



partytime

Simple can be Best! Anya Brighthouse is both resourceful and creative, whether it is helping a shared bedroom work for a brother and sister, turn a small flat into a cosy home for a single Mum, or a roll of brown paper entertain kids. Each issue Anya turns her talents to another subject and this time takes a fresh look at children's parties.

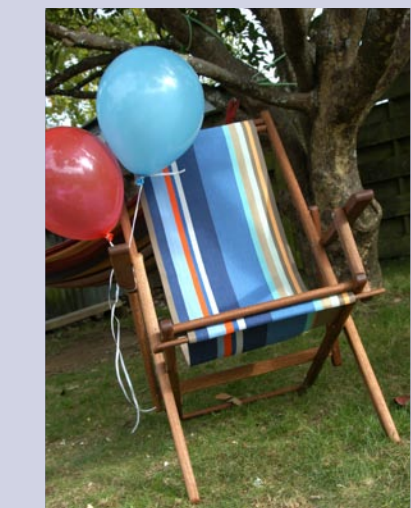
I used to be one of those people who did huge, themed, over the top, cook for three days beforehand, invite half the neighbourhood birthday parties. The party I created for my two eldest children when they turned three and one nearly bankrupted me! I spent a week getting ready for it, doing everything in blue and red icing...(my husband spent an entire afternoon trying to find someone who would supply tanked helium so we could fill the ceiling in our living room with blue and red balloons!). I won't mention what I paid for the cake (blue and red of course) with the cat in the hat iced into it... We had fifteen children and twenty four parents and it was just chaos. I won't go into detail, except to say the kids left most of the food, the cake icing tasted so bad the kids actually spat it out, and after two hours I found Maddie in her room (with the door closed) playing with all her new toys and her favourite cousin Kate. She didn't want anything to do with the other children because they kept wanting to touch her new toys. Riley, whose first birthday we were celebrating, was cross all day; he spent most of it screaming. Great party...!!!

The turning point for me was partly from my experience that day and completely when, 18 months later, Riley was diagnosed with Aspergers Syndrome – it explained why he hated being around all those people and all that noise. We do parties a little differently now. I'm not saying we do them perfectly, but it suits our family well. We have a few birthday rules. If you ask any of my kids they could tell you the most important one...

1. Big Party, Small Present OR Small Party, Big Present!

They get to choose whether they want all their friends and a small present, or the opposite. I have to say the small party often wins. One year my daughter was into Beanie Kids and she worked out that if she invited 12 friends to our house, she would get 12 beanie kids... so invite them she did and they made their own pizzas and sundaes and played with the beanie kids for 2 hours – and she loved it. I often think we forget that the birthday is a day of fun – and fun comes in all sorts of shapes and sizes. Throwing money at a birthday is sometimes the simplest option, but not the best. I know I used to worry about what kids to invite, how many etc – but the rule in our house now; 'just cos its easier!'





2. When you are five – five friends

However old you are – that's how many friends you have. This isn't exactly a hard and fast rule, it is just a way of not going completely crazy with parties before our kids are old enough to actually enjoy and remember them. If you want to enjoy a 1st birthday for a treasured first child or grandchild – accept that the party is actually for the grownups – not the small person who isn't too aware of the huge affair. Why not a small tea party for a few wee friends with their dolls? A friend of mine put on a pussycat party for her two-year-old daughter with a few friends. They all dressed up as kittens, had a kitten cake, had fun together and went home. She still talks about her 'Pussycat Party'. It was fun and no stress on adult or child! Isn't that what it is supposed to be?

3. Thoughtful - rather than expensive.

My daughter's favourite birthday so far was last year when we put three mattresses in the lounge and six girls had a sleep-over after eating fish and chips out of newspaper. Maddie hates cake (I often wonder how she is my daughter), so she had chocolate fondue with fruit pieces instead. Then they watched a movie together, eventually went to sleep and trashed my kitchen the next morning having breakfast together.

4. Being together is what counts

We sometimes underestimate our children's ability to create their own fun. Sometimes just being with friends is enough. I was talking with a friend about this the other day, and she mentioned that her 7-year-old son had his best birthday when they all just went to a soccer field and played kick around (they are mostly in the same team), then went home for takeaways. They played together for four hours and all had a great time, without the aid of a 'goodie bag' at the end.

5. 'Takeaways' shouldn't be compulsory

I have had many interesting discussions with people as I have bought up the party topic. The general consensus is that things have gone a little too far. I was chatting with my GP about this and she mentioned how much she loved doing the parties herself (she always iced the cake too). She often did parties outdoors. One year her Dad filled 200 water balloons which they took to the local park where 10 boys threw them at each other. There was a pirate cake at the end, and the only clean up was picking up the bits of broken balloons. No goodie bags either. A party is just that, and I don't remember ever going out to friends for dinner and demanding a gift just for turning up! You can tell I am a little anti 'party bags'... At the end of our discussion, my GP said "Whatever happened to taking home a piece of cake and a balloon?" and I have to say I agree with her. I was rather horrified recently when my son asked for a party bag as he left a friend's birthday! And I never do them! I did hussle him out rather quickly and had rather a long talk in the car about being grateful for being invited to the party.

6. It's a PARTY not a health food shop

I love entertaining and I guess that spills over into parties. I used to go very overboard with food at parties until I worked out how much I was throwing away at the end! So now I don't put large amounts of food on the table, as they just eat the chips and the sweet stuff anyway. I create an individual plate for each person, or fill a noodle box or brown paper bag. This way they tend to eat all the food, less is wasted and its easier to clean up. I don't often make a cake either (Big Meanie you say!) but that is because MY kids don't like them. I have learnt they would rather have small cupcakes with lots of icing as that is pretty much all they eat! I make a plateful of cupcakes and they choose four of their favourite foods. For one day a year, it is no holes barred on the food front! It is usually chips, smarties,

“ So come with me, where dreams are
born and time is never planned. Just
think of happy things, and your heart
will fly on wings in Never Never land...”

Peter Pan





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jelly for the boys, iced biscuits, cherrios and icecream. No sandwiches and grapes, with carrots and dip in our house. But if it were their favourite – then it would be fine!

7.Keep it simple...

One year we were on holiday at the beach for our littlest's third birthday. I really couldn't be bothered cooking a cake in the rented house, in fact I actually forgot until the day of his birthday! I rushed out, bought a tub of TipTop jellityip ice-cream and tipped it upside

down on a plate, covered it with smarties and stuck three candles in it. When it was cut into slices it looked AMAZING! My son still talks about that cake! We do ice-cream sandwiches by putting two chocolate wheaten together (choc side in) with vanilla ice-cream in between. They can be made in advance and taken out when needed. Great for an outdoor pirate party! Whatever happened to fairy bread and the boy version, choc hail sandwiches? Popcorn? Easy to make. Put it in party hats for a fun container. Wafer

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