

just try it

By Jill West

Party for All!

Celebrate in a Healthful and Allergy-Free Way

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Birthdays parties are a great time to celebrate, have fun and enjoy the company of family and friends. However, many parents dread taking their child to birthday parties knowing they will come home either “bouncing off the walls” or extremely emotional and cranky from the sugar and sensory overload. For other parents, there is additional stress if a child has food allergies. The good news? There are many ways to celebrate the big day, focusing on fun and minimizing junk food and allergy concerns.

Keep It Active

Having activities is a helpful way to focus on fun, not food. There are many options for indoor and outdoor games, depending on weather, the time of year and the ages of the partygoers. A few examples include a scavenger hunt, musical chairs, balloon stomp, tag games, relay races, capture the flag or a traditional soccer game.

Check out www.coolest-kidbirthday-parties.com/kid-activities.html for great ideas.

Goodie Bags

There are many great treats to put in goodie bags other than candy or other high fat sweets. For example, stickers, pencils, bouncy balls, bubbles, tattoos, bracelets, rings, cars, crayons, erasers and notepads are all treats kids like. If you do plan to include food, consider reviewing the Safe Snack Guide at www.snacksafely.com for allergy-safe options. Another option is to provide an arts and craft s activity, such as making a tiara or decorating a T-shirt, hat or small flower pot that kids take home. This way, you can skip the goodie bag entirely.

On the Food Front

■ **Skip juice and soda.** Very often, juice is served at parties with younger children and soda is served as they get older. The reality is, they have about the same amount of sugar per cup; it is too much in addition to cake and other sweets. Healthy alternatives are milk or water. Kids love infused water – adding oranges, strawberries or cucumber – for a colorful, refreshing and thirst-quenching beverage.

■ **Skip the chips.** If a salty, crunchy snack is important, serve popcorn or pretzels. Although these options are high in sodium, they are low in saturated fat, which makes them healthier than chips. Better yet, serve fruit, such as watermelon or pineapple wedges, fruit salad or fruit kebabs. For an additional crunchy option, serve raw vegetables with hummus or avocado dip (mashed avocado with lime juice). I’ve noticed (and parents tell me) that when these healthy options are available and easily accessible, kids *will* eat them.

■ **Instead of cake, serve cupcakes.** Many bakeries offer what looks like a cake, but is really individual cupcakes connected together in a shape or design. If you’re ambitious enough to make your own, try a healthy muffin recipe, such as banana or zucchini muffins and top them with a

small amount of frosting and a blueberry or sliced strawberry. Making your own cupcakes has two advantages: the portion is smaller, and there is far less sugar and fat-laden frosting. An additional benefit is they are far less messy.

Dealing With Food Allergies

Your child likely has at least one classmate with a food allergy, so you will need some strategies to keep these kids safe from a serious reaction.

- **Inquire about dietary restrictions.** When sending or emailing invitations, ask about food allergies and special dietary needs. This will give you plenty of time to figure out what foods to include and what additional foods might be needed. You might also consider sending a copy of your menu plan to the parents whose child has a food allergy or intolerance to ensure you didn't overlook a problematic food or ingredient.

- **Enlist help.** If you're concerned about being able to accommodate a child's dietary needs, reach out to the parents to ask questions or request their help in providing safe options. These parents can provide suggestions for specific foods and where to buy appropriate options, or they can bring those items when they drop off the child. These strategies will allow the child to be fully included in the food and fun.

- **Pizza on the menu?** Since many birthday parties include pizza, guests with gluten intolerance or dairy and wheat allergies will need an alternative to traditional pizza. If you're hosting the party at home, you can buy a frozen pizza that is gluten-free or dairy-free and gluten-free. In some cases, local pizzerias will also offer gluten-free or dairy-free pizzas that you can order along with the traditional pizza.

Emphasize Fun Over Food

While food is expected at a birthday party, it doesn't have to be the focal point. In an effort to avoid food allergy reactions and limit sugar and saturated fat overload, focusing on the fun will be a winner. By offering mostly healthy foods with a small dose of dessert, kids will go home happy and parents will thank you. ■

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