

## **CHILDREN'S BIRTHDAY PARTY ANXIETY** **BY VICKI ENGLUND (published in Emirates Magazine, 2007)**

Pre-birthday party tension. It can come upon the most competent of parents a couple of months before their child's party as the big day looms like that dreaded dental appointment they've been studiously avoiding.

The anxiety of hosting a young child's party isn't helped by parents' sometimes romantically idealised memories of their own childhood parties. It can seem as if things were much simpler a few decades ago when all you needed were some games of the Pass the Parcel and Pin the Tail on the Donkey variety, sandwiches and lollies, and of course the fairly standard iced cake – which was usually round or if your mother was really adventurous, square. As everyone was too stuffed to eat it, each child took a piece home in a napkin. Ah, the simple pleasures.

Of course, that was long, long ago in a galaxy far, far away and now there's a multitude of new industries based around children's birthday parties. It seems it's all just so pre-Millennium not to have a fairy/wizard/super hero attend your offspring's celebrations, and if not then the chances are you're having the party where the entertainment and eats are provided by a fast food outlet/play centre/animal farm.

Clinical psychologist, Dr. Julia Long, has worked with families for several years in Brisbane, and reassures parents they shouldn't feel pressured to throw extravagant parties for their children. "If you look at certain publications aimed at parents, there are sometimes pages and pages advertising clowns and jumping castles and suchlike," says Dr. Long. "If you take the children to the circus or the school fair they can do that sort of thing, but you shouldn't feel the need to have it for their party."

"They cost a lot of money too, and I think it's really just connected with consumerism. There's this pressure with everything – to have the perfect home, the perfect car, the perfect job. Being a parent has a huge amount of pressure and there is a lot written about how mothers in particular have so much guilt associated with it."

Many parents do feel that pressure to provide the party to end all parties as if the event is a reflection of their worth as a parent. It's not uncommon to hear the child's mother admit to having been up until all hours of the morning sculpting some intricate shape for the cake, hand-painting the decorations, and then popping a few things in the oven to cater for the parents too. This can lead culinary-challenged parents (read, mothers) to feel more than a little inadequate.

To them, Dr. Long has this to say: "With parenting, there are a few things that are definitely the wrong way to go, and on the whole people need to do whatever they want to do. If people are going to all of that trouble because it's a creative outlet or they really enjoy cooking, then it's fine – I think it's important not to knock them. It's when you're doing it because you feel like there's pressure or you have to impress people that it becomes a problem."

"If you really ask yourself, does my child mind, will my child be happier or love me more if this party is fantastic? ... I don't think little kids would really care. It's like at

Christmas time and you give them really great presents and they're more interested in the box. Even older kids can be like that – they can find things to play with that you haven't spent a lot of time or money on.”

Of course, a lot of parents work long hours these days and see their children much less often than they would like. Dr. Long thinks that spending big money on a party to impress might sometimes be an overcompensation to make up for that lack of time. “You think about the money that's spent on the party and what else you could do with it – a family day out somewhere or a weekend away. There are probably things that are more family-oriented that aren't over in two hours.”

Another aspect which can lead to more anxiety for parents is the guest list. Deciding who to invite and who to leave out can be a politically sensitive operation. With even very young children now having such a wide social network, you have to decide what the number limit is and stick to it, even if it can make for some awkward moments when a child sees an invitation being handed out and doesn't receive one.

“I think it's reasonable to limit it because it just gets very overwhelming,” says Dr. Long. “The combination of a lot of sugar, a lot of excitement and a lot of kids makes them overwrought and over-stimulated. You can see the kids who are in that state and they're not having fun. And certainly the parents aren't. So limiting the number makes it more pleasant for everybody really. And maybe it's worth mentioning the number limit to parents who might have thought their child would be invited, because they should all understand the difficulties.”

So, in the end, the most important thing is not to panic or start comparing yourself to the supermum who gave the previous party and set the bar inhumanly high. But as Dr. Long admits, it's hard not to compare when it's something so close to your heart as your children. You want them to be okay and for them and their friends to have a good time. Just try not to let the end result be poor old mum lying in a heap after those two short hours wondering how it could have all been so much thankless work.

Tips for hosting a stress-reduced children's birthday party:

- Don't panic.
- Higher cost doesn't equal higher enjoyment – your child will probably enjoy themselves just as much if simple games are played as if you have paid for specialised entertainment.
- The birthday cake doesn't have to qualify as a work of art. A basic shape with lots of decorations will suffice.
- Limit the number of guests and stick to it. The ones who are left out will get over it.
- If parents are staying too, remember they're not the guests so you're not obliged to serve them with gourmet treats.
- Try not to compare your efforts with serious over-achievers.
- Remember your child loves you and will probably think the party is great no matter what.
- Don't panic!

Vicki Englund