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Families

The ABCs — and p's and q's — of birthday-party etiquette

By [Stephanie Dunnwind](#)*Seattle Times staff reporter*

One mom recalls a birthday when her then 4-year-old son fought with a guest over a blue balloon and ended up in a timeout, prompting one young guest to sigh, "This is the saddest party ever." Another watched mortified as her 5-year-old birthday boy burst into tears when he opened a gift and discovered it was a book.

Just about every parent has a birthday-party horror story of someone — birthday child, guest or even the adult host — creating a major social blunder.

"The pressure on the birthday child is huge, and the emotional temperature for everyone is abnormally high," notes Carol McD. Wallace in her book, "Elbows Off the Table, Napkin in the Lap, No Video Games During Dinner: The Modern Guide to Teaching Children Good Manners."

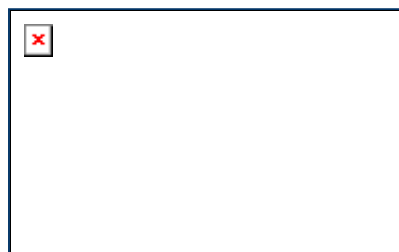
But while parents should be understanding of a child's faux pas, etiquette experts say they can use ubiquitous birthday parties as a way to teach manners for both host and guests.

"From a child's perspective, birthday parties are often the first real coming out into the social world," said Corinne Gregory, program director of Woodinville's The Polite Child. "They test a heck of a lot of manners and behaviors."

Age-appropriate expectations

Older children can be expected to be more civilized, but with the preschool crowd, adults should be willing to tolerate "all kinds of behavior that would ordinarily horrify you," including yelling, sloppy eating and grabbing for party bags. "Remember this is the one occasion when singing at the table is appropriate," Wallace writes. "Everything follows from that."




That said, parents can encourage even toddlers' understanding of basic etiquette



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The ever popular birthday-party piñata game is a good chance for children to learn to be patient when taking turns and to share when the goodies fly out of the piñata after it's broken. These children are enjoying the game at the recent birthday party of Joshua Hart, 9, of Seattle.

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Raven Blue, a guest at Joshua Hart's birthday party, is delighted with the party favors the guests receive. It's a nice gesture from the host, and recipients should remember to express their thanks.

concepts. Helping a 2-year-old decorate a thank-you card with stickers, for example, shows that it's important to acknowledge the person who gave him something, Gregory noted.

For tots who attend a party, the biggest lesson is about how to deal with disappointment when they discover all the gifts aren't for them, Gregory said.

"If they see a gift on the table, the inclination is for them to go over and open it because they figure, 'Of course it must be for me.' "

Even through the second or third grade, "Birthday Kid Meltdown is a common phenomenon," Wallace notes. "Everybody tactfully ignores it, and the tears or fury are left out of the official version of the birthday memory."

In an ideal situation, a party host thinks about how to make sure all his guests are happy and comfortable. Meanwhile, all the guests are trying their best to honor the host's special day. "That's a challenge with kids, because their natural inclination is to ask, 'What's in it for me?' " Gregory said.

It's important for parents to review key etiquette points before a party so children know how to react to situations. "A child who hasn't been trained in correct behavior will open a box and say 'Ewww' if it's not something they want," she said. "Parents can help children learn ways to be gracious even if it's a gift they don't like."

Basic party rules

Though etiquette expectations rise as children get older, almost all parties involve certain niceties.

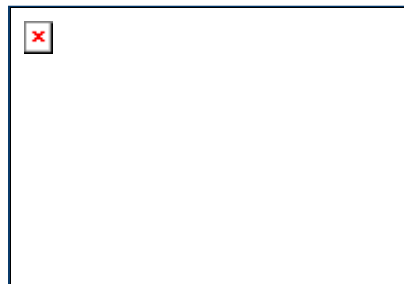
For those throwing a party, a definite no-no is sending invitations to school. Instead, they should be mailed directly to the child or offered personally by phone. That way, children who aren't invited don't feel left out.

Though it's impossible to discourage entirely, parents should suggest children not talk about their party in front of kids who aren't invited. For the same reason, have guests meet at the party location, rather than be picked up together from school.

For young children, it's up to parents to consult calendars and RSVP. "An RSVP is not any less important for a birthday party than a fancy dinner party," Gregory said.

But many admit it's a lost practice. Monika Bailey, who hosted a birthday party for son Kyle, 6, last weekend, said she wasn't sure how many pizzas to order or whether siblings would attend because half the guests didn't RSVP.

"RSVP has actually kind of died," she said, noting parents are extremely busy. Other parents report getting RSVP calls the night before or day of the party, defeating the purpose.



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Party favors, a gracious touch at Joshua Hart's birthday party, included airplanes and scary false teeth. Parents should remember age-appropriateness when helping their birthday boy or girl choose party favors.

Many parents said gifts usually fall in the \$5 to \$20 range. However, the most important factor is putting some thought into the gift, Gregory said. Homemade cards are certainly acceptable, especially if the child writes something personal.

"In our materialistic society, it's important for parents to teach children that the value in a gift does not come from its price tag," Gregory said.

Bailey said parents often ask what the birthday child likes. "They want to get something the child will enjoy that won't just collect dust," said the Snohomish resident, who also has a 3-year-old son, Ryan.

Colleen Willis of Woodinville takes her daughters, Jocelyn, 9, Jordan, 8, and Kristin, 4, shopping and encourages them to choose a gift in the price range. "They like to pick something they like as well," she said.

Cash from relatives is acceptable, but experts say it's more appropriate for friends to bring a gift.

While opening gifts, the birthday child should take time to acknowledge the giver, look him in the eye and say thank you.

"A party should never be so big a child can't address each guest individually," said Barbara Brueske, owner of Etiquette Unlimited in Sammamish.

Sending handwritten thank-you notes within a week of the party is always a nice gesture even if children thanked the gift-giver in person, experts said.

Thank-you notes should express appreciation for the guest's attendance, acknowledge the specific gift given and note something about it, such as "I can't wait to play the game you gave me," Brueske said. "It can be short, but it should be handwritten by the child if he's old enough."

Willis always reminds her daughters that they might feel a little envious inside when the birthday child opens gifts. "I say, 'It's OK to have that feeling, but remember you're there for that person.'"

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