

Parents

Picture-Perfect Birthday

By Katie Hurst

Most moms have been there: Scrolling through Pinterest or scanning Facebook when they spot a picture of a child's

birthday party that looks like it came straight out of a magazine. Matching handmade décor. Bite-sized themed party food. Smiling, well-behaved children dressed like dolls.

Unfortunately, these picture-perfect scenes are a stark contrast to many birthday realities.

“For my 7-year-old, we did a party at our house and it was a disaster,” said Amy McMullen, Mount Pleasant mother of three (including 7-year-old Elle, the Cover Kids click-to-vote winner featured on this edition's cover). “We'll never do it again. We had about 15 7-year-olds. I opened the door and all they wanted to do was run in circles.”

The truth is, no children's party is perfect, despite what you see online. But that doesn't mean you have to write them off altogether, either. We caught up with some local party professionals and experienced moms to get insiders' tips on how to pull off a seemingly perfect party, without pulling out your hair. Here are five easy steps to making your next party memorable and fun for your child while saving your bank account, and your sanity.

Step 1: Choose a theme and decide on details

[Fun themes](#) can help set children's parties apart. Acclaimed wedding and party planner Tara Guérard, owner of [Soirée](#) event planning, recommends brainstorming theme ideas a few months in advance with your children's interests in mind. Popular themes include superheroes, princesses, pirates and tea parties.

For younger children, including those with first birthdays, try thinking outside the box for theme ideas. Maybe a theme incorporating the parent's jobs, family hobbies or even the simpler interests of the baby — bubbles, balls or a favorite stuffed animal.



“When I was planning my son's first birthday, at first I just picked a theme that I thought was cute,” said Kendal Moore, a James Island mom. “Then I decided I should pick something that I could look back on and I could tell him about, something that would make me think of him at this time and what he loves the most. He loves his wagon probably more than anything — so I chose a little red wagon theme.”

Once you've picked the theme, decide on a few solid colors to decorate with, Guérard said. Make one table your centerpiece table and start collecting or making party items that match your color and theme—table linens, vases, plates, cups, etc. Guérard recommends picking simple items in solid colors, rather than splashing your theme on everything in sight.

“It really comes down to the details,” Guérard said. “That's what makes it memorable and gives a cute look to it all. I would do simple, solid-colored plates rather than the birthday-themed ones you can buy. You'll still be pulling your theme together by purchasing things that are in your colors. When you put all that together on your table, it starts creating a look.”

To keep things manageable, choose one or two parts of the party you'd like to make special, Guérard suggests. Go all out on cute cupcakes or make a customized banner or water bottle labels with your child's name on them, but don't feel like every aspect has to be unique.

“I think that's all you need to do for kids,” she said. “They don't know or care and the adults are honestly just excited that the child is being worn out and gets to get out of the house and has something fun to do. It's nice and cute to have these picture perfect parties with a few fun details, but don't stress out over it.”

Step 2: Send the invitations

Birthday invitations are meant to convey more than just where to go and when to show up. Cindy Grosso, owner of the [Charleston School of Protocol and Etiquette](#), said if done correctly, the invitation can save you a world of grief and miscommunication come party time.

Send the invites two to three weeks before the party with a specific reply-by date that's a few days out, she suggests. If parents or siblings are also invited to the party, indicate so on the invitation by using wording like “siblings welcome” or “John Smith and family.” If children are to be dropped off at the party, specify by listing a pick-up and drop-off times.



“The invitation is key to communicating who is welcome at the party,” Grosso said. “Generally, people don't want to do the wrong thing, like sending siblings when they're not invited. They just don't know what they're supposed to do.

“It's your job to inform them in the invitation. Otherwise what winds up happening is a miscommunication that can lead to hard feelings on both sides.”

Generally, parents are expected to stay at the party with children under 5 years old, Grosso said. For children this young, the party time should only last about an hour and happen before 1 p.m. or after 3 p.m. to avoid popular nap times. Parties for older children can last a little longer, about two hours maximum, she suggests.

When it comes to the guest list, invite your child's closest friends, but don't forget to keep your budget in mind.

“Some people say if your child is turning 6, invite seven friends to the party,” Grosso said. “Basically, their age plus one for the guest list. But you also need to take into consideration budget and manageability restraints. You might not be able to manage that many children at a party on your own.”

