

Children's Birthday Parties in Contemporary America

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A PRIVATE PETTING ZOO AT THE BIRTHDAY CHILD'S HOME; a visit to a haunted house followed by dinner and a carriage ride downtown; a scavenger hunt in the shopping mall (children have to find gifts the birthday child's parents have bought and left in various stores); a party with a professional DJ who plays music and fries hamburgers; a visit to a beauty salon to have children's nails and hair done; milking a goat and collecting eggs on the farm. These are some of the children's birthday parties my colleagues and friends have told me about. I myself have been to several parties and even threw one for my son's second birthday. As a result of these stories and experiences, I began to realize that children's birthday parties have become elaborate and expensive events in recent years.

After I became interested in the birthday party as a social phenomenon, my son came home from his day care center with a complimentary monthly publication, *Warm 98 Family Magazine*, put out by a local radio station, that had a special section on birthday parties. Beside tips for parties, a special section had a resource guide that included, to my surprise, over 50 facilities hosting children's birthday parties in the Greater Cincinnati area alone. I found out later that the guide was not exhaustive; there are other facilities, including the health center at my university, where children can have birthday parties. Clearly, children's birthday parties have become a big business as well.

What interests me are the comments my colleagues and friends make after telling about another extravagant birthday party their children have gone to. They always lament the passing of the days when a birthday party meant that a child got together with good friends, eating cake and ice cream and opening presents—all in the backyard or the front room. It is also interesting that everyone—young and old, men and women—has something to say about children's birthday parties. Why have children's birthday parties become elaborate? Why

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are people interested in them? What is the meaning of the children's birthday party in contemporary America? This article aims to answer these questions.

I conducted two questionnaire surveys—one among the party facilities listed in *Family Magazine* and the other among parents. Because the sample size was small and because I knew most of the parents who answered the questionnaire, the surveys are not scientific. Even such surveys, though, may be used to “uncover assumptions which underlie the activities of members of a society, and although these may vary from one socio-economic group to another, certain assumptions would seem to be shared” throughout the society, as anthropologist Joy Hendry says (4).

The questionnaire sent to the party facilities included the following questions:

- How often do you host a birthday party?
- When did you begin hosting birthday parties?
- What is included in your birthday party package (activities, refreshment, decorations, etc.)?
- What is the age range of children for whom you have hosted birthday parties?
- What is the typical age of children who have birthday parties?
- Are you more likely to hold a birthday party for boys? Or girls?
- What is a typical cost of having a birthday party?

The questionnaire was mailed to the facilities listed in *Family Magazine*, which included 14 gymnastics/sports/activities centers; 14 bowling lanes; six roller skating and ice skating rinks; five game centers; four pottery studios; three martial arts centers; two miniature golf courses; two farms/ranches; and one dance studio.

The survey results indeed revealed interesting insights regarding children's birthday parties. The results show that most facilities hosted birthday parties regularly, in many cases daily. Different frequencies of parties reflected the type of facility: while the dance studio hosted two parties per month, one sports center had 10 parties weekly, and one game center 20 parties per week. Most businesses had hosted birthday parties for fewer than five years, although two bowling lanes had done so for over 40. It seems that bowling lanes have always hosted birthday parties for adults; in recent years not only do they allow children to have parties, but other facilities have copied their idea of hosting a party. All the facilities except one offered activities—whether they were bowling games, game tokens, sports, or ceramic-making instruction. Two-thirds of the facilities included food (typically pizza or hot dogs) and some of them a cake in their birthday package. One-third of the facilities provided supplies such as decorations, invitations, and balloons. Other items included in the packages are a special gift for the birthday child, goody bags, coupons for a return visit, and pictures. While they had hosted birthday parties for all ages from one to 18 years old, their targeted age group was the preteens, and the typical ages of children who actually had the parties in these facilities were between four and 10 years. This corresponds with the results of the parental survey. As children grow older,

they want to have fun with their friends without parental supervision and thus do not necessarily want to have birthday parties.

There was no significant difference regarding the sex of children for whom these facilities hosted parties, although some facilities, such as the dance studio and pottery studios, were more likely to have girls. Standard costs ranged from \$5 to \$13.99 per person, but it was possible to pay as little as \$30 or as much as \$150 for a standard group of 10 people. The average cost was \$120 for a group. Because most facilities ask parents to bring the cake (which, if ordered, typically costs \$20 to \$25), and because it is customary to send children back home with goody bags, it is safe to say that parents can expect to spend \$150 to have a birthday party in these facilities.

