



Birthday Madness

Ponies and bounce houses and clowns—oh my

By Kelli Wheeler

My daughter is turning 4 this month, and our family will mark the occasion in what has turned out to be an emerging Wheeler birthday tradition. It includes renting a two-story inflatable slide with an attached bounce house and inviting a bazillion children and parents to our back yard. Tie it all together with whatever princess/cartoon character/superhero theme is all the rage and throw in sugary, messy party favors and we have ourselves a little shindig.

Doesn't everyone celebrate preschool birthdays this way? I had a sinking suspicion to the contrary last year when I drove back onto our street after going to the store for another case of frosting and saw that people were slowing down their cars to see the top of the slide towering over our house.

I would think I had a problem except I had just been to three other children's parties that included

ponies, clowns or bounce houses. One had all three. I even accompanied my kids to a party where the goody bags included a half-dozen full-size candy bars. (I confiscated half as my driving fee.) Another time, I attended a child's first birthday party that included a bounce house full of adults while the guest of honor took a nap.

What happened to the good ol' party in the garage with family and your best friend? I know it existed—I've seen proof in the grainy, soundless 8mm footage my grandma has showing a modest gathering of family in some relative's garage. It was simple with cake, pointy party hats and ice cream within arm's reach in the garage freezer.

At what point did we get away from this? When did parties evolve to the point where you had to dip into the children's college fund so some kid who pushed my kid down in the park could walk away with the party favor of a lifetime? Is it really necessary to invite every child your kid has ever come in contact with to the party?

I suspect part of the problem is our children's growing circle of friends

and the many activities they take part in. In our playgroup alone, there are more than 30 kids now. That doesn't even count school friends and sports friends. It's hard to limit who can come without hurting someone's feelings. And I'm talking about the *adults'* feelings.

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I think another new phenomenon is the increase of disposable income. A show-stopping birthday party for your kid makes just as much sense as upgrading to the in-car DVD player so your kids will forever ride in a car without looking out the window again.

My family has pointed the finger of blame for our own out-of-control birthday extravaganzas squarely at me. I can't say exactly where I went bad. If we're psychoanalyzing things, I suppose a connection could be made between my not having traditional birthday parties as I got older due to lack of funds and the way I currently throw children's parties so extravagant that there are still streamers in my tree from last year. But I think that's too deep.

If you want to look into my background, a large portion of

my career was spent organizing promotional events that included chili cook-offs and sumo wrestling matches with people in fat suits. But that was work.

No, I think my urge to throw party extravaganzas for my children, despite the fact that they are too young to remember the details without photographs, falls into the category of Why the Heck Not? My kids have fun, I have fun doing it, and our friends book a year in advance for the next one.

When pressed, I do admit that it is probably a bit too much. But I would rather spend our hard-earned money on kids' parties that I can enjoy with them now than an IRA that will mature when I'm in the ground and my kids will get in place of Social Security. Life is for living, I say.

I know that if all our family could afford was a modest gift and an ice cream cake from Baskin-Robbins, my children would be happy, as we made them and their day feel special.

And that's what it comes down to: parents wanting to make their kids feel special. Is there really anything wrong with that? Yes, it may be a little extravagant and out of control, but if you had the means to do it, wouldn't you want to do something that matches the off-the-chart love you feel for kids? Not to say you can't make your children feel special with just a hug and a kiss.

But that giant slide is one heck of a good time. Oh, and if you could see the smile on their faces—and that's just the adults.

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