Step 3: Plan food and activities

After throwing more than 400 birthday parties with her mobile party business [Teacups and Trucks](#), Corrie Silvers knows there's nothing worse at a party than a group of kids with nothing to do. Sidestep this disaster by planning age-appropriate activities beforehand—lots of them.

“If kids are running, screaming, yelling through your house, it doesn't matter how pretty things look,” Silvers said. “You need to be ready to roll right into another activity quickly. It's better to have a lot more planned than not enough.”

For the birthday parties she plans, Silvers creates games that go with the party's theme, such as secret spy missions and princess crowning ceremonies. However, there are a few tried and true activities that work with any party.

“For girls, any kind of crafts will usually keep them interested,” she said. “Anything that they can make, like flowerpots are popular right now, or jewelry. With boys, try scavenger hunts or target practice. It's all about action and mystery. Put a craft in front of boys and they will not do it. It has to be action-packed.”



You can always bring in the professionals for some extra help keeping the kids occupied. A range of entertainment is available for hire—from magicians and clowns to jump castles and face painters. Read reviews online before booking, Guérard suggests, and remember to budget for gratuity for entertainers.

If you're trying to keep costs low, food is an easy place to save, Silvers said. Plan the party in between meal times and stick to cake and ice cream and a few light snacks.

“Unless your party is at meal time, you can get away with not providing food,” she said. “I would recommend having snacks of some sort though — fruits, veggies, crackers — finger foods that are easier to eat. Parents have told me their No. 1 pet peeve is when parties don't provide food for the adults. So if parents are there, you should feed them, too.”

Step 4: Party Time

When guests arrive, have a sit-down activity ready for the kids to work on while they wait for the rest of the group, Silvers said. Coloring sheets or small craft items at a table work to keep them occupied before the games begin.

Allow the first 15-20 minutes of the party for kids to work on this project while they greet each other.

Once all the guests have arrived, start your planned games and activities. If one child acts disinterested or refuses to take part, Silvers said that's okay, let them sit one out. If none of the kids want to play the game, cut it short and move onto a different activity.

If the kids get a little too rambunctious and out of control, regain the group's focus by sitting down in a circle with them.

“Something about being on their level really works,” Silvers said. “Getting them on the same level as a group and being at eye level with them brings their focus back in.”

If all else fails, try silly dancing or games with a parachute — an activity that kids love and also helps get the energy out. Above all, remember to keep your cool, Silvers said.

“You have to have patience,” she said. “The kids aren't in a structured environment, it's the weekend, it's a birthday party, there's lots of sugar involved and kids are just wild. Have patience.”

Reserve the last 30 minutes of the party for snacks and cake, Silvers said. If you're going to open presents at the party, which she doesn't recommend for younger children, you can do it at the end of the party, also.



If you're giving out goody bags for guests, hand them to the children as they leave the party, Grosso recommends. Make sure to have a few extras in case you have guests who forgot to RSVP.

Step 5: Send Thank You Cards

According to formal etiquette, a thank you card is not required if your child opens the gift in front of the giver and thanks them for it in person, Grosso said. However, she still recommends having children write thank you cards so they can practice the "attitude of gratitude."

"For children, I think you can never go wrong writing a thank you," she said.

Thank you cards should mention the specific item the child was given and a sentence or two about how the gift was enjoyed. If children are too young to write the notes themselves, Grosso recommends having them draw a picture on the card or sign their name or initials. That way they can still reflect on what they were given and practice the manners of thanking others.

"The definition of confidence is the faith or belief that you are acting in a proper manner. Manners are all about confidence that what you are doing is correct," Grosso said.

"When you teach your child to write a thank you note, you're not teaching them to write a note, you're teaching an attitude. It's not about what to do, it's about what to be."

Where to party

Want to opt out of hosting a birthday party at your home? No problem. There are plenty of local party spots that will take the hosting and cleanup duties off your hands and keep your kids entertained to boot.

Active

Golf Party: Is your little one into golf? Make this sport party-friendly with activities like golf scavenger hunts, bubble machine golf and water balloon golf. Or incorporate golf instruction and driving range time for older kids.

