

The Birthday Party Dilemma

By Barrington H. Brennen, MA, NCP, February 17, 2010

Most parents adore their little children and love to show to the world how much they love them. One way parents honor their children and demonstrate their love is by having birthday parties. While having a birthday party can be a wonderful idea and very important in a child's life, it is more often a showcase for the parents' pride than a celebration of a birthday. That's not good.

Another great dilemma is parents having birthday parties at school for their children. This should not be allowed, at least not the way it is done in most schools today. Many parents really believe that this is a wonderful way of really pouring their love on their children. When a classroom teacher allows one parent to bring a birthday cake and other party trinkets to school to celebrate a child's birthday, it is setting up that child to become self-centered and "pig-headed." The problem with classroom parents' sponsored birthday parties is that not every parent has the means or talents to do what other parents did for their children. Thus it becomes a competition between parents more than a celebration of a birthday. And then, oh how children can boast and "show off"!

A SAD DAY

I remember many years ago a parent, with good intentions, requested to celebrate her son's fifth birthday in his school's classroom. The teacher allowed the party to take place. I watched as the parent brought a giant birthday cake and two smaller cakes, sandwiches, candies, cookies, balloons and decorations for the class. That parent even bought a little gift for each child. It was a fun and happy time for the entire class. For days and weeks after the party all seemed to go well as the little ones talked and laughed about the birthday party. Then another student's birthday came. The little girl asked her mother if she could have a birthday party in her classroom at school. Her mother said yes, "that will be wonderful." The day came and the mother brought to class what she could afford. It was a small cake, homemade lemonade, cheap paper cups and napkins, not even paper plates. The children ate the small, thick layered, rich cake, sang the happy birthday song, and the party was over. The day after the party the boasting and shaming began among the little "innocent bundles of joy." "My party was better than yours," said the student of the first party. "That's not true," responded the second child with the small birthday party. The little dialogue even led to tears and the teacher had to console the student.

BAN OR STANDARDIZE

Birthday parties in a school classroom should be banned or at least standardized. Standardization of birthday parties would mean that the school administration establish celebration guidelines. Here are some suggested guidelines for schools:

1. Birthday parties are to be celebrated monthly.
2. Teachers alone are responsible for organizing birthday parties.
3. If the school sees fit to allow parents to contribute to birthday parties, they too should follow general guidelines; i.e., parents can only bring a certain cake size or cup cakes, etc.. No parent should dictate the size of the party, activities, or decorations during the party.
4. The time and length of the party should also be standardized.

Parents should not be allowed to plan birthday parties for their children in school. This should be a personal affair at home. Parent-initiated birthday parties in school are a hornet's nest of ill feelings or self-centered, borderline narcissistic behavior. No two parents can do the same thing for their child's birthday. It becomes then a competition and a pride-building occasion for the parent more than a celebration of the child's birthday. The child is caught in the middle of this stinging, self-centered behavior and has a greater risk of growing up with a grandiose personality as though the world is centered on him or her.

EQUAL OPPORTUNITY EXPERIENCE

The education process should be an equal opportunity experience. At no time should parents be allowed to use the school to showcase their own financial or political power. The classroom is to be an equalizing chamber for students from all the economic categories of the society. When a student walks in to a classroom, he should feel comfortable knowing that the teacher will treat all students alike.

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