The internet also hosts businesses, such as BirthdayExpress.com and iparty.com, that help parents throw a birthday party for their children. BirthdayExpress.com was founded in 1994 by a married couple in Kirkland, Washington. It offers "more than 130 fun and popular party themes," theme-related supplies (such as invitations, cups and plates, crepe papers, and gift wraps), "a scrapbook of party tips from parents across the country, a directory of party games and recipe ideas, a printable coloring book section, a detailed party planning checklist, and a resource that lists the famous people with whom you share your birthday" through their web site ("BirthdayExpress"). Their goal is "to make it easy for busy parents to celebrate the lives of their children." One of their competitors, iparty.com, promises to provide parents with "a sophisticated yet fun and easy-to-use resource with a definitive assortment of products to customize any party" ("iparty"). These services give detailed instructions as to what to do before, during, and after the party, and thus having a party becomes easy. Most of the supplies they carry are readily available in any party or toy store; in fact, they cost slightly more when purchased on-line. Yet the convenience of having them delivered to the house and of being able to purchase precise amounts of supplies (instead of packages) make these businesses attractive. Having ordered products from them and used their on-line resources, I must say that they can be life savers.

What do parents think about children's birthday parties? The questionnaire for parents asked their child's/children's age and sex and had three questions:

- What was the best birthday party your children were invited to?
- What was the most outrageous/weird/unique party your children were invited to?
- How much do you usually spend to hold a birthday party for your children?

I also included a space for comments. Since I did not want to make it intrusive, the questionnaire had only three questions and did not ask about the parties they had hosted. Despite such circumspection, parents were reluctant to answer the first two questions, especially the second one. Many respondents wrote "None" or simply left it blank. This result is interesting in that the same people had told me in some detail about outrageous and weird parties their children had attended.

With regard to party expenses, some parents spent less than \$40 (minimum amount \$25) and one spent \$500 to \$750. A majority of the respondents claimed expenses of between \$100 and \$150 per party, which corresponds with the typical costs at the party facilities. The respondents who spent less than \$40 wrote the following comments:

Some people go to way too much trouble and expense. Guilt?

Many people want to substitute expensive parties for the other intangibles that they think they should be doing—an extravagant party makes them feel good.

On the other hand, one respondent who spent over \$100 wrote, "It's worth the \$ not to deal with the hassle of cleaning, cooking, cramped quarters, etc. Besides, I come across as a cool mom when I let them choose some really 'awesome' place to go." As this comment indicates, many parents see a birthday party as inevitably involving a good deal of work and expense. A mother of two teenage daughters wrote, "Glad we're finished. Now we just give them money & no party." Another respondent with a 13-year-old daughter said, "I'm afraid to even think about the sweet 16 party!" A respondent with three preteen children wrote, "They're fantastic—once they're done!! Boy am I glad it's only once a year!!" Only a few people actually mentioned children in their comments:

Make it easy for everyone & everyone will be happy. Let the child have input.

[M]y kids—who may not be typical—enjoy any excuse to get together with friends. They enjoy simple overnight sleepovers, or parties at NKU's [Northern Kentucky University's] Albright Health Center.

The results of the two questionnaire surveys make clear that the children's birthday party has become an expensive and extravagant event in recent years. Informal conversations I have had with my colleagues and friends support this. Interestingly, as the above comments indicate, many parents seem to be concerned more with material aspects of the birthday party than with the children. If the child is not the focus of the party, why do parents have a birthday party? What is the role and function of the birthday party in the contemporary U.S.?

One reason for having a party has to do with the focus on material aspects of the party. One parent wrote in the questionnaire: "There seems to be a competition among parents for expensive parties." A male colleague whose daughter went to a birthday party in the neighborhood almost every weekend said that everyone spent too much on birthday parties and then added that one neighbor had to have an extravagant party because he was a medical doctor. That is, this doctor must show his wealth through the child's birthday party. Another male colleague who was a single father said that he would feel guilty if he had not had a party for his children. "Besides," he said, "it's a pay-back time." Since he bought the presents for his children's friends throughout the year, it was now their turn to collect all the presents. A female friend whose in-laws live in the city said that her son did not go to his cousins' birthday parties for a period of time. When she had the party for her son and invited his cousins, her in-laws

made it clear that they were not happy because she merely wanted to collect presents without giving any. My friend now forces her son to go to his cousins' parties.