Who Does Them: [Grasshopper Golf](#); [Scott's World of Golf](#)

Price Range: \$195-\$200

Skating Party: Zip around the rink on ice or on wheels with a classic skating party. Let the kids skate out their energy before cake and present time in a private party room.

Who Does Them: [Carolina Ice Palace](#); [Hot Wheels Skating Center](#) Price Range: \$89-\$160, including admission and skate rentals



Bowling Party: This retro sport is back in a big way and kids will enjoy knocking down the pins, playing in the arcade and eating pizza till their hearts content.

Who Does Them: [Sparians River Bowl Charleston](#); [The Alley](#); [AMF Triangle Lanes](#) Price Range: \$250 and up

Gymnastics Party: Let the kids run, jump, twist and dance with gymnastic activities before cake and present time. Little ones will enjoy games and trampolines while older kids can take on obstacle courses and foam pits.

Who Does Them: [Choice Gymnastics](#); [The Little Gym](#); [Gymnastics Academy of Charleston](#); [GymMasters Gym Academy](#); [East Cooper Gymnastics](#); [Gymboree](#); [Rolly Pollies of Summerville](#) Price Range: \$125-\$250

Dance Party: Rather than turning on the music and letting the kids do their own thing, host a party at a dance studio and qualified teachers will lead the party goers in their own dance routine and games.

Who Does Them: [Once Upon A Ballet](#); [Jazzercise](#); [Dance Moves](#), [Daniel Island Hip Hop](#), [Berkley County/West Ashley School of Performing Arts](#) Price Range: \$125 and up

Karate Party: If the birthday child is a karate enthusiast or a beginner, a party at a local karate studio can be a great way to enjoy the sport with friends. Kids will love learning the different moves from the experts along with playing fun karate games. The birthday child will even get to help cut the cake with a martial arts sword.

Who Does Them: [Coastal Kenpo Karate](#); [Charleston Taekwondo](#); [Carolina Karate](#) Price Range: \$150 and up

Party at the Park: When the weather's nice, a park can be a great venue for a simple but fun get-together. Let the kids play on the playground or bring your own games and activities to keep them busy. Rent a picnic shelter for a guaranteed spot or arrive early to claim one that's available.

Who Does Them: [James Island County Park](#); [North Charleston Wannamaker County Park](#); [Mount Pleasant Palmetto Islands County Park](#)



Price Range: \$175-\$300 for full-day shelter rentals (free on first-come, first-serve basis)

Water Park Party: Summer birthday boys and girls are in luck! Charleston County Parks offer birthday party packages at their water parks May-September.

Who Does Them: [Whirlin Waters Adventure Waterpark](#); [Splash Island Waterpark](#); [Splash Zone Waterpark](#)

Price Range: \$175-\$325

Sports Game Party: Does your child have a favorite local sports team? Take the whole party to a game if the sport is in season and let the kids cheer on the team together. Most include a private party area with food and cake options along with a special birthday announcement for your child during the game.

Who Does Them: [Charleston Battery](#); [Charleston Riverdogs](#); [South Carolina Stingrays](#)

Price Range: \$140-\$275

Artsy

Pottery Party: Whether molding one-of-a-kind masterpieces or painting pre-made creations, kids can let their creativity soar at pottery-themed birthday parties.

Who Does Them: [Earth Art Pottery](#); [Art Buzz Kids](#); [The Artists' Loft School](#); [4Cats Arts Studio](#); [Creative Spark Center for the Arts](#); [Kiln' Time](#); [Charleston Museum](#)

Price Range: \$130-\$275

Jewelry-Making Party: Each child can choose their own beads and make their own wearable creation. Crafting bracelets and necklaces will keep them entertained and provide a one-of-a-kind party favor for each child.

Who Does Them: [It Fitz Jewelry](#); [Creative Spark Center for the Arts](#)

Price Range: \$130-\$275



Painting Party: Let the kids unleash their inner artist by putting brush to canvas at a painting birthday party. The creativity will keep the group entertained and each child can take home their own work of art.

Who Does Them: [Kids Art of Charleston](#); [Party and Paint](#); [Bottles 'n Brushes](#); [4Cats Arts Studio](#); [Art Buzz Kids](#); [KidSpaces Interactive Art](#); [Fear No Easel](#) Price Range: \$250-\$275

Animal Lovers

Horse Party: What kid doesn't love a pony ride? Get the whole farm experience by hosting your party at a nearby stable for riding lessons, hay rides, games and more.

