INSIDE PEOPLE

# Sorry, kids, the party's over

[By Jane Clifford]

Birthday parties have gone from little gatherings with family and neighborhood friends to highly orchestrated and costly events, right up to the mind-boggling multithousand-dollar extravaganzas seen on MTV's "My Super Sweet 16." How do you handle your child's annual celebration, given ever-higher expectations?

We asked a parent and a professional family counselor for their advice. Here's what they had to say.

From Jan Wilder of San Diego: Oh, no. Only three more months till Leah's 13th birthday, and I'm stuck like a rat in a trap. Two years ago I wrote an article on over-the-top birthday parties. I decried the money spent, the lavishness of the presents, the whole too-muchness of it all. I implored parents to end the madness.

I discovered, after I sent the article to some of my friends across the country, that this phenomenon is sweeping the country.

My friend Janie, a teacher from upstate New York whose own kids got at-home, pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey parties, was horrified by what the parents in her second-grade class did.

"Nutso," she said - a party for the kids, a party for the parents' friends and a party at school.

"You'd think that these parents had all given birth to the Christ Child!" she wailed.

My friend Theresa in Kansas City said that the young moms in her son's third-grade class were wearing her out with their elaborately planned parties. She is 48 and wiser than that. And my friend Sally in North Carolina sent the article to her friends across the country and got a storm of responses from them: "You think that's bad, listen to this ...."

I thought it was regional. No. It's global. I'm not sure that's better. Luckily, under our roof sanity reigns. Right.

Last week Leah told me she wanted a limousine at her birthday party this year. Yesterday she told me Disneyland will do, with numerous friends in tow. Or a stay in a hotel with room service and a pool.
So how do I fight this? How do any of us?

Maybe we need a Web site. A support group. What works? How can we stand our ground against the MTV excesses? If we parents can't stop it, who's going to - the kids? The city council?

I think I'll start by setting a spending limit on her birthday. The whole thing: presents, party, the works. Maybe we parents need to use the Double Disney approach: Be like Jiminy Cricket and "Let your conscience be your guide." Then come up with a Goldilocks figure, not too big, not too small, just right.

Next, lay down the law: "You can have anything you want within this limit."

Oh, this could get ugly. And when she whines, "But other parents ... " it's time to use my mother's old standby: "What other parents do cuts no mustard with me."

Me, I'm not panicking. I still have three months to talk her into a sleepover with pizza and movies. Maybe if I let her keep the difference between my spending limit and the cost of the party?

One way or the other, I'd better get started. It's gonna be uphill.

Professional guidance comes from Catherine Butler, marriage and family therapist in private practice in San Diego: First of all, it helps if you know your kids' friends. Then you can talk to the parents. And since this is mostly a girl thing, get together with the parents of your kid's girlfriends and say, "Can we coordinate before they come to us?" Decide ahead of time how you will approach the issue.

Maybe you can alternate years - a blowout party one year, no party the next year.

Parents: Be firm and loving. Say, "Darling, this is our budget. How you spend it is fine.



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If you don't want presents and want to spend all the money on a party, that's OK."

The party issue certainly can't be a last-minute thing. Your child can't unload this on you two weeks before the event. Better that it's a collaboration, with realistic planning, looking at things and how much they cost, deciding that more of this may mean less of that but that might be more fun.

Truly, the main thing I deal with kids is incredible narcissism. The main thing parents can do is be parents. Set limits and stick with them. Don't be railroaded or guilted into things, especially if you're a divorced parent.

This "feeding the need" is not a good thing. It's Christmas, birthdays, bar mitzvahs, all revisited, that equates "things" with love. Sometimes love means saying no.

So many parents want to be friends, not parents. If you are tempted to throw the lavish party, ask yourself why are you willing to do this. Is it because you didn't have it or because you can. Ask yourself what kind of message you are communicating.

Parents have to ask themselves these questions, but a lot of times they just don't.

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