These conversations indicate that the children's birthday party is an occasion when parents can show off as well as share their affluence and simultaneously expect a return in material form. In this sense, the birthday party can be considered a new form of "conspicuous consumption." In *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Thorstein Veblen examined the leisure and dining activities of the middle class in industrializing America and concluded that the conspicuous way these activities took place functioned to indicate to outsiders their social standing as well as to reinforce class solidarity. Veblen called "the social process in which goods are ritually displayed and consumed 'conspicuous consumption'" (Kline 5). Whether it is basketball games and gymnastic lessons at party facilities or a petting zoo and a DJ at home, parents of the children invited to the party know the monetary value of such entertainment. The wealth of the parents who host the party can also be expressed in the form of the cake and goody bags. It is interesting that the basic steps of the birthday party are first activities/entertainment and then the cake and ice cream, which are followed by opening of the presents. After the parents of the birthday child show off their affluence, it is other parents' turn. One parent who insists on keeping the party simple said that sometimes it even got embarrassing to receive such expensive presents. These presents undoubtedly show the affluence of other parents. Perhaps the parents are competing among themselves and, it can be assumed, this is why opening of the presents remains one of the highlight of the party. Parents have the birthday party partly because it functions as the indicator of their social status.

Another reason for throwing an extravagant birthday party seems to be the guilt many parents feel toward their children. In their study of two-income families, Rosalind D. Barnell and Caryl Rivers state that "guilt is the universal malady of working parents today, and one to which parents in past generations were seemingly immune," and that "It's safe to say that no modern working parent has completely escaped those sudden, painful stabs of guilt" (9). This guilt stems from the uncertainty of whether or not they are living up to the ideal parental image that is chiefly circulated by the mass media through the never-ending reruns of old family comedies and the words of politicians who advocate family values. Even though, as Shirley R. Steinberg and Joe L. Kincheloe state, "traditional family values and structures characterized by working fathers and home-making, child-caring mothers are inconsistent with new economic realities" (20), many parents try to compensate for what they perceive are their deficiencies so as to eliminate their guilt by rewarding children with material goods. This is the phenomenon one network news program called "affluenza."

Businesses that cater to children's birthday parties take advantage of this phenomenon. BirthdayExpress.com makes clear in its company fact sheet:

In today's fast-paced world, busy adults find it challenging to coordinate professional-looking, fun birthday parties and social occasions. From selecting a theme and purchasing decorations to planning party activities and sending thank you cards, hosting a party consumes both time and energy. With BirthdayExpress.com, consumers can order all the themed party planning supplies they need in minutes via the Internet or catalog without even having to leave the comfort of their home or office. ("BirthdayExpress")

By utilizing the services offered by business facilities, parents do not have to be overstressed. The flyer for one facility in Cincinnati says:

- *private party facility—no keeping track of the kids in public!
- *you provide the cake, ice-cream plates, napkins, and spoons.
- *NO MESS MOM!

Another facility similarly states in its flyer that "We provide the activities, while you relax and enjoy the party too! Best of all, we clean up the mess!" By ordering plates, napkins, and spoons from BirthdayExpress.com and getting the cake and ice cream from a local bakery, parents only need to transport children to the facility. They can be bystanders while feeling less guilty about their lack of parenting.

In *Birthday Parties for Children: How to Give Them, How to Survive Them*, published in 1983, author Jean Marzollo wrote, "We want to make our children happy on this special day. We love our children and want to express this love with a special, wonderful celebration" (x-xi). The first party I went to as a parent was for a one-year-old child. There were over a dozen children, most of whom were the birthday child's brother's friends, who came with their parents. It was a nice party complete with food, games (for older children and adults), the cake, and presents. Everyone had a good time except for the birthday child. He was too young to know what was going on, to play with other children, or even to blow out the candle. Since then, I have been to other parties for one-year-olds and the situation was more or less the same. I wondered what the reason for the party was if the child is too young to enjoy it. Being asked why they have a birthday party for their children, two parents said that it is a tradition; that is, it is a custom parents are expected to perform. Another parent was more realistic, saying "you know the parties are really for the grown folks . . . especially when [the children] are young (between 1 and 3 or 4)." Just as in the results of the survey, these parents did not mention the love for children which one might think should be the main reason for the birthday party. Some parents use birthday parties to show their status and others use them to reduce the guilt they feel toward their children. Thus, it is safe to say that, as the above parent said, children's birthday parties in the United States are actually for parents.