Who Does Them: [Black Bottom Stables](#); [Del Mar Plantation](#); [Middleton Equestrian Center](#) Price Range: About \$300

Wildlife Party: Don't let the lack of a local zoo stop you from inviting the animal kingdom to your children's party. A few other place around town will let your kids party like animals while learning about animals.

Who Does Them: [Bee City Honeybee Farm and Petting Zoo](#); [Cypress Gardens](#); [Magnolia Plantation](#)

Price Range: \$75 and up

Pet Party: Got a cat or dog lover? Host a birthday "paw-ty" at the Charleston Animal Society and all proceeds will benefit animals in its shelter. The party includes a visit from a shelter animal, animal-related games and crafts and the birthday child gets to name the next adoptable animal.

Who Does Them: [Charleston Animal Society](#) Price Range: \$250

For Girls

Princess Parties: Dress-up parties are always a hit with little girls, especially when they're channeling their inner princess. A few spots invite children to meet their favorite princess, have a princess makeover or take a ride around town in their own horse-drawn chariot.

Who Does Them: [Princess of Tides](#); [Old Towne Carriage Company](#); [Children's Museum of the Lowcountry](#)

Price Range: \$100-\$280



Baking Parties: Turn the birthday treats into an activity by letting the children in on the baking. Bake and decorate cupcakes for a fun party with a sweet ending.

Who Does Them: [Cupcake](#); [Children's Museum of the Lowcountry](#)

Price Range: \$250-\$280

Doll Parties: Guests can bring their favorite dolls to add to the fun of the party. Whether making their own hair accessories for their American Girl doll or choosing a history doll to dress in period clothing, girls will love partying with their little friends.

Who Does Them: [Princess of Tides](#); [Charleston Museum](#)

Price Range: \$100-\$170

Tea Parties: Let the girls dress up in their finest hats and boas for a traditional tea party with all the frills. Guests will snack on fine tea sandwiches and drink out of porcelain tea cups and maybe learn some teatime etiquette along the way.

Who Does Them: [Charleston Museum](#); [Charleston Tea Parties](#); [Time Well Spent](#) Price Range: \$300-\$350

For Boys

Lego Party: Little boys will love taking on a Lego project with their friends and building something from the ground up. Parties can be customized with a theme including Star Wars, Pirates, City, Princess, Harry Potter and more.

Who Does Them: [Brick by Brick](#); [Daniel Island Discovery Center](#) Price Range: \$200-\$400

Firefighter Party: Kids can slide down the fire pole and learn about fire safety and fire fighting while having their party at the North Charleston Fire Museum.

Who Does Them: [North Charleston Fire Museum](#)

Price Range: \$175



Pirate Party: Treasure hunts and storytelling are sure to keep the kids entertained as they go on a pirate adventure for their birthday party.

Who Does Them: [Charleston Pirate Tours](#), [Children's Museum of the Lowcountry](#); [Charleston Musuem](#)

Price Range: \$150-\$280

Video Game Party: If your child loves video games, a mobile game theater can bring all the entertainment the kids will need. With multiple LCD screens and every gaming system you can think of, all the guests can get in on the fun.

Who Does Them: [Monster Mobile Game Theater](#); [Gameplay Express](#); [Charleston Video Game Parties](#)

Price Range: \$300-\$350

Other

Mad Science Party: Invite a mad scientist to your party and let your kids have fun while learning with some whacky hands-on science experiments. Kids can make slippery slime, silly putty and superballs or go for a hovercraft ride, watch a rocket launch and learn the wonders of dry ice.

Who Does Them: [Mad Science Charleston](#) Price Range: \$200 and up

Pizza and Games Party: Going to a celebration-fun zone is a classic choice that's always a crowd pleaser. Older kids especially will love running wild with arcade games, mini golf, go-karts, laser tag, paintball and more at any of these fun centers around town.

Who Does Them: [Blackbeard's Cove](#); [Celebration Town](#); [Monkey Joe's](#); [ChuckE Cheese](#); [GloZone Fun Center](#); [Frankies Fun Park](#)

Price Range: \$150- \$300

