



## ATTENDING ANOTHER CHILD'S BIRTHDAY PARTY

A social event, such as a birthday party can be extremely difficult for a child on the autism spectrum. A young child in preschool or nursery school may be just getting used to being with others in a classroom. The classroom experience is for a highly structured and well defined period of time. Children attending these programs know what to expect, what is going to happen first, what will come next, who will be there, where they will sit, when and what they will eat, when they go home, etc. There will be few if any surprises.

Attending a friend's birthday party is quite different. Think about all the unknowns! Who will be there? The birthday child, for sure, but perhaps also the child's older and younger siblings, cousins, neighbors, their parents, and others. The location may be new, perhaps the friend's home, where our child has never been before, or maybe it's at an event space such as the neighborhood pizza restaurant, the bowling alley, the Little Gym® or even at Chucky E. Cheese's®. There are lots of new things for any child to adapt to, and, for a child on the autism spectrum, it could be simply too much novelty, too much noise and excitement, too much stimulation!

As parent and caretaker, you are in the best position to predict how your child might respond to the party. Perhaps there is a Mickey Mouse™ theme, your child's favorite. But how might your child react when he or she can't have the plastic character on the birthday cake? Does your child understand the social rules of a birthday party? As a parent, you want your child to participate, to have fun, to be included, but you also know it simply might be too much.

What do we know about children with on the autism spectrum?

- They do best when they can anticipate what will happen and in the order it will happen.
- Unstructured socialization can be very difficult.

- Too much stimulation, sounds, smells, lights can simply be too much of many good things.
- Sometimes children have particular food preferences or special diets, and these may not be available.

Here are a few ideas:

- Perhaps you can arrive a few minutes early to try to acclimate your child to the environment and to see how he or she reacts to the environment and the excitement.
- Stay with your child and leave with him before things fall apart. A short good time is much better than a longer day and leaving after a meltdown. Have a treat/surprise in the car waiting for your child, so he or she isn't too disappointed at leaving before everyone else.
- Prepare for the party by visiting the location and planning out the day. Talk about all the people who will be there, what you will do at the party and most importantly plan for a quiet place to go if your child begins to feel overwhelmed and/or over stimulated. Bring your child's calming toys with you (stress balls, computer game, and headphones). Plan to take your child outside for a walk around the block and decide whether to go back in or go home.
- Explain to the birthday child's parents that you want to be available to support your child at this party and how you plan to do it. It is never a good idea to simply drop your child off at a birthday party and expect that he or she will have fun.

Of course, another choice is simply not go to the party until you can be sure you your child is ready for the experience. Every child is different, and only you can know what will be best for your child.

It is often a good idea to prepare a Social Story™ to prepare for a birthday. With cell phones and the computer technology, you can put together a pretty good Social Story™ using actual photos of the places and the people who will be at the party.

Children's story books describe many of the events and social themes in birthday parties. A trip to the library can go a long way to help prepare your child for the party. There is a series of "Off We Go....." children's story books by Avril

Webster and others that can be used to help prepare children for events such as birthday parties, haircuts, going to the grocery store, etc.

So.... happy birthday!

Related Articles:

- [Planning a Birthday Party](#)
- [Suggestions for a Birthday Party Social Story](#)
- [Ideas and Themes for Birthday Parties](#)
- [Making Friends](#)

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