



So you want to know more about...

Birthdays & Celebrations

Happy Birthdays

Parents often ask if it's okay to celebrate their child's birthday at the center. We'd love to include you in our celebrations! First, we need you to understand what that means in our programs.

We'd like to explain our firm policy of **no birthday treats from home**. Some children and staff have food allergies and/or dietary restrictions which would exclude them from food-focused celebrations. Some food allergies are so severe, even traces of the food can be life-threatening. Monitoring all food that comes in and out of the center is a time-consuming task *and* difficult to control 100%. Also, while we believe occasional treats are fine for young kids, we do need to be careful—the number of children in

our programs means we might have several birthdays in a week.

Sometimes parents ask to distribute small gifts or party favors at the center in honor of their children's birthdays. We have allowed this in the past but have decided to discontinue it for several reasons. Monitoring toys or small gifts for age-appropriateness becomes one more task on busy teachers' to-do lists and can become a financial burden for parents. *We will only provide celebrations that involve fun rituals and/or special privileges, and which focus on the child whose birthday it is.*

Many families choose to mark special occasions by donating a favorite children's book or game

to the center. We gratefully accept these donations as we would at any time of the year, but we will not make them a focus of the celebration, so that children who don't donate anything won't feel embarrassed.

Parents **may** use our center space after hours or on the weekend, free of charge, to host private birthday parties for their children. To reserve a space, speak with your center director well in advance. Invitations should be mailed (*not distributed in parent mailboxes*), so that children who are not invited do not feel left out. Parents must leave the center space clean, taking special care not to leave any traces of outside food. Please read below for detailed descriptions of our celebrations.

Child-focused Celebrations

Gretchen's House staff have established birthday traditions in their rooms. These may include but are not limited to:

- Birthday crowns
- A special gift for the honoree from a center "treasure box"
- Singing "Happy Birthday"
- Giving the birthday child special age-appropriate jobs for the day, such as passing out the cups at snack, being line leader, etc.
- Having a "chair lift" where the teachers raise the seated child a

number of times to match their age (for PS & older children)

- Doing a special cooking project with the birthday child's family group to use as snack that day
- Taking a photo of the birthday child with crown and gift, to e-mail and/or send home
- Special projects that are favorites of the children in a particular room or family group

Staff will remind parents of our policy prior to their child's birthday.

Parents may participate in the celebrations by:

- Joining their child for snack time or a special activity (singing with a guitar, sharing a favorite book, or taking a walk with the class, for example.
- Bringing in grandparents or a pet to introduce at circle time, as part of the "special person" day.
- Participating in a regular activity or game.

Tips for Planning Home Parties

Parties can be overwhelming for birthday kids and their guests. Some other points to consider when you plan birthday parties and family gatherings:

- A general rule of thumb for planning a low-stress party is to invite as many guests as your child is years old. Parents of children four and under may need to stay at the party with their child.
- **Timing** is everything: keep in mind children's naps and bedtimes when scheduling get-togethers. Set up a quiet room for infants and siblings who need a break.
- Keep **food simple** and serve it before children act hungry, which may be too late to catch their best behavior. Don't be surprised, however, if they're too excited to eat well.
- If your child attends a party without you, inform the host of any food allergies or other issues.
- It can be difficult for very young children to watch one child open gifts. Consider a **no-gifts** party, or even a **book swap**: every child brings a wrapped book and every child leaves with one. Make sure party favors are age-appropriate. With family, consider **opening presents over several days**.
- Help your child understand the importance of **showing appreciation** by having them participate in thank you's in any way they can.
- Any party with small children should be an **active one**. Consider having a pool party, skating party, or renting a gym.

Share Your Own Traditions

At the center, we don't focus on religious aspects of holidays, but on what they mean for families. For example, many cultures have new year celebrations in which they clean out the house and make room for new prosperity. Kids love to share their own rituals and learn about others'. If you'd like to share some of your own traditions with the children at the center, talk to your child's teachers. Consider:

- What part of this celebration is **meaningful for children**? Their attention span is relatively short so you should zero in on what is going to really excite and engage children.
- Presentations are most successful when the children are **actively involved**. If you'd like to prepare food with us for non-Birthday celebrations, please ask for guidelines about allergies within the group.
- **Pictures and props** from home: special dishes, blankets, and other objects help make the experience **concrete** for children.
- Consider giving the teachers a small **written summary** of your celebration that they can share with other parents. It's wonderful when other parents can be a part of this **dialogue** at home.

Frequently Asked Questions

Can you give me a directory of the children in my child's classroom for planning purposes? Sure! Ask at the office. We request that you don't distribute invitations or discuss outside events at the center. This leads to hurt feelings for children and families who aren't included.

We are from a minority culture and I feel that you don't need to address majority celebrations at the center. It's true that many "majority" holidays have become very commercialized and thus are "everywhere" at particular times of year. We don't emphasize the commercial aspects or the religiousness of those celebrations. But we think it's also wrong to completely ignore celebrations that are an important part of so many children's lives. We hope to expose children to a **variety** of cultures and traditions and we

can't do that without your help. If you aren't comfortable presenting your own traditions, please feel free to suggest some activities and celebrations to your child's teachers.

Any suggestions for places to have group parties? Consider using one of the center spaces for a larger group! Other local hotspots: the Hands-On Museum; the Museum of Natural History, The Ann Arbor Art Guild, Wide World of Sports, The Scrap Box, local skating rinks, bowling alleys, public swimming pools, local parks (sledding in winter!), kid-friendly facilities like Pizza Party/Amusement centers; country facilities like Wiard's Orchard or various small local farms.