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Sesame Family Newsletter

October 16, 2009

Birthdays on a Budget

by Jordan D. Brown

Focusing on what really matters to birthday boys and girls

Featuring:

- How Old Are You Now?
- Making the Party a Class Act
- There's No Place Like Home
- Batteries Not Included



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- [Happy Birthday!](#)
Animation of a birthday party.

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HOW OLD ARE YOU NOW?

In just a few weeks, my daughter Olivia is going to do something special with millions of people throughout the world. What



international, daylong event could my 4-year-old possibly be participating in? As you may have guessed, she's having a birthday. My wife Ellen and I cannot believe that our little girl will soon be turning 5.

Over the weekend, we began to discuss how we might celebrate such a momentous milestone. What kind of party would Olivia and her friends enjoy? With all the products and services available today--many accessible with just a click of the mouse--it is easy to get sucked into throwing an elaborate or expensive party. You know how it goes: dozens of kids, mountains of presents, fancy food, costly activities at a popular venue... the works. While an over-the-top celebration might seem appealing on the surface, it is often more stressful for everyone involved, including the birthday boy or girl. This is especially true in this challenging economy. Few people have the extra cash to blow on such extravagances. So what's a devoted parent to do?

My main suggestion is to ignore the hype and focus on what really matters to your child. In my experience, the best birthdays from a kid's perspective boil down to these elements: singing "Happy Birthday," blowing out candles, opening some presents, and spending time with friends and family. That's it. All the other stuff, while fun, really isn't necessary to make the day special and memorable.



[Fiesta Dany](#)

Rosita sings about Dany's birthday party.

MAKING THE PARTY A CLASS ACT

If your child is in school, the easiest and least expensive way to celebrate a birthday is to organize a small class party. With this approach, there's no need to send invitations, decorate your house, or put pressure on parents to buy gifts.

Several years ago, when Olivia's older brother Finian turned 5, Ellen and I honored his wish to make a "dirt cake" for his preschool class instead of the typical cupcakes, or ice cream. A dirt cake consists of chocolate pudding mixture served in a clean flowerpot, covered with crumbled cream-filled cookies that resemble dirt. As an added touch, we buried some gummy worms so they were sticking out of the "dirt" and included a plastic flower. We even let Finian reveal the tasty surprise to his class.

When Ellen and I arrived at Finian's classroom, casually holding the flowerpot, I announced to the teacher, "Oh no! I forgot the birthday cake at home. What are we going to do?"

Finian then got to say, "Why don't we eat the plant?"

"WHAT?!" I responded with mock surprise. "That's just for decoration."

And then, as planned, Finian said, "Oh, really?" stuck a spoon into the dirt cake, scooped out some of the top layer, and said, "Yum!"



[Fido the Goldfish](#)

A birthday party for a fish named Fido.

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

The other day, I was reading aloud one of Olivia's favorite books, *Hooper Humperdink...? Not Him!* by Dr. Seuss. In this story, the narrator talks about the long list of guests he plans to invite to an upcoming birthday bash. Everyone he knows from A to Z will be invited, except for a boy named Hooper Humperdink. At the end of the book, the narrator, of course, changes his mind... the more, the merrier, he decides. Olivia always requests that I substitute the names of family members for the guests in the story, so instead of "Olivetta" I read "Olivia." This book gives us a chance to talk about what it might feel like to be Hooper and to hear that there's a big party and not be invited. Helping children learn the value of including others in any group activity--from playground games to play dates--builds empathy. No matter what the age, feeling excluded from a group can be a very painful experience. I try to encourage Finian and Olivia to go out of their way to include any children who might be shy than others.

Although Olivia is quite the social butterfly and enjoys a crowd, we've learned from experience that keeping home birthday parties small is a wise option for preschoolers. Big groups can be scary. Since



[Empathy in Children](#)

Learning to identify with the feelings of others is an important skill.

[Cat Had a Birthday](#)

How different animals say "happy birthday."

school just started in September, Olivia only knows a few of her classmates well, so we're going to keep things low key this year. We'll allow Olivia to invite six friends from the neighborhood for cake and simple activities that she really enjoys. To help us plan what we might do, we'll probably start with a theme. Some ideas we're considering include her favorite color (purple), princesses, wild animals, and ballet.

Olivia has enjoyed going to some birthday parties more than other ones. The ones she enjoys most involve lots of physical activity, like "crazy dancing," familiar games like "Red Light, Green Light," or making crafts that she can take home. At one party, all the guests received a plain t-shirt and markers, sparkle glue, and paint to decorate them. Then all the kids worked together to finger paint a special birthday t-shirt for the guest of honor. (Smocks were a big help in keeping the birthday clothes relatively paint-free.) At another party that Olivia loved, the main activity was planting flowers.

BATTERIES NOT INCLUDED

During a recent trip to the library, Olivia found a book called *Three Cheers for Catherine the Great* by Cari Best. The plot involves a Russian grandmother who insists that "the best present will be No Presents." She explains that "No Presents" are gifts that come from the heart rather than things bought from a store. Gifts might be a homemade song or poem, a silly dance, or a baked pie.

The book got me thinking about what special "No Present" we might create for Olivia this year. One gift I'm considering is putting together a short homemade book called *A Day in the Life of Olivia, the 5 Year Old*--and it would celebrate her everyday pleasures. Given my limited drawing abilities, I will probably take photographs of Olivia doing things like dressing in costumes, playing with her dolls and stuffed animals, cooking in the kitchen with me, painting, and so on. My goal is to make this kind of book for her every year, so that she can remember special times, and see how she's grown from year to year.

Jordan D. Brown
Sesame Workshop

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