

Playtime & Party Ultimate Party Planning Guide

6 Weeks Before

Decide who you will invite.

Decide on your guest list and **contact your most important guests** to see what dates they're available for a party. (Your child would be disappointed if their best friend wasn't able to come to their birthday party.)

It's the **interaction between guests** that makes or breaks a party: take another look at your guest list. Do these people get along? Is it going to be a blast – or are they going to be reluctant to participate because they don't know each other or – even worse – don't mesh as a group?

Decide what kind of party you want to have.

Be realistic about **where you want to spend your budget**. What is more important to you and your guests: the food, the entertainment or the ambiance? Where do you want to spend most of your money? Is the food – either quality or creative themed food – one of the most important parts of the party, or will you find ways to keep the menu simple?

(For instance, a kid's cowboy party will be more memorable if you focus the budget on decorations and serve nibbles with fun cowboy names. An adult party celebrating the first show of the season might get away with theme-named munchies too, but most adult parties will have at least appetizers.)

Will you be serving a **meal, appetizers, or snacks & nibbles**? Make sure the guests understand so they know if they – or their child – should eat before the party.

Decide on a party theme.

Ask your child what topic they'd like for their birthday party and be ready with suggestions that you're willing to do as well.

Before you go ahead with your fantastic theme, think for *one more moment*. Is it **going to be a blast or are the participants going to whine and complain** about the party theme you've chosen? What excites you might not work so well when you bring a group together.

(For instance, if your child wants a craft party and invites kids who hate arts & crafts, it doesn't matter how much you spend on the craft supplies – the party will bomb because they'll be done in 30 seconds asking for a game. If you want to have a karaoke party and invite people who hate to sing, the party will end early. Or they'll all stand around talking so loudly you can't hear the one singing. It's happened. Many a time.)

There are so many themes out there. **The goal is to choose the perfect one for your group.**

Need inspiration?

- See our [party themes](#) with decorations, food, entertainment & costumes for each one
- Check out our [Pinterest Party Boards](#) – we have over 200 boards with topics for all ages & occasions.

Set your party budget.

Life is short; we want every party to be the ultimate party but sometimes that means more creativity than cash. Be realistic. **Set a budget that you know you can afford** without the crying-cringing credit card invoice the month after your soirée.

Our finances fluctuate from year to year. **If you're short on cash right now**, that's okay. Work around it with freebies and clearance sales, by hosting the party in your own home, and maybe inviting fewer people this year. Play [classic games for a kid's party](#).

Being realistic about *where* you want to spend your budget takes the pressure off. What is more important to you and your guests: the food, the entertainment or the ambiance?

What is it about parties that is the **most fun, the most memorable** *for you*:

- the venue
- the decorations
- the food
- the entertainment
- the interaction with other guests

This is where you devote the most of your budget.

Is the food – either quality or creative themed food – one of the most important parts of the party, or will you find ways to keep the menu simple?

(For instance, a kid's cowboy party will be more memorable if you focus the budget on decorations and serve nibbles with fun cowboy names. An adult party celebrating the first show of the season just begs for theme-named munchies but not much else.)

Will you be serving a meal, appetizers, or snacks & nibbles?

If you are trying to get more people into your apartment or rec room, a stand-up appetizer party makes sense. Make sure the guests know what you'll be serving so they'll know if they – or their child – should eat before the party, or save room for your goodies. (The time you set for the party will be a good indication – right after meal time for an only-munchies party – but its best to be clear upfront so you don't have grumpy whiny guests that are "hangry".)

There are lots of ways to **save money on your party** without anyone noticing.

- have an appetizer party instead of a sit-down meal
- have an ice cream bar or hot chocolate bar as party decorations *and* food
- ask everyone to bring their best goodie tray and share
- have a costume party – they're exciting for everyone but guests are responsible for the cost of the costume & you need less or no decorations

Arrange the entertainment and party venue.

