KidBD printable

The kids birthday party checklist

Four weeks, five short sessions and a run sheet for the day itself. Written for a parent with a job.

The short version

A birthday party at home needs four weeks, and only about five hours of your actual attention inside them. Week four is the date and the guest list. Week three is the invitations. Week two is the food and the cake. Week one is the games and the run sheet. The evening before is a ninety minute reset, and the day itself runs on two hours.

Everything else you have read about is decoration. It can be dropped and no child will mention it.

Four weeks, not six

Most checklists open at eight weeks. That is written for a venue with a deposit, not for your kitchen.

A party at home has exactly one hard deadline, and it is the invitation. Everything in front of that is a decision, and decisions made six weeks out get made twice. You choose a theme in March, go off it in April, and pay for both.

So start four weeks out. It is long enough that no family has already said yes to something else, and short enough that you only decide each thing once.

The plan below is five sessions. Each one is under an hour. None of them has to happen on a particular evening, only in the right order, because every session hands something to the next one.

Week four: the date, the list and the place

One session, about forty minutes, and three answers come out of it.

Pick the date with the child in the room

Saturday morning is the best slot for children under eight. They are at their sharpest, they have not been to two other things already, and nobody arrives having missed a nap. Saturday afternoon suits nine and up.

If the birthday falls midweek, do not move the party to the actual day. Do something small on the day and hold the party on the weekend. A school night party is two hours of tired children and one hour of parents apologising for the traffic.

Write the guest list once

The old rule is the child's age plus one. It is a good rule up to about twelve children, and it holds because it is really a rule about noise. Six children at a sixth birthday is a group you can still hear over. Twenty is a crowd you manage rather than a party you host.

Ask your child who they want, write those names down, and then stop. A list that grows after this point grows because of adults, not children.

Decide the room, not the theme

Where will the children actually be for two hours? The answer is usually one room plus the kitchen, and that single fact settles more than a theme ever will. It tells you how many can sit, whether a running game is possible, and where the coats go.

Write these three lines downThe date and the start time. The names. The room. Everything in the next four weeks is downstream of those three, and every time you change one of them you pay for it twice.

Week three: invitations and the replies

Invitations go out three weeks before the party. Not four, and not two.

Four weeks out and the date sits in a parent's head with nothing around it, so it moves. Two weeks out and half the families you asked already have something. Three weeks is the window where a yes is both quick and real. For the actual words, sorted by age, borrow from these kids birthday invitation wording examples.

Ask for three things and nothing else:

- [ ] Yes or no, and the child's name.
- [ ] Anything they cannot eat.
- [ ] A phone number that will be answered on the day.

That third one is the one everybody forgets, and it is the one you need at four o'clock when a child is still in your hallway and nobody has come for them.

Chase the silence at ten days

Roughly a third of the families you invite will not answer the first message. That is not rudeness, it is a screenshot in a camera roll. Send one short message ten days out to everybody who has not replied. One message. Not a group thread, which turns into a conversation you then have to read.

At the end of this week you should have a number. Not a guess, a number. Every decision in week two is priced off it.

Week two: the food, the cake and the one thing you buy

Children at a party do not eat a meal. They graze twice and then run.

So plan for grazing. A table of small things beats plates of one big thing, and it survives a child who arrives hungry and a child who arrives having eaten.

Food that works at a party at home

- [ ] Two savoury things children recognise on sight.
- [ ] One fruit that can be picked up with fingers.
- [ ] One thing that is clearly a treat and is obviously finite.
- [ ] Water, and one other drink. Not four.

Put the allergy information on a card beside the food, in words a ten year old can read. You told the parents in the invitation. The card is for the child who wanders past on their own.

The cake question

Bake it or buy it, and do not let that decision take a week. A bought cake with the child's name on it is a cake with the child's name on it. Nobody at the party is judging your buttercream except you.

Whatever you choose, get it done by the Thursday. A cake made on the morning of the party is a cake made while six other things need you.

Buy one thing, not nine

There is a moment in week two where a parent buys nine small things that together cost more than the cake and do nothing. Balloons in three colours, a banner, paper plates with a character on them, a pack of party bags, and small plastic objects to put in the bags.

Pick the one that the child will actually notice, buy that, and stop. For most children under ten, that is balloons. For most children over ten, it is not decoration at all, it is food they chose.

