

Here are 10 tips to help with that special day:

#1 -- Planned by Kids for Kids -- The number-one party tip several American Greetings parents recommended was involving the children in party planning and preparation. Surprises are fun, but the kids like to get involved in planning, and this is a time when the kids are motivated to be especially helpful.

Let them plan the theme, location, guest list, menu, games, etc. They can write invitations or create them on the computer with fun computer paper, fill loot bags, blow up balloons, decorate, even help "childproof," "crowdproof" or straighten the house.

#2 -- Party Basics -- The second most frequently mentioned tip from experienced party moms is to make the party manageable. It's tempting to invite the whole second grade class for the afternoon, but you'll likely regret it.

Children's party planning standards, such as the old rule of inviting the same number of young guests as your child's age, have been passed along by experienced moms for a reason. The company's research indicates on average children's birthday parties had included eight other children.

How long? One hour is more than enough time for a toddler or pre-school party. For older children two to three hours is recommended.

#3 -- Popular Themes -- What's in a theme? According to company research, one third of kids' parties have a theme. American Greetings DesignWare company advises that many of the most popular themes are kids' favorite characters from the entertainment world. For the past three years, one of the most popular party themes has been Rugrats. Pokemon is a new favorite.

For the younger set, Bear in the Big Blue House, Clifford the Big Red Dog, The Busy World of Richard Scarry and Paddington Bear are favorites loved by parents and kids alike.

Amy Bergstresser, DesignWare brand manager, shared other trendy themes such as aliens and other space themes. She said, "Retro themes from the '60s and '70s are very trendy now with all ages and they're fun for parents who remember smiley faces and tie-dying from their childhood. These themes make for fun hippie costume parties, and moms and dads can play their old records."

"Sports and dinosaurs continue to be classic kids' party themes," Bergstresser added. The most popular themes are available inexpensively in discount, party or toy stores. You can purchase all the trappings, including themed games, decorations, balloons, stickers, favors, etc... Or theme with a few basic store-bought items, such as disposable plates, cups, table covers, loot bags and napkins and make your own accessories.

Nancy O'Leary, mother of two who works in American Greetings Consumer Communications Department, reminisces about baking cakes and making games

to match the party plates and hats. "I would always make the cake to match or create a new twist on an old game. Both my daughter and my son had summer birthdays so we had outdoor parties, and we would create our own games, like pin-the-football-on-the-player or pin the tail on the mermaid."

#4 -- Keep Them Busy -- Another top tip was keep them busy. Jill Hooley, marketing director for American Greetings educational products subsidiary Learning Horizons, said, "Both of my sons have summer birthdays, so we have always had backyard parties. I've found that it's best to plan plenty of activities to keep them busy. One sure hit was a wacky relay." Teams compete in relays that include putting on dress up clothing and hats. Another version of this wacky relay had teams competing in stuffing balloons into extra large clothing.

Chris Mahon, Human Resources training coordinator, shared, "One year we planned a back yard scavenger hunt for a party. It was such a hit that my daughters requested scavenger hunt birthday parties for several years following. As they got older, we made the hunt more challenging and expanded beyond our yard to the neighborhood."

#5 -- Plan "B" -- Michele Vrooman Kennett, a card writer/editor for kids cards, advised, "I learned the hard way, always have back up plans, like rainy day alternative location and activities if you're having a party in the yard, as we generally do for our girls."

Some good fall-back games mentioned were variations on simple games, such as spud, hot potato (or whatever you can find to toss -- "hot pillow" or "hot tennis ball"), limbo, teaching the kids line dances, Simon Sez, or even rename duck-duck goose to match the theme. Barbara Hatala, corporate communications manager, reminisced about the first children's birthday party she had for her son, "I felt very prepared with a full agenda of activities that I thought would fill the two hours. But the games were over in no time and I found that I had a room full of 5-year-olds to entertain until their parents arrived to pick them up."

#6 -- Beware of Sleep-overs -- Sleep-overs? All agreed that sleep-overs are a challenge. For those under age 10, carefully consider the viability of making it through the evening without midnight calls to "pick me up, I want to come home." For pre-teens (though not their parents), sleep-overs seem to have become the party of choice. Sleep-over tips included being in touch with the guests' parents and being very specific about sleep time rules, or they never will. Older children may enjoy a summertime tent camp-out party in the back yard.

#7 -- Party Destinations -- In addition to home or yard party tips, many American Greetings associates noted taking birthday parties outside the home, as well. Popular destinations include roller and ice rinks, local parks, recreation centers or swimming pools. Outings such as laser tag, sporting events, entertainment complexes and other commercial destinations are popular and fun, but pricey. Several parents of teenagers, such as Lee Roberts, sales presentations manager, who took her son and a friend to an amusement park for his 13th

birthday, noted that as the kids get older they want more expensive activities for their birthdays, like going to theme parks or the movies, but had to compromise on the number of friends in the party due to expense.

#8 -- Thank You -- Party etiquette was another subject commented on by many. "Thank you for the gift... for coming to my party" thank you notes are important social skill builders. Children actually enjoy writing thank you cards when they have fun note cards or when they're producing thank yous on the computer and printing on decorative paper. A very special addition to thank yous suggested by one American Greetings associate was to include a photo of the event that includes both the birthday boy or girl and the thank you note recipient.

#9 -- Their Special Day -- Whether with a party or not, the object of the day is to make your child feel special. Alternative birthday celebrations include special rituals, such as birthday plates, breakfasts, dinners or birthday cake with grandma, measuring to see how much they've grown, reminiscing about "the day you were born" or previous parties over photo albums or by watching videos of younger years. Jim Morrison, the company's multi-media productions manager, and his family annually celebrate "plane day," the anniversaries of the dates each of his two children came to him and his wife via international adoption. Jim notes that some adoptive families call this "adoption day."

#10 -- Keeper Cards -- Certainly a greeting card that tells children how special they are and are important keepsake reminder for them of the day. Pam McGrath, American Greetings senior editorial manager, said, "Our tradition is to have family parties for every birthday, whether it's a full dinner celebration or just cake and ice cream. Birthdays give families the chance to let the child know how precious he or she is to them. And children love to get cards as much as adults do. My children love to save their cards as keepsakes of the day. We write kids' birthday cards with this in mind -- to help let kids know just how important and special they are."