The theme's **venue is dictated by how many guests** you'll have at the party:

- a video game or American Idol karaoke party is best with just a couple of close friends

- going to a movie theater can add up quickly so you may not want to invite the whole class
- and if you're planning the ultimate party you may not have enough space in your rec room or backyard to contain it all

You need to **book your date *now* if you're going big:**

- Want a magician, face painter or mascot like Santa or Easter Bunny
- Want to have your party at the movie theater, restaurant or playland
- Want to make an outdoor theater or have a bouncy castle for your backyard
- Want to hire a professional bartender for an adult party

Research your choices and book it now!

Purchase party favors, prizes for games & decorations

It is a good idea to purchase your party supplies as early as possible.

- If buying online, it gives you time to purchase, receive and even return if necessary.
- It allows extra time for you to change themes if you're not satisfied with what's available.
- It also lets you spend time researching your options for the best or cheapest.

What kind of decorations do you need:

- decorations outdoors so guests know which house
- for the walk-way

- the front door

- the entrance way

- the party table and chairs

- the food serving or buffet table

- the party room

- Will the cake be the centerpiece or will you require something else?

- Do you need a table centerpiece?

- What is the focal point: the table or the buffet?

- Will you have a decorated focal wall?

- Do you require a background for your buffet table?

- Are you going to put a clever themed sign on the bathroom door so guests know where to go?

- What kind of themed serving dishes do you require? Kid's themed paper plates, mason jars for beverages, wooden spoons for ice cream, patterned paper straws, napkins, etc.

- will you need name tags?

4 Weeks Before

Send invitations.

By inviting guests reasonably early you **allow time for their schedule to still be open and to shop for a birthday gift.** (Don't you hate rushing to the store for that last minute present?)

Don't rely on a phone call as your invitation. People forget. They need something to put on their fridge or in their calendar – which also helps to build excitement every time they see it! Send it in writing so they can refer back to it, whether its an official written invitation, by creating an event on social media or by email.

For a children's party:

- specify if parents and younger siblings are welcome to stay
- the time the party will start and a pick up time when the party will end (most parties are 1.5 to 2.5 hours long)
- the RSVP date
- The rain date if applicable
- tell them if a costume, swim suit or other item will be required.
- get parent's phone numbers so you can contact them in case of an emergency
- ask about allergies when they call to confirm – parents may assume you know because the school knows

Decide on the kind of party invitation that is required:

- the fill-in invitation is perfect for moms to put on the fridge to remind everyone of the date
- the customized invitation can include a photo and hint at the theme
- a [3D invitation](#) appeals to the senses and gets guests excited in anticipation

Plan the party schedule.

You want this to be a party they talk about on social media, tell their friends and family about, and maybe even remember for years to come. That doesn't happen by accident. *However, mishaps are usually remembered forever. . .*

For a children's party:

Don't plan on joyful play among children to be the activity for your party.

For a children's party it's a good idea to plan a pre-party ice breaker keep-them-entertained event. There's always that one mom who is so glad to have a "babysitter" that she drops her kid off early. And you probably already know who is going to get there late. If you don't plan something for the kids to do while they wait for the party to officially start, they are so excited that they can get out of control before the party even begins. See our article on [kids ice breaker ideas](#) for more information.

Plan your activities. Kids need to be kept occupied and your party will be a success that they will talk about at school the next day – or even years to come – based on your activity choices. The rule of thumb is to plan more activities than you think you'll need in case

things move along faster than you anticipate or something is rejected outright by the group.

Plan a “slow down” activity before serving food at a kids party. A sit-down game, a paper game such as Ad-libs or a movie will help them move from physical activity to eating. (Taking the time to calm down can save you from cleaning up carrot sticks or cheesies that were thrown at each other during a food fight. Been there. Done that.)

Plan a goodbye activity. If you pick up your kid from a party and they’re all running around out of control, you assume the whole party was like that, don’t you. And you hate how long it takes to get your kids to settle down afterwards.

