

Easy eco parties for kids

Can a birthday party be a memorable celebration of another year in your child's life without turning into a wasteland of cheap plastic, rubbish food and wanton commercialism? Party veteran **Sarah Heeringa** offers 22 tips for hosting great green parties for kids of all ages

STYLISTS: SARAH JAMES AND SUSAN ELIJAS, WWW.GILDEDLILY.CO.NZ. NATURE EXPLORER TOOL BELT MADE BY SUSAN ELIJAS, DISPOSABLE PLATES: WWW.POTATOPLATES.CO.NZ. BOOKS FROM AUCKLAND WAR MEMORIAL MUSEUM SHOP, OTHER PROPS STYLISTS' OWN

I've been to more kids' parties than I care to recall, from tame affairs organised down to the last excruciating detail, to exercises in barely controlled bedlam—including some I've hosted. Other parties are memorable for their celebrations than their conspicuous consumption. The best parties are somewhere in between these extremes, where kids are free to play but have enough to do to keep them occupied, where there aren't (too many) tears, where at least some real food is on offer and where the hosts are organised enough to enjoy the moment and the company of other parents. Here's how.

1 Resist party inflation!

Kids' parties can be as simple or elaborate as you're willing to make them, but resist the temptation to treat them as a competitive sport. Laying on non-stop organised entertainment or filling party bags with gifts that cost more than the presents most guests have given your child is kinda bad form. Encourage your friends to keep it real. Overly extravagant parties can be a reflection of the needs of the parent rather than the child: an attempt to impress, validate their own self-worth or assuage guilt about the time they spend with their child.



2 Start simple

Your child's first birthday is a major milestone—but that celebration's for the adults, not the kids. For the next few years, keep toddlers' parties short and simple, and the entertainment age-appropriate. Forget about a clown or bouncy castle: a simple paddling pool or hiring a few big toys from your local toy library will provide ample fun. Make a big batch of play dough and provide a large plastic sheet with biscuit cutters and rollers (make sure your young party goers don't eat too much dough!), then divide the play dough up at the party's end as an easy gift.

3 Stay home

Holding a party at your home is cheaper and much more welcoming than any party venue. The food can be a lot better too! Do you want parents to stay? Parties can be a great opportunity

to catch up with—or get to know—other parents. Have adult snacks ready for anyone who stays on. If you'd rather avoid the extra costs, indicate on the invite that it's a drop-off party. Parents will appreciate knowing either way.

4 Make your own birthday cake

It's not a cake decorating competition and your child won't care if it's not perfect. If time is tight, the simplest cake can be made using a tub of ice cream customised with reusable items such as action figures or small plastic animals.

5 Be proactive about presents

Aim to keep the focus on getting together with friends rather than getting stuff, to avoid ending up with a load of plastic packaging and cheap tat that soon ends up in the bin—or expensive toys

that may hardly get played with. Request books or vouchers, or ask for contributions towards a particular item, such as a Lego set, musical instrument or doll's house. When five or six people chip in together you can buy something really worthwhile. If your child wants to invite lots of kids, or even their entire class, consider asking parents to bring a plate of food instead.

6 Get creative

Ditch tacky decorations and plastic balloons and make colourful, reusable bunting. These strings of triangular flags can be made from paper or scraps of fabric. Get your child involved in picking a theme, making party invitations from recycled cards and magazines, and making decorations. Let your decorating imagination fly: autumn leaves strung on threads, an underwater scene made using fishing nets

and fairy lights, or a flower fairy theme with flowers or petals sprinkled on the table and tea lights floating in glass bowls.

7 Say no to plastic party bags

Dispense with party bags altogether, or choose brown paper or reusable fabric bags (see good.net.nz/2/partybag for how to making simple drawstring gift bags). Fill with a box of raisins, small wooden toys, hair ties, packets of seeds or home-made fudge. Alternatively, make the paring gift something your party goers are involved in, such as sewing and decorating simple felt bags, or potting a plant.

8 Get crafty

Craft activities are great for amusing older kids and getting younger ones sitting quietly around a table. Make craft that's worth keeping, such as decorated

headbands, painted t-shirts or finger puppets. Beading or making jewellery is ideal for older girls. (Collect old buttons and buy bead necklaces from op shops to pull apart and mix with new beads.) For a spring-themed party, give guests a small terracotta pot to decorate with paint, then fill with soil and plant with seeds. Making seed bombs or clay creatures are fun activities that involve getting a bit dirty.