Week one: the games and the run sheet

This is the session that decides whether the afternoon works, and it is the one most checklists give a single line to.

You need three games and a fourth in your pocket. Not eight. Three that you have thought about, plus one you can start in ten seconds if a game dies.

Choose them against the room you picked in week four, and against the age of the children coming, not the age of your own child. A seven year old's party with four ten year old cousins in it is a ten year old's party. The party ideas by age and the ideas for a party at home are the long version of this week.

Then write the run sheet

A run sheet is one piece of paper with times on it. It exists so that at 2:40 you are not deciding anything. You are reading.

Put it on the fridge. Tell one other adult it is there. That second part is the whole trick, because the person who wrote the run sheet is also the person who will be in the kitchen when it is needed. For a minute-by-minute version at ninety minutes, two hours and three, copy one from the kids birthday party schedule.

Party day, hour by hour

Two hours, six blocks. This is the shape that works for five to eight year olds at home.

The two hour run sheet

Block	What is happening	What you are doing
Arrivals, 20 min	Coats, presents in one place, a quiet thing on the floor to join.	Standing at the door. Nothing else.
First game, 15 min	Something that needs no explaining and no teams.	Running it yourself, loudly.
Food, 25 min	Grazing, sitting, the noise drops by half.	Refilling water and counting heads.
Big game, 25 min	The one with a shape to it. A hunt, a quiz, a challenge run.	Keeping it moving, not judging it.

Block	What is happening	What you are doing
Cake, 15 min	Lights, singing, the photograph.	Cutting, and handing the camera to someone else.
Wind down, 20 min	Something seated while parents arrive.	Handing out the one thing each child leaves with.

A party does not fail in the middle. It fails in the first twenty minutes, when four children are standing in a hallway with their coats on.

The night before, in ninety minutes

1. **Clear the room**
   Move out what you do not want touched. This takes fifteen minutes and saves an argument.
2. **Set the food table**
   Plates, cups, the allergy card. Not the food, only the surface it lands on.
3. **Lay out the games**
   Everything each game needs, in one pile per game, in the order the run sheet says.
4. **Charge and place the screen**
   If a game runs on a phone or a television, open it once tonight and leave it open.
5. **Print the run sheet**
   On the fridge. Tell one other adult where it is.

How long should a kids birthday party be?

Two hours for five to eight year olds. Two and a half for nine and up.

A two hour party ends while everyone still wants more of it. That is the correct feeling to end on, and it is the reason to write the end time on the invitation rather than leaving it open.

Three hours at home is where the trouble is. You run out of plan at about the two hour mark, the children run out of new things at the same moment, and the last hour is four of them on a sofa asking when their parents are coming.

How many children should you invite?

The child's age plus one, up to about twelve.

The reason is noise and attention, not money. Past twelve children you stop being able to address the room, and a game that needs a rule explained stops working. You end up splitting the group, which means two adults, which means you are running a small event rather than hosting a party.

If your child's class has a whole-class invitation habit, the honest options are the whole class or a small handful of named friends. The list in between is the one that causes the problem.

Where the money actually goes

Four places, and only one of them is noticed by a child.

1. **Food.** Always more than you planned, because you buy for the children who might come.
2. **The cake.** Noticed, photographed, remembered.

3. **Decoration.** Bought in week two, seen for two hours, thrown away on Sunday.
4. **Party bags.** The only line on this list that no child has ever asked for.

If the budget is tight, the two to cut are the last two, in that order. Replace the bag with one thing that came out of the party itself. The photograph from the cake. A slice to take home. The thing they made during the afternoon.

Five mistakes that cost you the afternoon

1. **No arrivals block**
   Guests never all arrive at once. Plan the first twenty minutes as its own thing and the whole party starts on time.
2. **Too many games**
   Eight games on paper becomes two rushed ones and a lot of explaining. Three, plus one in your pocket.
3. **Cake too early**
   Cake is a full stop. Children read it as the end. Put it in the last third, never the middle.
4. **Nobody else knows the plan**
   The run sheet in your head is not a plan, it is a risk. One other adult reads it before the first guest arrives.
5. **No ending**
   An open end time means the last three families leave at different times and your child spends the last half hour watching people go.

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