The kids who aren’t picked up right away usually rip through their party favors before they even leave the party. A goodbye activity gives them something to do so you can hand them their take-home bag after their parents arrive to pick them up. (Munchies are NOT advisable since most kids can run and chew at the same time!)

A good party plan involves a goodbye project that doesn’t require a definite ending and can be considered completed at any point. Parents often want to speak to the hostess when picking up their child, so this is where your volunteer helps again. They can supervise the goodbye activity while you hand out take-home bags and talk with parents.

A good alternative is to open gifts at pick up time – kids hate to sit through it so they don’t mind leaving before its over. Also, the gifts are less apt to be played with (and maybe broken) by guests as they dwindle in number. The drawback to this idea is that you can’t watch your child open gifts and talk to parents at the same time. If you choose this route, **appoint an adult to write down which gift came from whom** for the thank you cards and your own information.

Plan a weather alternative if applicable. Can you bring the party indoors if it rains? Or did you make a rain date in advance so parents know it will be cancelled?

Plan your activities by the **party theme and interests of your guests**. The rule of thumb is to *plan more activities than you think you'll need* in case things move along faster than you anticipate or something is rejected outright by the group. (Yes, it happens. I was at an adult Christmas party where one woman declared, "We don't do games." All the hostess' plans went out the window – as well as my opportunity to win some great prizes.)

For an adult party:

Don't count on sterling conversation among guests to be your only activity.

A great adult party will also have planned activities. (Plus: activities look better in the photos and videos shared on social media that show how great your party was!)

There are always those who come early, and those who come late. Plan something for people to do while waiting for all guests to arrive:

- photo booth with party theme
- games that can add people at any time & don't have a set ending
- munchies & cocktails
- guest book, best wishes cards, fill-in cards for decorations

Plan the party food.

Are you the hostess with the mostest who likes to cook and serve the food while the guests are there? Or is the ease in serving the food is a major factor for you so you can spend time with your guests?

Can the darling hubby or a dear friend oversee the BBQ? Do you have a volunteer who will help serve the food? Can you set up a beverage bar and buffet table so everyone can easily serve themselves?

How active are the kids invited to your party? A buffet isn't always a good idea for kids – some kids take way too much food, and it can be a mess. Some parties involve watching a movie or sit-down play time *incorporated into their eating time* to keep kids focused on the party instead of instigating a little “fun” of their own.

Make a grocery list while you're planning the menu to keep things easy. Now would also be a good time to **test any new recipes** you want to try for the party so you can tweak or replace them if necessary.

Make your party unique by having a menu that matches your party theme. See our article on [creating a signature drink](#) for your party – kids or adults. It's easier than you think!

And the pièce de résistance . . . the cake. Are you going to make it yourself? Will you order it? How big does it have to be? What will make it go with your party theme? (Our [party themes](#) will help you easily answer these questions.)

Make a party supplies list.

Now that your party is planned make an extensive list of everything you'll need:

- sports equipment or game requirements

- arts & crafts supplies

- music

- tables & enough chairs

- serving dishes

- serving utensils

- plates, cups, tableware

- table cloth and/or napkins

- decorations for the walk-way, the front door, the party table and chairs, the food table, and party room

- balloons, centerpieces, flowers

- take-home bags & loot

Line up your assistants.

Take the pressure off by asking family members, friends or even parents of kids who attend the party to be helpers.

At an adult party, having others help with the food, music or volunteer to be the first to dance or play a game can make things run smoother. Anyone who helps with the cleanup afterward is worth their weight in gold!

Arrange to have someone other than yourself to be a mascot at the party if you're having one. It's fun to have an Easter Bunny or robot at the party, but you want to be able to interact with your kids.

An enthusiastic teenager is a good choice. (My son volunteered to be Dudley the Dragon at our local library for a written reference he used in his university application for teaching. Most high school students have to fulfill volunteer hours to graduate.)

Order the cake, balloons and floral arrangements.

If you're getting a specialty cake at the bakery or grocery store, order it well in advance to avoid disappointment. Order your balloons, flowers or other party decorations if getting them locally.

