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Birthday party games for kids

Thirty games, sorted by age and by the moment in the party they fix. No shopping, no printing, and no rules nobody can hear.

The short version

You need three games and a fourth in your pocket. Pick them against the age of the children coming and against the moment in the party you are trying to fill, not from a list of favourites. Our party ideas by age covers the rest of the afternoon for each age band.

Under eight, a good game needs no explaining. Eight to ten, it needs a rule and a winner. Eleven and up, it needs a secret or a scoreboard, because at that age looking silly for nothing is a real risk and the game has to be worth taking it.

If the party is in your living room, the ideas for a party at home show which of these fit a small space, and the party schedule shows where each game sits in a two hour afternoon.

Read the room before you pick a game

A party has a shape, and it is the same shape every time.

The first twenty minutes are low and nervous, because half the guests are still in the hallway. Then it climbs. Somewhere after food it peaks, and if nothing stops it, it peaks into shouting. Then it has to come down, because at the end there are parents at the door and a child who needs to be able to say goodbye.

Most bad party moments are a game played in the wrong part of that curve. A running game during arrivals excludes the four children who are still taking their shoes off. A quiet seated game at the peak is a rule nobody hears.

Ten birthday party games for five to seven year olds

At this age a game works if a child can join it halfway through without asking a question.

Keep every rule to one sentence. Avoid teams. Avoid anything where losing means sitting out for eight minutes, because the child sitting out is the child who starts crying at the cake.

1. **Musical statues.** Music on, everybody moves, music off, everybody freezes. Nobody is ever out. The last one moving picks the next song instead.
2. **Sleeping lions.** Every child lies down and tries not to move. You walk between them being funny. Five minutes of calm on demand, which is worth more than it sounds.
3. **Pass the parcel, one layer per child.** Count the layers to the guest list, not to a nice round number, so every single child unwraps exactly one.
4. **What is the time, Mr Wolf.** One child faces away, the others creep forward, and the whole thing resets with a shout. Works in a hallway.

5. **Duck, duck, goose.** Old, still perfect, and it needs a floor and nothing else. Best with eight children or fewer.
6. **Balloon in the air.** One balloon, and the floor is lava. Add a second balloon when it gets easy. Add a third when it gets boring.
7. **The three cups.** Hide a small toy under one of three cups, shuffle slowly, and let them point. Ridiculously effective, and it fits on a coffee table.
8. **Freeze pose.** Musical statues with an instruction. Freeze like a robot, a tree, a dinosaur. Changing the pose each round buys three extra rounds.
9. **Beanbag walk.** A beanbag on the head, walk to the wall and back. A rolled sock works. Slow, silly, and it uses up eight minutes cleanly.
10. **Simon says.** The one game where being out is over in twenty seconds, because the next round starts immediately.

One rule for this age bandNever run a game where the same child wins twice in a row. Change something small before the third round. The point is not fairness, it is that the other children stop trying at exactly that moment.

Ten birthday party games for eight to ten year olds

Eight to ten is the sweet spot. They can hold a rule, they want to win, and they are not yet too cool to shout.

1. **Wink murder.** One child is the murderer and kills by winking. Everybody else is trying to spot them. Quiet, tense, and it runs itself.
2. **Charades from a bowl.** Write twenty things on paper before the party. Films, animals, jobs. Two teams, one minute each.
3. **Minefield.** Cushions on the floor, one child blindfolded, their partner shouting directions. Swap over halfway.
4. **The chocolate game.** Roll a six, put on a hat and scarf, and cut one square of chocolate with a knife and fork until somebody else rolls a six.
5. **Human knot.** Eight children, everybody grabs two hands that are not next to them, untangle without letting go. Loud and genuinely hard.
6. **Categories against the clock.** Name a category, go round the circle, one word each, no repeats, no pausing. Animals, then countries, then sweets.
7. **Balloon, hands behind backs.** Keep it off the floor using heads, knees and shoulders only. Two teams, one balloon, immediate chaos.
8. **Blind taste test.** Five things on spoons, blindfold, guess. Check allergies first, and write the five down so you can check them twice.
9. **Cup stacking relay.** Ten plastic cups, build a pyramid, take it down, run back, tag the next one. Nobody waits long.
10. **Spoon and ball relay.** A ping-pong ball on a spoon, across the room and back. Add a turn around a chair when they get good.

