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Birthday scavenger hunt ideas

Build the route first and the clues almost write themselves. A route for a small house, twenty clues you can copy, and what to put at the end so it does not finish in an argument.

The short version

A scavenger hunt is a route with clues hung on it. Walk the route first, in your own house, counting the stops. Then write one clue per stop, each one pointing at the next.

Eight stops for five to seven year olds, ten to twelve for eight and up, and one thing at the end that the whole group opens together. That is the entire method, and almost every hunt that dies was written in the opposite order.

The route is the game, not the clues

Parents write the clues first because the clues are the fun part. It is the wrong end of the job.

A hunt written clue first ends up with six good rhymes pointing at three rooms, a group that crosses the kitchen four times, and a last clue that sends nine excited children back past the uncut cake. The clues were fine. The route was never walked.

So walk it. Start where the children already are, move away from the food, use the hallway and the stairs to burn a minute of noise, and come back to the room you want them in at the end. Number the stops as you go, on a scrap of paper, and only then sit down and write.

A route for a small house

You do not need a big house. You need objects, because a small house has few rooms and every child guesses the room instantly. The same thinking runs through our ideas for a party at home.

Point a clue at the washing machine and it does not matter that the kitchen is four steps away. The child still has to work out which of the white doors it is. These are the hiding places nearly every home already has, and none of them needs tidying first:

- [ ] Inside a shoe by the front door
- [ ] Taped to the back of the bathroom mirror
- [ ] In the fridge, held on by the magnets
- [ ] Rolled inside the kitchen roll tube
- [ ] Under the doormat, inside or outside
- [ ] Behind the television, at a child's eye level
- [ ] In the drum of the washing machine
- [ ] Clipped to a coat hanger in the hall cupboard
- [ ] Inside the birthday child's own school bag

- [ ] Taped under the seat of a dining chair

Hide the clue, not the treasureEvery stop holds a piece of paper and nothing else. The one object worth having is at the final stop. This is what lets you build a ten stop hunt with nothing bought, and it is why a hunt costs an afternoon of thinking rather than a shopping trip.

Tape everything down. A clue resting on a shelf gets knocked to the floor by the third child through the door, and then the hunt stops while you pretend to help look.

Twenty clues you can copy

Change the words to match your own house. The shape is the part that works.

For four to six year olds

Short, literal, and a picture beside the words so a child who cannot read yet is still running with everybody else.

1. I am cold inside and my door has magnets on it.
2. You put your feet in me and I live by the front door.
3. I hold your toothbrush and I am next to the mirror.
4. I go round and round and your socks come out clean.
5. You sit on me at dinner. Look underneath.
6. I am soft, you put your head on me at night.
7. Wipe your feet on me before you come in.

For seven to nine year olds

Two lines that rhyme, read out loud by one child, argued over by the rest. This is the band where a hunt is at its best.

1. I have a face but never a nose, I tell you the time as the morning goes.
2. Climb to the place where the water is hot, look behind the shiny spot.
3. I am full of stories but I cannot read, check the shelf at the highest speed.
4. You cannot come in without turning my key, look down at the floor and you will see.
5. I am green and thirsty and I live in a pot, I have no mouth but I drink a lot.
6. I eat your dirty plates all day, open me up and look my way.
7. Warm in winter and folded in three, look in the cupboard for the next part of me.

For ten and up

A riddle they have to work at, and one they can get wrong. At this age being handed the answer is the insult. The party ideas by age guide covers what else holds this age group.

1. I have keys but open no locks, I have space but no room. Look inside the letter I type.
2. I am taken before you get it, and I show you the day you forgot. Look where the photographs live.
3. Four legs in the morning, still four at night, and yet I have never walked. Turn me over.
4. I am the only thing in this house that is always cold and always lit at the same moment.
5. Count the stairs. The number you get is the drawer you want in the kitchen.

6. I am the last thing you touch before you leave and the first thing you touch coming back.

A good clue is one the children solve in about twenty seconds and feel clever about. Thirty seconds is a stall. A minute is you reading it to them.

What changes with age, and what does not

The route hardly changes between four and twelve. Only the clue does, and who is allowed to read it.

What to change for each age band

Ages	Clue	Stops	Who reads it
4 to 6	A picture, with one short line under it.	Six to eight	An adult walks with them and reads nothing until asked.
7 to 9	Two lines that rhyme and name an object, not a room.	Eight to ten	A different child reads each clue. Say this before you start.
10 and up	A riddle, or a small puzzle with a number in it.	Ten to twelve	Split into two teams on opposite routes that meet at the end.

Garden, street and park

Outdoors the clue gets easier and the boundary gets harder.

Say the edge out loud before anybody moves, and say it as a thing they can see. Not "stay in the park", which is an idea. "You can go as far as the blue bin and no further", which is an object they can point at.

Then hide higher than you would indoors. A garden has weather in it and a bin bag over a clue lasts the afternoon. Good outdoor stops: the underside of a slide, a plant pot that is turned upside down, the second fence post, the spare wheel of a car, a hedge at adult shoulder height, the far side of a tree everybody can already see.

Two adults, or no streetA hunt that crosses a road needs an adult at each end of the route and a named child in front. If you have one adult, keep the whole thing inside the garden gate and add two stops rather than adding distance.

The photo hunt, when the group is too big

Past about twelve children a clue hunt stops working, because eleven of them are watching one child read.

Swap to a photo hunt. Teams of three, one phone per team, a list of twelve things to photograph, ten minutes on a timer. Nobody waits, nothing is hidden, and you write the list on the morning of the party in about four minutes.

- [ ] Something older than everyone in your team
- [ ] All three of you touching the same tree
- [ ] Something that starts with the first letter of the birthday child's name
- [ ] The smallest thing you can find
- [ ] A photograph where nobody is smiling
- [ ] Something perfectly round

- [ ] Your team upside down
- [ ] Two things that match but should not

Score it at the table while the cake is cut, one point each and a bonus point for the picture that makes the room laugh. The scoring is the second half of the game, so do not rush it. The party schedule gives the hunt its own slot as the main game, and the invitation wording covers the reply-by line that tells you how many children will be running.

What is at the end

One thing, opened by everybody, at the same moment.

A hunt is a group running as a group for twenty minutes. Put a single prize at the end of that and the last ninety seconds becomes a race, which is the one part of the afternoon you did not want. The end works when the finding is shared: a box everybody reaches into, the next game announced from inside the box, or the cake itself.

If you want the birthday child to have the moment, give them the last clue rather than the last prize. They read it out, the group runs, everybody arrives together.

What goes wrong, and the fix

Four things go wrong, and they are the same four every time.

1. **They solve it in the wrong order**
   A child spots clue six on the way to stop two. It is not a disaster. Hand them the clue for the stop they skipped and carry on; a hunt with a hole in it is still a hunt.
2. **One child solves everything**
   Say at the start that each clue belongs to a different reader, and name the order. Do it before the first clue, not after the third, because by then it is a correction rather than a rule.
3. **A clue is missing**
   Keep a written list of your own stops in your pocket. When one has gone, say the answer out loud as if it were the next clue and move the group on. Nobody notices.
4. **It ends too fast**
   Build one spare stop you can insert between any two others. A clue that reads "go back to where you started and look up" buys you three minutes and needs no preparation.

If you are planning the whole afternoon and not just the hunt, the four week birthday party checklist has the run sheet this sits inside. For the games either side of it, there are thirty birthday party games sorted by age.

The full guide, with the questions parents ask: kidbd.app/blog/birthday-scavenger-hunt-ideas