2 Weeks Before

Follow up RSVPs.

Contact anyone you haven't heard from to confirm your guest list. Two weeks feels less stressful to agree to attend if they've forgotten about it.

Purchase alcoholic beverages for an adult party.

If you need help to estimate how much beverage alcohol you require, use Evite's [Party Drink Calculator](#).

1 Week Before

Get printables ready.

If using printables for your party decorations or cupcake toppers, take them to the printers or print them off at home now to make sure you have enough ink and paper.

Start putting your printables together – take your time and have fun!

Attend to the yard work for an outdoor party.

Clean up the backyard and add any plants that you'll require.

Arrange for professionals to do the work if you're using their services.

Make ahead food that can be frozen.

If you have planned your menu with recipes that can be made in installments, make anything that can be frozen and kept until you need it now.

Confirm food made by others & your assistants.

If having a potluck or if family and friends are contributing to the party food, contact them to confirm that they are still able to do so and make sure you both understand who is providing the serving utensils, and other requirements such as an electrical socket for a crockpot.

Confirm your helpers at the party and tell them exactly what you expect of them.

2 Days Before

Go Grocery Shopping

Prepare Party Favor Bags

Start Practicing Thank You – Now is a good time to discuss kindness and showing gratitude for any and all gifts with the birthday girl or boy.

Mow the Lawn for an Outdoor Party

Get First Aid Kit – if you already have one, check the supplies and put it where it will be handy in the case of an emergency.

The Day Before the Party

Remind assistants – contact your helpers to jog their memory and make sure they are available, know what is expected of them and when they are to show up.

Make or pick up the birthday cake – also make sure you have candles & something to use to light them.

Prepare food for menu – make as much on the menu as possible now, or at least do the prep work in advance such as chopping vegetables, marinating meat, making sauces, etc.

Refrigerate beverages and chill wines & beer.

Buy ice. Plan on 1 pound per guest.

Clean and tidy rooms that will be used

Prepare bathroom & coat room – put a sign on the coat room and bathroom door so guests don't have to ask. Put out hand towels, soap and extra bathroom tissue.

Prepare name tags for guests if they don't know each other.

Prepare stations for food, beverages and craft/play areas for kids' party. Make sure you have clean serving dishes and utensils for everything you have planned to serve. Get crock pots ready to keep food hot.

Day of the Party

Pick up balloons & flowers.

You can delegate this task if the person knows what the arrangements should look like.

If you pick the items up early enough, you leave time for mistakes to be fixed. It's always a good idea to call them and confirm the items are ready before you leave the house.

Organize the party areas & decorate.

If you're having the party at your house, arrange the furniture and set up the dining table, activity stations and gift table. Put up decorations.

If going to a different venue for the party, arrange everything you'll need for each area in different tote bags or storage boxes so you know if you have everything you'll need and make it easier to delegate jobs to your assistants. (I've even made a rough drawing of the activity station with labels to put in the box so assistants know exactly what needs to be done with as little direction as possible in the chaos.)

Prepare the party food.

Set up the buffet or display table with your cupcakes, beverages, snacks, party favors and decorations.

Set cake on display table early enough that it will be room temperature when eating it.

Give directions to anyone who will be doing food preparation during the party.

Prepare the bar.

Make sure wine & beer are chilled.

Prepare the bar area:

- decorations
- straws
- glasses
- garnishes

Get things ready to make list of gifts.

Have a pen and paper ready to write down gifts & giver when opened, and give instructions to your assistant if delegating this task.

2 to 3 Days Later

Send thank you cards to guests for their gifts and mention something wonderful that happened with them at the party.

Thank assistants specifically for what they did & offer lots of praise so they'll be willing to do it again next party! (Even if you gave them a thank you gift at the end of the party, it never hurts to thank them profusely once again.)

If your child is old enough, get them to send thank you cards, e-cards or texts to everyone with specifics, such as the gift they received.

Good luck with your planning, and I hope your party is the most amazing ever!