The best party game is not the cleverest one. It is the one where every child is doing something at the same moment.

Ten birthday party games for eleven to fifteen year olds

Here the difficulty changes completely. It is not attention, it is embarrassment.

An eleven year old will not do a silly voice in front of nine people for no reason. Give them a reason, which means a secret to protect, a score to chase, or a phone in their hand, and the same child will do all of it.

1. **Werewolf.** The whole group, a hidden pair, and an argument every round. One game fills forty minutes and they will ask for it again next year.
2. **How well do you know the birthday kid.** Twenty questions written in advance about your own child. The winner gets to ask the twenty-first.
3. **Heads up.** A word on a phone held to the forehead, the room shouting clues. Two minutes per turn.
4. **Challenge run.** A sequence of short dares and puzzles, one after another, with a reason to reach the end.
5. **Photo scavenger hunt.** Twelve things to photograph around the house and garden, in teams, against a clock. No prizes needed.
6. **Thirty second drawing.** One word, thirty seconds, everybody draws at once, the room votes. Run it as a bracket and it is suddenly a tournament.
7. **Lip sync, in pairs.** Pairs, because nobody has to stand up alone. Pairs is the single change that makes this age band play.
8. **Two truths and a lie.** Works with children who half know each other, which is most parties at this age.
9. **Karaoke bracket.** Not open karaoke, which dies. A bracket, with rounds, with the room voting.
10. **Would you rather, across the room.** Two impossible options, everybody stands on the side they chose, then the two sides argue. Ten minutes, no preparation.

Three formations that fix a game

Before you change the game, change the shape of the room. It fixes more parties than a new game does.

Circle

Everybody can see everybody. Use it for anything with turns, and for the first game of the party, because a circle tells a child who has just walked in exactly where to stand.

Two lines, facing

Instant teams with no negotiation, which removes the two minutes of arguing that ruins most relay games. Also the fastest way to raise the noise level on purpose.

Pairs

The fix for the child who will not join in. In a circle they are performing for nine people. In a pair they are talking to one, and almost every reluctant child plays.

How to run a game so it actually works

1. **Say the rule once, standing up**
   One sentence, said loudly, before anything is handed out. A rule explained while children are already holding a balloon is a rule nobody hears.
2. **Start it yourself**
   Do the first turn, badly and loudly. Children copy what they have just seen, not what they were told.
3. **Set an end before you start**
   Five rounds, or one song, or two minutes. A game with no stated end runs until it dies, and everybody remembers the dying part.
4. **Stop it one round early**
   The hardest one to actually do. When it is going well, do one more and then stop. They will ask to play it again, which is the whole point.
5. **Never make a child sit out for long**
   If a game eliminates, the eliminated child gets a job. Judge, music, counting. Anything except a chair.

What to do when a game dies

You will know within about fifteen seconds. Two children drift off, and then it is over.

Do not try to rescue it. A rescued game takes four minutes and lands back where it was. Do this instead, in this order:

- [ ] Change the formation. Circle to pairs, or sitting to standing.
- [ ] If that does not work, start the pocket game. No announcement, no apology, just begin it.
- [ ] If two games in a row have died, the room is too hot or too full. Open a window or move them into a different space, even a worse one. The change itself is the fix.

Your pocket game should need nothing at all. Categories against the clock is the best one for eight and up. Simon says is the best one for under eight.

Games for a big group, and games for four children

Group size changes which games work more than age does. You only know the number once replies are in, which is why the invitation wording needs a clear RSVP date.

Which games survive which group size

Group	What works	What to avoid
Four to six	Turn-taking games. Pass the parcel, the three cups, charades, blind taste test.	Team games. Two against two is an argument, not a game.
Seven to twelve	Almost anything. This is the size every party game was designed for.	Games with one long individual turn while eleven children watch.
Thirteen and up	Everybody-at-once games. Musical statues, freeze pose, categories, photo hunts, werewolf.	Pass the parcel and duck duck goose. At this size the group is the waiting time.

If you are planning the whole afternoon and not just the games, the four week birthday party checklist has the run sheet that these games sit inside. If the big game is going to be a hunt, the scavenger hunt

routes and clues are in their own article.

The full guide, with the questions parents ask: kidbd.app/blog/birthday-party-games-for-kids