



A Shared Vision

Partners in Pediatric Blindness and Visual Impairment

How to Plan a Successful Birthday Party

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Birthday parties and other special occasions are an important part of our culture but can be challenging for children with special needs. Parties are noisy, the setting is typically unfamiliar, people are talking and moving around the room, and unexpected decorations are hanging everywhere. There is a lot to make sense of for a young child with a visual impairment. Your child's energy may be devoted to making sense of the commotion, leaving little left for having fun. Here are some proven strategies that will make birthday parties and other similar events more enjoyable for both you and your child.

Communication Is Key

The moment you start planning your child's birthday or you receive an invitation to attend someone else's, start talking about the experience right away so your child knows what to expect. Explain why birthdays are celebrated and what happens at a party. There may be games, snacks, cake and ice cream, giving gifts, unwrapping gifts, goodie bags, party hats, and

decorations. Talk about the event and what it may be like in terms of noise, numbers of people, and possible activities.

Practice singing “Happy Birthday” together. There are several ways you can teach the song so it’s meaningful to your child.

- Sing the song while bouncing your child on your lap or clapping hands together (using hand-under-hand technique).
- Sing while playing with a pretend cake and candles. If you don’t have a toy set of cake and candles, make your own out of play dough or other materials you may have. Pretend to blow the candles out when you finish singing the song.
- Sing the song and stop before the last word to encourage your child to fill it in: “Happy Birthday to ____!”

You can even have a pretend party with your child’s favorite dolls and stuffed animals so your child feels more comfortable with the activities and can anticipate what may happen.

Read About Birthday Parties

Another way to prepare your child is to read books together about birthday parties before you go. Here are some of our favorites:

- [Happy Birthday – DK Baby Touch and Feel Book](#)
- [Where is Baby’s Birthday Cake?](#) by Karen Katz
- [Birthday Counting](#) by Barbara Barbieri McGrath
- [How Do Dinosaurs Say Happy Birthday?](#) by Jane Yolen
- [If You Give a Pig a Party](#) by Laura Numeroff
- [Birthday Monsters](#) by Sandra Boynton
- [Grumpy Monkey Party Time](#) by Suzanne Lang

You can also make a story box or bag filled with things related to attending a party or another large gathering. Include items that are related to the event such as gift bows, party hats, noise makers, and balloons. Read about what happens at a party and play with items your child may encounter to make the experience much more successful. When the party is over, make an experience book about the birthday and fill it with things your child experienced – the crinkly tissue paper, a big red bow, the sparkly confetti, a cupcake wrapper, candles – so you can talk about and remember the party together while touching the objects in the book.

Explore with Your Senses

Let your child engage with items that are typically associated with birthday parties: wrapping paper, gift bags, tissue paper, bows, ribbon, cards, party hats and blowers, candles, and decorations (e.g., streamers, balloons, confetti, piñatas). Tell your child about the different colors and prints on the wrapping paper and bags (gifts are meant to look pretty!). Explain what the decorations look like – is there a theme? Give contextual information that your child may not be able to see; these details are important building blocks for understanding the whole concept of a birthday party.

Encourage your child to touch the different materials. Talk about the different textures and even the sounds they make – the shiny wrapping paper, the crinkly tissue paper. Blow on a party horn to hear if it sounds loud or soft.



Even candles can be experienced ahead of time. Let your child touch an unlit candle – can you feel difference between the wax and the wick? Explain why candles go on birthday cakes and are blown out. Talk about HOW to blow out candles and other safety considerations like not touching or leaning in too close to the open flame.

These activities offer the perfect time to introduce new vocabulary and concepts to your child.

- New words or phrases to introduce, e.g. surprise, party, wrap, gift/present, balloon, ribbon, cake, happy birthday, candle, thank you;
- The balloon is SMALL but it gets BIG when we BLOW it up;
- How old are you? I'm three!
- Directional concepts like "in" and "out" with gift bags or boxes;
- Talk about how you OPEN a present. It's different than opening a door.

