

KIDS' PARTIES— *through the ages*

BY KATIE MARKEY MCLAUGHLIN

That low-key gathering you put together for your then-3-year-old probably won't satisfy her now that she's a rambunctious second grader. And that amazing bounce house you rented for your 6-year-old might elicit an eye roll from your preteen.

So before you start planning your child's next birthday party, consider these ideas for what makes a great event based on which milestone you're celebrating.

BABIES

Amy Herwig, owner of the York-based party planning company Party Belles, finds that baby birthday parties are all the rage right now. "A first birthday party has become even more popular as families spread out further from one another," she explained. "It's often the first good time to get everyone together to celebrate the newest family member."

But as you start arranging that first celebration, remember that ultimately the party is for you, not your child, who won't remember (or care about) the streamers and color-coordinated tablecloths.

Your little one's only concern, in

fact, may be the cake. Today it's popular to have a special "smash cake" just for the birthday boy or girl—and the messier he or she gets, the better.

Marisa Straub, owner of Kids Party Factory in Harrisburg, reminds parents to keep it short and choose a time that accommodates babies' nap schedules. "Keep it simple but memorable," she advised. "Don't overdo it."

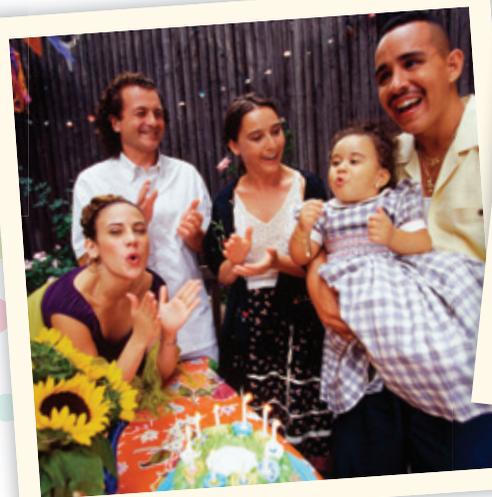
Where to Party? For first birthday bashes, choose a basic location; community rooms, church halls, or even your own living room will make for a nice event.



TODDLERS & PRESCHOOLERS

Parties for this age group are often a little bigger and should include a few short, simple activities to keep the tots engaged.

Straub recommends uncompetitive games—a basic version of "Simon Says" or a few songs sung in a circle usually go over well—and Herwig says you can't go wrong with



bubbles. "Bubbles are magic. They are a sure crowd-pleaser with this age range!" Also, decide ahead of time if you'll have your child open his gifts at the actual party. Some experts suggest waiting until later, since the younger guests might not understand why they can't keep the presents they brought.

Where to Party? If weather permits, this is a great age for throwing a backyard bash or renting a pavilion at a local park.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN

The key for kids in elementary school is to keep things moving.

"Kids at this age just want action," Straub said. "They want parties where they are constantly doing something." This might mean throwing the party at an action-packed location—like a bowling alley or mini-golf course—or preparing activities involving movement, like treasure or scavenger hunts.

This is also the age where your child can begin to have more of a say in what her party looks like. "Allow your children to own some parts of their party suggested because it will mean so much more to them," Herwig said.

Where to Party? Check out the party packages at places like kids' gyms, skating rinks, or paint-your-own pottery sites for creative types.

PRE-TEENS & TEENS

When your children reach this age, birthday parties naturally become smaller and more intimate, Straub said. "Around age 12 it starts to become more low key," she said. "You usually just invite a few friends."

She suggests foregoing the traditional planned party in favor of a simple trip or outing for your child and his closest pals. "While you might spend a little more money per child that way, you're also only paying for a few kids."

If you do have a larger party—especially for a special milestone like the Sweet 16—Herwig strongly advises choosing a theme to draw teenagers to the shindig. "Attendance at this age is often far short of expectations. The more you can promise a good time to guests, the more likely they are to show up. This is best achieved through unique themes." A good DJ and music don't hurt either.

Where to Party? For small gatherings, try a spa or tea house for girls, or a trip to the movies plus pizza for boys. For full-fledged parties, hotel conference rooms are great canvases for creating a club-like vibe that pre-teens and teens are sure to enjoy.

GENERAL TIPS

No matter what your kid's age, keep these party planning suggestions in mind.

Location: Consider parking and bathroom availability, the size of the party versus the size of the space, budget, and safety concerns.

Food: Focus on simple, kid-friendly fare. Build-your-own food bars for items like tacos or ice cream sundaes are always a hit.

Stress: Remember that it's less about the party and more about celebrating your child. And if your budget allows, hiring a party planner will enable you to throw an incredible, personalized event without the hassle.

CPP Katie Markey Mclaughlin is a freelance writer.