9 Mix up the eats

Sausage rolls, cheerios, chips and dip are cheap party standards, but without being too puritanical (it's a party after all) you can also offer plenty of wholesome snacks alongside the favourites. Try home-made popcorn, melon balls, oven-baked kumara and potato wedges, raw vegetables with hummus for dipping, grilled pita bread cut into triangles, small sandwiches

and fruit skewered on sticks with melted fair trade chocolate for dipping. Borrow a chocolate fountain for a fair trade meltdown.

10 Use a checklist

A list of to-dos will help with your preparations, and a list of the food you intend to serve will save you from discovering party food lurking at the back of the fridge the next day. Draw up a running order of events as a reminder to you and others. Serve some snacks at the start, then put food away during games—it's a choking risk and too much of a distraction for some kids.

11 Use fabric napkins or recycled paper serviettes

If time and energy allow, make your own napkins to match your theme. Cut fabric into squares and hem on a sewing machine, or



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Carry your colours and theme through to bunting, tablecloths and giftwrap

7 party ideas for toddlers to teens

Teddy bears' picnic

Have each guest bring their favourite stuffed toy to a park (or your back garden) for simple games and afternoon tea.

Nature party

Go on a bush walk, and incorporate a treasure hunt into the nature trail. Use potting mix, small plants and pebbles to make miniature secret gardens. Make a bug-shaped cake. Give each child a small swan plant you and your child have potted up.

Sports tournament

Ideal for large groups. Organise everyone into two teams and play soccer or other games at a local park, followed by a picnic or barbecue. Involve as many helpers as you can (dads especially). Give out prizes and other treats in a ceremony at the end.



Victorian tea party

Collect some retro cups and saucers and your fanciest cake plates. Dress up and practise your best manners. Have your mother or grandma give the young ladies a deportment lesson. Make découpage cards. Serve delicate sandwiches and the daintiest cakes. Play the piano or play croquet on the lawn.

Fear the fear

Divide guests into teams, blindfold them and have them take turns to identify a platter of disgusting delicacies (peeled grapes as eyeballs, cooked cauliflower as brains, tinned spaghetti as intestines). Guide them through an outdoor obstacle course.

Have a flower-power sleepover

Decorate the lounge with bean bags, lava lamps, flowers and peace signs. Dress as hippies, go-go girls or flower children. Play twister, charades and music from the 60s and 70s. Eat fondue. Make tie-dyed t-shirts, bead jewellery and spin art (using an old record player).

Go camping

Pack a tent and just the essential camping supplies and head to a basic DOC campsite or a friend's farm—ideally somewhere out of cellphone range. If that's too hard, simply set up the tent in the back garden. Cook over an open fire, drink camp cocoa, play card games. After dark, play go home stay home, go for a walk by torchlight and sleep under the stars.



Make your own cake: just keep it simple

Save on washing up with eco plates and utensils from PotatoPak



Mix up the eats: fun plus healthy

sew 3–4mm from the edge and fray. Even quicker, cut fabric into squares using pinking shears (scissors that make a zigzag edge). Extra napkins can be used to wrap leftover birthday cake as a take-home gift.

12 Save on washing up

Use disposable wooden cutlery and Potato Pak's colourful, totally biodegradable potato-starch dinnerware—just watch that the kids don't eat all the plates. Later they can be composted, put in your worm farm or buried in the garden. Write a child's name on each cup to avoid using more than necessary.

13 Give classic old games a twist

Use a large sheet of paper and pens to create pin the pants on Patrick (a SpongeBob-inspired version of pin the tail on the donkey). Make your own simple piñata with papier mâché and a balloon, fill with lollies and glue a funny (or a family member's) face on the front. Musical chairs, statues, tug of war, duck duck goose, egg and spoon races or limbo are all simple games that require minimum set-up but are enduringly popular. The chocolate game (put on dress-ups and eat a king-size bar with a knife and fork) is great for older kids. Save

on expensive entertainers by hiring teenagers to run the games and paint faces.

14 Be foodies

Sit younger children at a table with cupcakes, icing and candy sprinkles, and let them decorate their own cakes. For older kids, make lots of small pizza bases, provide bowls containing various toppings and let them assemble their own pizzas—ideal for picky girls and hungry teenage boys. Even better, cook them in an outdoor pizza oven (see good.net.nz/adobe).

15 Don't up the ante

As children get older, their party plans get ever more fantastical. If someone else's party involved a stretch limo ride to the movies followed by a meal out, don't feel pressured to match it. Just as the most memorable gifts often involve experiences rather than things, the best parties are about building and celebrating meaningful relationships. Talk with your child about something new they'd like to try—camping, horse trail riding, going to a ballet, surfing lessons. Give your child a budget and the option of choosing one or two close friends to take on a special outing. The more cost effective the outing, the more friends can come along.