During the course of this research I learned about birthday parties in other countries partly because the few existing studies on children's birthday parties were mostly "conducted outside the U.S." (Otnes and McGrath 73). Through

these studies, I learned that birthday parties in other countries have a specific function targeted at children. In Israel, for instance, a birthday party in the kindergarten is an important event because it has the clear purpose of socializing children into the norms of collectivity and the bureaucracy of Israeli society (Shamgar-Handelman and Handelman; Weil). In Japan, kindergarten birthday parties develop children's identity as group members and teach them the vertical relationship between different age groups (Hendry). A birthday party is a big family event in Brazil where the family comes before everything else. My student from Brazil said that people were expected to take a day off and visit their family members on their birthdays. Another Brazilian informant wrote, "In my native country, Brazil, children[s] birthday parties are so elaborated that you wouldn't believe. Usually the child pick[s] a theme herself and the mom work[s] on it buying or making all the decorations herself." She said the following regarding American birthday parties:

[M]ost of parents drop their kids in places like Chuckcheese [sic] or parties halls and they have some balloons and a regular cake. Perhaps it should be attributed to the fact that American society working parents don't have the time or motivation for elaborated parties. But I think it is worth. The child feels good about her importance since tender age. . . . But I think that in small scale, anybody can make a child feels [sic] special for her birthday. We only need to be a little original.

Both Brazilians agreed that children's birthday parties can become such an elaborate event in their country that everyone in the family has to pitch in. One of my colleagues has a German neighbor who continues to do extraordinary things, such as redecorating the house and cutting the bushes in the front yard in the shape of dinosaurs, to have a party for her grandchildren. Becoming aware of such different birthday practices, I must conclude that many parents in the U.S. are critical of their extravagant birthday parties, but American parties may be simpler compared to those in other countries.

So, is the American children's birthday party that focuses on material aspects, centers on grown-ups, and has no clear purpose worthless? The answer is no, because the birthday party reflects contemporary U.S. society in many ways. Jack Santino, in his study of holidays and celebrations, states that "even the increased commercialization of our holidays . . . , despite frequent crassness, is really an economic indication of the ongoing importance of holidays" (xviii). Of all the celebrations commonly practiced in the U.S., the children's birthday party seems to be among the most popular and important, as attested to, for instance, by the growing number of birthday-related businesses. Dennis W. Rock evaluates the vitality of a ritual using the following four criteria: (a) the nature and extensiveness of artifactual consumption; (b) the presence or absence of a well-defined ritual script; (c) the clarity of participants' ritual role perceptions; and (d) the presence or absence of a well-defined target audience beyond the immediate participants (256). Applied to children's birthday party, all four criteria indicate

that it remains a vital ritual. Availability of party supplies in terms of both the amounts and the places to buy, as well as an increased number of party facilities, attest to the existence of the first criterion. No matter how elaborate and extravagant it becomes, the basic elements of the birthday party—"invitations, decorations, presents, desserts of cake and ice cream, games, and treat bags for everyone" (Marzollo xii)—have not changed, thus indicating the existence of a well-defined script. Even though there may have been some shifts as to the roles involved in the birthday party, such as the organizer who facilitates games on behalf of the parent, children have pretty good perceptions of different roles, such as the birthday child, the guests, and the planner, by the time they are in kindergarten, as Cele Otnes and Mary Ann McGrath have observed. Discussing the increased interest among people to decorate their houses for social holidays, Santino says that such tendencies "reflect the fact that many of the old ties of mutual dependence and reciprocity are changing" (40). Birthday as a life-cycle ritual used to be attended by family members. But in today's mobile society, they may not always be there to witness one's transitions in life and thus those who see the house decorations become the surrogate family. Birthday parties in business facilities, such as bowling lanes and Chuck E. Cheese, are witnessed by others, not even party participants, who happen to be there. Moreover, while family members pitch in to prepare for a birthday party in Brazil, parents can get coordination tips and problem solutions from "Trained Party Planners" at BirthdayExpress.com who are "available around the clock." Thus, the children's birthday party is a vital ritual today because it meets the needs of people in contemporary America.

My research is still in its preliminary stages in that I have unexpectedly encountered a wealth of information that needs to be examined further. What I hope to do in the future is to revise the questionnaire and retake the survey with a larger sample, preferably among members of different socioeconomic groups, for I suspect that the findings discussed above are largely a middle-class phenomenon. I also wish to explore birthday parties in other countries because they seem to be more extravagant overseas.

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