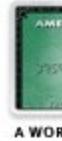


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Kids and holiday parties: ho, ho, ho or uh-oh?

By **Stephanie Dunnewind**
Seattle Times staff reporter

Allyis' 2003 holiday party, where toddlers ran around and scattered colored balls from a rented ball pit all over the floor, convinced Rochelle Hill that the company needed an adult-only gathering.

While the kids were just being kids, tot chaos in the formal venue made the party stressful instead of fun, said Hill, vice president of marketing for the Bellevue-based technical-staffing company.

"The toddlers took over the party," said the mom of two, ages 2 and 5. "They made the room their own jungle gym. Parents had a hard time socializing with colleagues. A lot of us were saying, 'I wish we'd gotten a baby-sitter.'"

It's a sentiment many parents face this season as they balance their desire and obligation to attend holiday gatherings — both private and corporate — with spending time with their kids, who may balk at situations with unfamiliar people, expectations and settings.

"Sometimes parents assume kids magically know how to behave themselves in occasions they encounter once or twice a year," said Corinne Gregory, president of Woodinville-based **The PoliteChild**, which offers holiday-manners classes.

With consequences ranging from punch spilled on white tablecloths to

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Attending a party successfully (with kids)

Feed kids a snack. This staves off cranky behavior when they refuse to eat any "weird" food. "So many temper tantrums can be attributed to low blood sugar," Gregory said.

Make expectations clear. "On the way to a party, parents will tell kids to 'Be on your best behavior,'" Gregory said. "But what does that mean?" Spell it out: Greet hosts, no gagging noises at dinner, say thank you. "The more specific parents can be about what they expect, what the party will be like and who will be there, the better things will go," she said.

Role-play. Practice skills kids might not know, such as how to shake hands. If dinner will be formal, go over applicable manners; likewise, if it's buffet-style, explain how to go through politely.

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screaming fits during the boss' speech to projectile vomiting of too many sweets, parents should consider whether formal evening parties are appropriate for young kids, even if they're invited, experts advise.

"Do yourself, other partygoers and your children a favor, and get a sitter," said Gregory, a mom of three, ages 9, 6 and 4. "Otherwise, everyone will be miserable."

A corporate holiday party is a business event that "just happens to be in a social setting," said Deborah King, president of Final Touch Finishing School. "Parents are often judged based on how their family acts. If I had any questions about my child's readiness, I absolutely would get a baby-sitter."

An employee survey found overwhelming support for a grown-up soîree, but Allyis still wanted to include kids, "since the holidays, especially Christmas, are for children," Hill said.

The company's 130 employees have about 100 kids, nearly three-quarters of them under age 12. So now it hosts two holiday events: an early December family party at The Children's Museum with Santa photos, then a couple weeks later, a formal affair for employees and dates.

The child-friendly venue lets kids run and play with friends they haven't seen since the corporate summer picnic, while the buffet includes mac and cheese and chicken nuggets.

"By the time the adult party comes, you're ready to get dressed up, hire a baby-sitter and really enjoy it," Hill said. "There really isn't any guilt, because you've been to an event with your family. The adults get to have fun and mingle, and the kids have a blast at the children's party."

With casual home parties for family or friends, many hosts find a separate kids' area works best.

"Every time a party has gone well, it's when parents have thought ahead to plan activities for the children," said Final Touch instructor Lisa Fischer, who teaches local holiday-manners classes.

While entertainment might include

comfortably. That holiday dress with the petticoat is darling, but if it's also scratchy and poky, your daughter isn't going to be happy. Skip the jeans but don't go overboard on frills.

Keep post-party venting to a minimum. Follow-up after the party with a few comments on what kids did well, then suggest a couple improvements. "Don't beat them over the head with negatives," Gregory said, "or they'll get to the point where they say, 'I'll never go to one of those again.' "

— **Stephanie Dunnewind, Seattle Times staff reporter**

Information

Final Touch Finishing School:
www.finaltouchschool.com

The Polite Child:
www.politechild.com

When not to take kids to holiday parties

They're not invited. If the invitation is addressed only to parents, it's not a family party. If you're unsure, ask when calling to RSVP.

There won't be others. "In fact, if anyone says this to you directly, they might as well add, ' ... so don't bring yours,' " writes Carol McD. Wallace in

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watching a movie, kids get restless sitting too long in front of the TV, said the Renton mom of Jaclyn, 11; Austin, 9; and Collin, 7. Last year, Fischer set up a gingerbread-house activity for young guests during her annual holiday party. She spread plastic on the floor and set out materials; Jaclyn helped younger kids.

Parents should explain their expectations for party manners but still need to supervise young children, experts said.

"In some case, parents tend to abdicate responsibility for their kid when they walk into a social situation," Gregory said. "The kids go running off roughshod. But parents should still be in control of their child."

With so much excitement and activity, "if parents don't take the time to make sure children are prepared for that, it can be disastrous," King said.

Of course, if there's a boring party you always get invited to, "it's a *great* idea to bring your kids," said Adam Wasson, author of the tongue-in-cheek "Eats, Poops & Leaves: The Essential Apologies, Rationalizations and Downright Denials Every New Parent Needs to Know and Other Fundamentals of Baby Etiquette."

After his daughter, now 3, broke an item at one home party, "I don't think we'll be invited back until she's in college," he said. "If you have a toddler, it's almost inevitable that something embarrassing is going to happen."

He hopes to attend at least one party *sans* child this year, preferably with cocktails. "Parents are too obsessed with including kids," he said. "Everything is always about the kids."

Besides, "When it's a parent-child mixer, there's never alcohol. And drinking juice boxes is just not the same."

Stephanie Dunnewind: sdunnewind@seattletimes.com

"Elbows Off the Table, Napkin in the Lap, No Video Games During Dinner."

There's nothing for them to do. "If the host is not set up for children or doesn't have items to entertain them, it puts everyone in an awkward situation," said Deborah King of Final Touch Finishing School.

The party will keep them up past bedtime. Tired kids tend to misbehave.

Their behavior reflects poorly on you. Many corporate holiday parties are "thinly veiled networking opportunities in disguise," says Corinne Gregory of The **PoliteChild**.

Expectations are unrealistic. If kids are expected to act like grown-ups — "in other words, not wiggle, not interrupt, keep their voices down, listen to incredibly dull adult conversation and not play with anything," Wallace notes — then leave them at home.

You want to relax and have fun. "I don't want to go to a party where I'm going to spend the whole time in a back room taking care of my child," King said.

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