Wrapping Gifts

Why do we wrap gifts? To make them a surprise for the person receiving the gift. The gift can't be seen by anyone until it's unwrapped. This might be a difficult concept to explain to a child who is visually impaired.

Allowing your child to help with wrapping gifts gives them the opportunity to build important skills such as object permanence (an object still exists even if it's covered up or hidden) and joint attention (shared interest in an object or event), to increase vocabulary (see list above) and to set the stage for more complex pretend play.

Wrapping gifts also provides lots of great opportunities for using fine motor skills: folding, ripping, cutting with child-size scissors, using a tape dispenser, removing the sticker from the back of a bow, tying ribbons, etc.

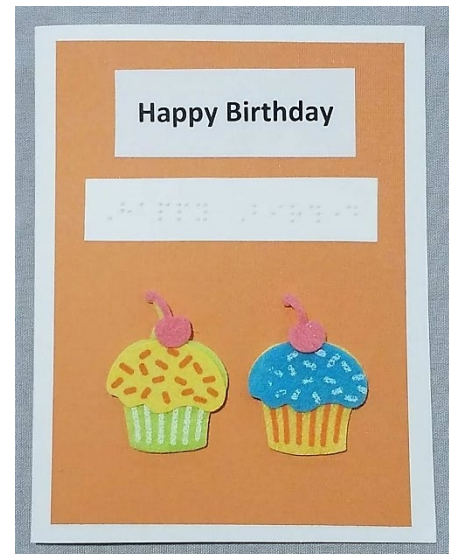
Use fun gift wrap like mylar or tissue paper as they have an interesting texture and make lots of sound – many children love this! Use tape and ribbons sparingly. It's hard enough to unwrap a present; don't make it more difficult for the child to open it.

Gift bags are often much easier and don't take as long to open. This may be a consideration during the holidays or if there are many gifts to be opened.

Take toys out the packaging before gift-wrapping them. It's no fun for a child to open a gift only to find it's in a box or plastic that he or she can't feel through. It's hard to wait patiently for a toy to be removed from the packaging. Insert batteries so the gift "works" as soon as it's unwrapped.

Make birthday cards by encouraging your child to scribble a message (in braille or print) and sign his or her name. Foam stickers or other tactile objects (buttons, pompoms, sequins, etc.) are also a fun way to decorate and personalize cards and gift wrap. One of my daughter's friends printed both her and Maddie's names on a card and then glued yarn over the print to make it tactile. It was such a sweet gesture from a six-year-old.

When there are a lot of gifts to be shared, such as at Christmas, braille gift labels ahead of time and distribute to family and friends to affix to their gifts for the child. All children love to sneak peaks under the Christmas tree to find gifts with their names; a child with visual impairment is no different! If your child isn't ready for braille or print, use a tactile symbol on his or her gifts such as a small pompom, or ornament affixed to the tag or package. Making tags from corrugated paper or textured paper is another way to make your child's gifts identifiable.



Opening Gifts

If necessary, familiarize your child with the process of opening gifts by practicing on a gift or two before the party. Talk about how to open a present, taking some time to look at the gift before

setting it down and moving onto the next gift. Your child may not realize that there are multiple presents to be unwrapped or that guests are excited to watch the process.

Build extra time into the process of unwrapping gifts to give your child a few minutes to explore and feel each one before it's taken away and replaced with another unwrapped gift.

Take a few minutes before your child's party to sit with your eyes closed and really imagine, from beginning to end, what it might be like for your child when opening presents. Consider the age of the children attending the party – younger children tend to get very excited and want to “help” open others' gifts. They're also not always patient about waiting their turn to give their gift. Consider the area where the gifts will be opened (crowded, loud, open, quiet?) and the time of day (will your child be well rested?). What things can you control to best meet your child's needs? Is there anything that might be particularly stressful that you can “practice” or talk about ahead of time? Does your child have any tactile or sound aversions that could make the gift frightening? If so, work out a system together so your child can anticipate the texture or sound component (“This gift may make a funny sound!”, “There's a scratchy part on this one!”)



