

Birthday SURVIVAL Games

Think you're alone in dreading your child's birthday party? Robert Munsch hates them too. "Things always get hyper at birthday parties." Coming from him that's saying a lot. He based his picture book *Moira's Birthday* on a party where unbeknownst to him or his wife, Julie; their daughter invited all of grade three to her celebration. Of course in his story, Moira invites all of grade one through to all of grade six, a total of six hundred kids and has to order 200 cakes and 200 pizzas to feed them all.

Are there lessons that can be learned in trying to ensure a stress free and fun party which succeeds in eliminating some of the inherent "hypeness"? It could be a more serious problem than having 200 pizza boxes to get to the recycling curb. Kathy Kacer, children's author, (latest book *Hiding Edith*, Second Story Press), says hyper high excitement, an impending cold and a lack of sleep all contributed to the worst asthma attack her then eight-year-old son, Jake Epstein ever experienced. In the middle of eating pizza, Jake, now star of *Degrassi the Next Generation*, had to be taken from his own party by Kathy and rushed to the hospital to be hooked up to Ventolyn. Can we avoid disasters like this by eliminating some of the high drama of the parties?

Editor of *Today's Parent Toronto* Helen Keeler thought she could by sticking to the rules and only having as many children at the party as the age her child was turning, an oft-quoted guideline for parents new to the birthday party game. She invited two children to her child's third birthday, and in her words, "You have never seen a sadder, more boring little birthday party. The three of them

just staring at each other and waiting to go home." So maybe there is a happy medium to be found here – a number somewhere between two and 600 that both you and your child will be happy with. **Lesson #1:** We need to be flexible on our birthday party "rules," and plan the party to fit both parents' and childrens' needs.

With a book called *The Secret Life of SuperMom*, you'd think, Kathy Buckworth, would have it all together during birthday parties – "Until the ill-fated pool party/sleepover I threw which featured warring factions of 11-year-old girls. (The worst kind...second only to the mothers of the same girls, who chewed me out for 'allowing' my own daughter to invite who she

wanted to her own party.) Still makes me cringe. Add in the fact that I had planned this party, as well as my nine-year-old son's for the next night, both sleepovers, and I had a three-year-old and a two-month-old in the house at the time – well my mental state was a little unstable to begin with. I figured if I wasn't sleeping anyway." **Lesson #2:** Knowing something about the personalities of your invitees and the environment you will have them in is an important consideration.

Combining birthday parties for siblings with birthdays closer together seemed to be a good idea to Helen Stone who hosted two parties on one day. In Helen's own words, however, she went a little over of the top...

She had a large blow up jumping castle delivered and set-up in her backyard on Friday morning for Riley's Saturday party. That was a PD day so the neighbourhood kids spent the day in her



yard. "Saturday morning arrives, and, it's raining. Thankfully it stops just before my yard begins to fill up with two dozen 5 year old boys and girls. There is lots of mud, though, but the jumping castle is a huge hit."

She said, "I serve hot dogs, cake, etc and then Riley's party is over. I am worn out. One hour goes by and poof, I have 20 nine-year-old girls in the back yard. They too are attracted to the jumping castle. Shortly after, two young women arrive with a huge boom box, and some interesting props ready to teach the girls hip hop dancing. I get to sit down and watch this. After Emma's party supposedly ends, about eight of the girls are asked for a sleep over. More food, movies, games, laughter. I finally go to bed, before they do, and its 2 am. I wake up on Sunday morning to find the girls in the back yard in their pj's bouncing in the castle. After a morning of pancakes, bacon and strawberries, I say, 'never again'." **Lesson #3:** Be aware of your own energy level.

At least Helen was able to get through this intense party weekend without any injuries...unlike Georgie Binks' smashing bowling party. "At my daughter's tenth birthday we took 19 girls and my five-year-old son bowling at Bowlerama. Everything was going fine until one of the girls reached her hand down to grab a bowling ball, and an incoming ball smashed her finger. It tore her fingernail off and broke her finger. My husband took her to emergency while I ran the birthday party with the rest of the kids. I still think my husband had it easier with the hospital than I did all by myself with those kids." **Lesson #4:** Make sure there is another adult on hand for moral support as well as emergency situations.

You plan for weeks and weeks, have everything nailed down including the perfect location – or so you think. When Fern Mosoff gathered up her birthday party crowd and traveled a huge distance to get to "the" wave pool for a fun filled splashing good time, she had to improvise when she found out that the wave machine wasn't working. The kids had to satisfy themselves by playing in "calm" water. The next time, she made certain

to ensure that her location would be in working order. Determined to find some birthday fun on dry ground, she made time consuming and pain staking arrangements with her school's administration to use their gym. Arriving with her excited crowd she found the school doors locked up tight. Thankfully the outside school yard was available and the weather co-operative. Trying to have every detail planned, down to the last fun-filled minute is a good idea, but there can be glitches to every plan...so Sarah Moore, Managing Editor of *Today's Parent* found out, when she meticulously planned out her four-year-old son's Griffin's birthday party. "It was the first birthday party we held where he invited friends (as opposed to just a family celebration). We had three girls and three boys. My husband and I had five or six games planned, which were dispensed with in the first five minutes of the party so we were stuck with seven four-year-olds in our home for the next hour and a half (in miserable-weather March) with nothing to do. So the boys ran across the back of my couch, while the girls sat and coloured quietly at the table until, lame-o parents we are, we finally popped in a video for the last 45 minutes of the party. As one little boy sat on my husband's lap, he wet himself (and, of course, my husband)." **Lesson #5:** Murphy's Law is alive and well at birthday parties – go with the flow and don't overreact when it engages. (A back up video is always a great idea!)

What about accepting all of your party planning limitations and just hiring professionals? Fool proof? Only if you decide not to overrule the professionals...

Tiziana D'Angelo, owner of *Messy Hands Art Bus* recalls a certain determined parent. "There was a mother who insisted even though her three-year-old's party be held in the Messy Hands Art Bus. Our parties are geared towards kids four-years-old and up. On the day of her party, the birthday child who had turned three had many two year old friends. Because our bus can only accommodate 22 kids which is what she had, we could not accommodate parents as well, which upset the kidsanyway, end result, we

had a bus-load of crying two and three year-olds. **Lesson #6:** Listen to the professionals – that's why you hired them.

"Professional planner" Carol Leddon-Cusson, owner of *Amazon Indoor Playground* and also known as the "Loot Lady" has been in the business long enough to prepare her staff, and parents for the inevitable hiccups which accompany most birthday parties. She says she often has to rush in for things like cake emergencies. She keeps a spare tube of icing on hand for misspellings and even a spare cake in the freezer for melted ice cream cakes. **Lesson #7** Keep extras and spares of everything, cup cakes, loot bags, balloons, prizes and activities.



Cake emergencies, or "situations" can happen to anyone. Josey Vogels, well known columnist and author of five books, didn't always aspire to be a writer – at 15, cake decorator was once at the top of her list... Once in order to get her superhero cape the right shade of blue she kept adding food colouring. The kids went home with blue mouths and tongues. And that wasn't the only thing that was blue she found out later. **Lesson #8:** Hire reputable professionals; get references if you can.

For more help finding these professionals check our directory under birthdays and parties: todaysparenttoronto.ca Still dreading the celebration of your child's birth? Remember that all the tellers of these disaster stories survived the birthday experience and you can too.

Kathy Buckworth is a regular contributor to Today's Parent Toronto. Her books, The Secret Life of SuperMom, and SuperMom: A Celebration of All You Do are available in bookstores everywhere. Visit kathybuckworth.com