

# The Anti 'Birthday Factory' Birthday Party

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Children in modern suburbia are being raised having elaborate birthday parties. My five year old son receives clusters of professionally done birthday party invitations from his classmates. Most of the time, I don't personally know the child, or their family, and yet, we always attend, meeting up with the same obliging parents, receiving the same invitations.

We have gone to 'Dinosaur Digs', 'Swim Parties', 'Chuck E Cheese's', Bowling Parties', 'Sports and Games', 'Gymnastics', 'Children Museums', and on and on...and they've all been great! I enjoy taking my kids to these places, I really do. But, when it was my turn to host my son's birthday party I wanted to do something special for my deserving son. I wanted to provide a memorable childhood birthday party for him, to the best of my ability.

These 'birthday factories' are so mechanical with producing birthday parties that it seems like the simple joys of childhood are getting lost in the meaning. I know that despite how vastly different these 'birthday factories' can be, you will always find food, activity, cake, presents and goodie bags. They charge upwards of \$300-400 when all is said and done. That's just a bit much, I think I can do better myself, thank you.

A child will fantasize about their birthday for months in advance. What wonder-ous things they plan; extravagant outings, a long list of guests, endless hours of fun, fun, fun... This is an entitlement as if they were the son of Rockefeller, all in the name of, 'their birthday'. Essentially, they want to be spoiled like crazy for the day. I can't say I blame them. I still look forward to...

my birthday for that very reason!

My son's sixth birthday fell on the Wednesday after Memorial Day weekend. We could not have a party over the holiday weekend, many families were already committed. Then, all of June is busy with graduations, carnivals, Father's Day, weddings, anniversaries, etc., so postponing it into June was really not an option. I decide to throw him a party on his actual birthday, Wednesday after school. Besides, I know that if I have it on his actual birthday, then we only have to spoil the heck out of him for one day, not two!

Having a small house, we can't comfortably entertain more than 6 people inside at a time. I know that sounds crazy, but its true, we've tried. Our yard is big enough to have a party, but I would need to prepare the house and yard for having approximately 30 guests, not to mention the post-party clean-up, so I conclude to the fact that I need to have it out.

Being this is a weekday after school gathering of neighborhood and school children with their parents and siblings, I thought, 'What better place to play than a park?' I decide to have it in the county park nearby. With an acre of open field and a decent, woodsy picnic area, I planned to just play classic childhood games in the park with a bunch of kids. I gave invitations to his each of my son's classmates and the kids we see everyday around the neighborhood, as well as a few close friends.

Preparing for an idyllic day of classic childhood play in the park, I gathered paddle balls, hula hoops, croquet, badmitten, arts and crafts and water balloons. I packed a cooler with fresh fruit, juice boxes, water, granola bars, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, chips and, of course, goodie bags. My husband took the day off to help with the preparations.

As a parent, I, too had fantasies of how the day should go. I imagined children having the time of their lives under my direction and the parents watch in awe as I demonstrate good old fashioned play. I imagined trays of delectable food, prepared in my carefully calculated time, being consumed without waste. I imagined gaining the respect of every child and adult as I create memories to share for years to come.

On the day of the party, a beautiful weather day, my husband and I sent the birthday boy off to school while we ran errands and packed both cars with party supplies. We arrived at the park to find the field had not been mowed in weeks (probably since the invitations went out). Leaving very little time before guests arrived, we cleaned the site best we could and clipped paper table cloths to the picnic tables. We erected the canopy, blew up balloons, opened bags of chips, layed out the food, plates and cutlery. I wasn't going to let the fact that I had forgotten serving spoons, chip bowls, lemonade and the cake cutter at the house upset me, I was determined to make the best of what we had, taking it all in stride.

Along the edge of the field, we placed a variety of games and activities. As the children arrived, they discovered the toys and games in the tall grass and began to run and play. Balloons began popping almost instantly from the rowdiness. A dog picked up a playing ball and began to rip it apart. The cheap games I bought were falling apart after one use. The parents chatted at the picnic tables as my husband and I ran our tails off keeping the children occupied with games and arts and crafts while graciously encouraging our guests to help themselves to food and juice.

Since the field was in no condition for croquet, badmitten or relay races, as I had envisioned, having arts and crafts was the next best thing. As we unwrapped tubes of paint-brushes and markers, I heard a gasp of fright from a parent who

immediately asked if that was non-toxic washable paint (she alluded this was not a good idea). Speaking like a politician playing both sides of a ticket, I assured her it was completely good clean fun. Before I could finish speaking, a little girl, struggling to get the paint-brush tube to work, asked me for help. With the adrenelin pumping through me, I squeezed the tube forcing the (shit brown) paint to burst out, squirting not only the little girl, but a mere inch from the designer-clad concerned parent. Even the little girl commented on the resemblance to 'poopie'. Reaching for a HandiWipe at the opportunity to prove this was washable paint, my son inadvertently knocked over a cup of water, mixing with the brown paint and running over the edge of the table. It became evident, the shit was hitting the proverbial fan.

Moving right along, this 'anti-birthday factory' classic childhood birthday party gained momentum. We had every child playing joyously in the field despite the calamity. At one point, I did try to get an organized game of 'waterballoon toss' going, but the minute I opened the bucket of pre-filled waterballoons, all eighteen children swarmed making me a target among themselves. Abandoning the (biodegradeable) waterballoon toss area as quickly as possible, I decided it was time to prepare for cake. As we all know, once the cake is served, its time to go.

With brown paint stained hands, dishevelled hair and grass clippings on my cheek, I cut the sheet cake with a plastic knife, scooping a healthy portion of chocolate cake and buttercream on to flimsy paper cake plates. Birthday party veterans (like the children in attendance) immediately requested their goodie bag for their departure. To their delight, (and some parent's dismay) they found space aged water pistols, M&M's, sidewalk chalk, bubbles and fun fruits.

All in all, the 'anti-birthday factory' birthday party was a herculean effort for us, costing us about \$350, 40 hours of prep work and 2 days recovery time. Although there is honor in cherishing our child's birthday memories, next year, we'll leave it up to the birthday factory, marking this up to experience.