Practice manners! Role play, saying “Thank you!” after each gift has been unwrapped and other appropriate responses to gifts. What should your child say if he gets something he already has or isn't particularly fond of?

Let an adult sit near your child to describe what's happening, what the gifts are and help hone in on your child's response. This person can help put bows in a pile or collect wrapping paper for recycling. Give the child a bit of time to feel the gifts – remember it may be difficult for a young child to let go of the gift without playing with it first.

It's Better to Give Than Receive

Giving gifts is a totally different concept than receiving gifts. Too often, a child with visual impairment is in the position of recipient but is not as tuned in to the joy of giving, nor of understanding how happy receiving a gift can make the recipient.

Shop together for a gift and let your child help with wrapping and making the card (print or braille). It's OK if the gift isn't wrapped perfectly! The recipient will surely appreciate the effort. This is also a great opportunity to talk about giving to others.

Talk to your child about what makes him or her happy and then what makes Daddy, Mommy, and siblings happy. How can these things be turned into gifts for each of them?

Consider homemade gifts – your child’s picture or handprints, cookies he or she helped make, performing a song – so your child learns that gifts don’t always need to be purchased.

What to Wear to a Party

If wearing fancy “party” clothes is challenging for your child, choose materials that are less irritating. Try cotton or silk, rather than lace and tulle, a polo shirt, and nice pants rather than a suit and tie. It’s better to have a comfortable child than a fussy one!

However, for some children, dressing up may be a special treat. Playing dress-up with tutus, cowboy hats, suit coats or twirly skirts can help a child look forward to special events.



And Don’t Forget

- When your child receives an invitation to a party, you’ll want to RSVP right away. Let the host or hostess know that your child may need to take breaks or leave the party early.
- If possible, arrive a little early so your child can explore the environment and get a feel for where things are before it is full of guests. Look for a quiet spot in case you need to escape the noise for a while. Noise-cancelling headphones may be helpful if your child is sensitive to noise.
- If your child has a close friend or cousin who is also attending the party, they may be able to help your child navigate a new setting and interact with others. This is an important skill to work on as preparation for the day your child wants to attend parties without you. Learning to pair up with a trusted peer is a great strategy for making parties less stressful and more fun!
- All that physical touch at parties can be overwhelming to a child who’s visually impaired. Rehearse how to respond to relatives or close friends who may want to give your child a big hug and kiss. It is OK to suggest a high five, fist bump or just a handshake versus a hug.

How to Celebrate Your Child's First or Second Birthday

If it's your child's first or second birthday, the party you plan might celebrate your own survival of those first years, or even your child's if they're medically fragile. Raising a child with a visual impairment is a huge accomplishment!

Rather than throwing a big party, you can start introducing the concept of a birthday party in fun, manageable pieces to a very young toddler who is blind or visually impaired. Think about how you can celebrate with mini activities throughout the day or week. Here are some activities you can do with your child:

- Kick, crinkle or squeeze a mylar balloon during playtime.
- Offer opportunities to touch ribbons, wrapping paper, gift bags and boxes.
- Enjoy small tastes of cake or ice cream if your child is eating by mouth OR touching/smashing/poking birthday cake with hands (or feet) if your child is not an oral eater. You can also put the cake into a Ziplock baggie if it's difficult for your child to have messy hands.
- Sing the "Happy Birthday" song during playtime and mealtime – you don't have to wait until "cake and ice cream time."
- Think of something your child enjoys and how you can "change it up" for his or her special day. Does she love balls? Add new textured balls to her collection. Play with balls outside instead of inside. Bounce on a new big ball. It doesn't have to be anything fancy – just something that's different from or more fun than a "regular day."