day scavenger hunt, Mary Mulroy had her daughter Meghan's thirteen-year celebration at Short Pump Town Center. She gave each of the five guests \$20 and clues for things to buy in different stores. "The girls were so excited. They loved being at the mall, and they got to pick out their own party favors."

Thankfully, the Richmond area offers a bonanza of fun-filled options from which to choose, running the gamut from a yoga birthday party to an afternoon in the Birthday Caboose at the Science Museum of Virginia. It's easy to get sidetracked from the basic premise that the party is for your child, not to please the neighbors, your in-laws, or anybody else. The Chuck E. Cheese bash that thrilled your son to pieces last year may bore him to tears, literally, this year.

Another consideration is how large the party should be. Depending upon their age, some children are overwhelmed by large groups while others flourish in them. Determining the optimal size of the party may help you narrow your options. For instance, if your daughter wants to invite every girl in her sixth grade class, such a large group would most likely preclude you from renting out a nail salon. Maybe a swimming or skating party would work out better.

Local mother Vanessa Crawford delighted her three-year-old son Miguel (and her pocketbook) by having a Midlothian fire truck come to Huguenot Park, a free service for Chesterfield County residents. "He was floored - he absolutely loved it! It was great because we could invite as many people as we wanted. And every single one of the dads showed up!"

The firefighters suited up Mom in firemen's gear, gave Dad the jaws

of life, taught a fire safety class, and conducted tours for young and old, even people who just happened to be in the park. At the end of the day, she had an overjoyed little boy, money left in her bank account, and nothing to clean up at home. Who could ask for more from their tax dollar?

Keep in mind, a little creativity can go a long way and possibly even lead to a more memorable event. For example, turn your kitchen into a jewelry making party with a selection of beads, wires, and other supplies. Or try this one on for size: Have kids tie-dye their own t-shirts for a great activity and party favor in one. If you're a scrap-booker (or know one who owes you a favor), teach a class. Or you and your spouse can stage a cooking show or class, a' la Rachael Ray or Emeril.

Perhaps your main concern is the time it takes to plan and put on a party. Don't despair. There are plenty of places around town where you can just show up at the party with your child on the day of the party. "The Children's Museum does it all for you," advised Janet Coleman. "They also have a party host to direct the kids in games and activities. And then the kids are free to enjoy the entire museum following the party."

Julie Roeger was quite impressed with a local gym's party for her daughter, Ellie. "They took care of absolutely everything once we walked in the door, even setting up a party table with a balloon tied to each chair. They tailored all of the activities to the age group, alternating between structured group play and free time. The kids had a blast!"

Elizabeth Cram raved about celebrating her daughter Couper's birthday at Maymont Park's ever-popular Children's Farm. "We loved it! The room was air-conditioned and right near the animals, so people could come and go with

their kids as they wanted. We brought our own food and decorations, all disposable. Since it wasn't a mealtime, it was easy. But the best part was when we got home. There was no mess!"

Last but certainly not least, relax, enjoy yourself, and enjoy your child. It is a party after all! Regardless of what type of party you decide to put on, it is important to remember that your demeanor will set the tone for the day. Oh, and

one more thing: Don't forget to tell your child that you love him no matter what – because without him, life wouldn't be much of a party at all.

For detailed information on specific birthday party options in the area, please refer to our comprehensive directory at: allaboutkidsmagazine.com



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