

How to Throw a Fun, Allergy-Free Party

If your child or any of his or her guests have food allergies (and among many guests there may be many allergies), trying to throw a party may seem daunting. But as more and more children are diagnosed with food allergies, more and more recipes are being made available to accommodate them. Consider some of these ideas for throwing an allergy-free party where everyone can relax and have fun.

When you decide to throw an allergy-free party, make sure you note that fact in the invitations. Some parents avoid having their children attend parties because of the usual allergens present. Let parents know you intend to have an allergy-friendly party, and ask them please to contact you about specific allergies. This will help you choose the right foods to serve at your party. (You may have a lot of guests with gluten sensitivity but none with dairy allergies, for example.)

1. Gluten-Free Foods

The obvious party foods such as cake, cookies, and cupcakes are usually made from wheat flour, which contains gluten. Some sources say that while most grains contain some gluten, there are grains that are so low in gluten - or contain a different kind of gluten - that people with gluten intolerance can consume them safely.

In fact, other experts say that grains such as brown rice, millet, and quinoa contain no gluten at all. Oats do not contain gluten naturally, but often get contaminated with wheat gluten during processing. Look for gluten-free oats if you want to use them in your party foods.

Here are some ideas for gluten-free foods you can serve at your party.

- * Rice or nut crackers and cheese
- * Cornbread sandwiches
- * Meringue cookies
- * Deli meats

- * Potato chips

- * Rice pasta

- * Gluten-free pancakes or waffles (you can use gluten-free pancake and waffle mix, and as a variation you can use the waffles or pancakes as wraps for sandwich fillings)

2. Eggs and Dairy

These are other food allergies you'll see among kids. In fact, some children are exempted from certain vaccinations if egg white was used in the development of the vaccine. Thankfully, there are egg-free party foods you can make for your guests, and there is even dairy-free ice cream made from soy or rice. Try egg-free brownies or cake. For these baked goods, the cake-like texture is achieved with baking powder and/or baking soda.

Dairy-free foods are not quite as challenging - avoiding cheese and milk seems simple. But you'll need to think more carefully than that - dairy "hides" in foods like cheese puffs, popcorn, and even bread.

3. Corn

Corn is considered a gluten-free grain, but it's also a fairly common allergen among children. Rice is considered a safe grain for kids who are gluten-sensitive and allergic to corn. Note that corn tends to be in everything, so avoiding all corn may not be possible (even party balloons may have cornstarch dusted on them). Check with corn-sensitive guests before attempting a totally corn-free party.

In addition to the above, consider nut and chocolate allergies as well. Peanuts are the usual culprit in nut allergies; it's rare for anyone to be allergic to "tree nuts" such as walnuts and also a legume like peanuts. Sunflowers are often a safe alternative "nut." Carob is an allergy-safe substitute for chocolate and can be used the same way.

Animal party themes can be a great success for kids of ages. But what kind of animal theme should you choose? And how do you apply that theme? Here are some ideas.

Jungle Animals

Jungle animals like monkeys, snakes, parrots, jaguars and tigers are beloved by many children. While they are not technically "jungle" animals, the big cats of the African plains are usually included in such a theme, too, such as lions and cheetahs. A jungle theme can be fun to decorate. Use construction paper to make big leaves; use stuffed animals all around the room, and hang brown and green crepe paper to look like vines.

Puppies and Kittens

Puppies and kittens are popular with children, as any parent whose child has begged them for a pet knows! Face painting can make kids look like their favorite puppy or kitten, and headgear with dog or cat ears can help kids' imaginations come alive. Serve food in dog and cat bowls, and use pet toys in the party games. If a real puppy or kitten can participate in the party, all the better!

Horses

Horses have been a popular party theme for some time. You can do a western/cowboy theme using horses, or go from a wild horse or dressage angle. You don't have to have pony rides; guests can do relay races with stick horses, eat apples without their hands, and sit on hay bales. They can play a game of horseshoes, too!

Farm Animals

Little kids are especially fond of farm animals, which may explain why so many books for young children focus on farm animals. Like the horse party, using bales of hay or straw for seats or

decorations helps set the theme. Straw hats make good favors and decorating them can be a fun craft for the party guests. An egg hunt would be a fun game, too - it doesn't have to be Easter!

Bugs

The bug theme can be lots of fun, whether you go with cute little ladybugs or fun creepy crawlies. There are lots of candies with bug shapes, and jelly worms are always a favorite. Make chocolate "dirt" for food, and guests can make their own bugs out of construction paper, Styrofoam, craft foam, or whatever works for your budget and age group.

Fish/Ocean

An ocean theme with fish can be very colorful and fun. Fishing games of all kinds are easy to arrange for all ages, and brightly colored fish pictures can be cut out of magazines, printed from your computer, or cut out of construction paper. Jelly fish can be served in blue Jell-O, or you can enjoy an ocean-themed cake. Guests can decorate their own beach buckets with fish stickers.

Party Themes and Ideas for Boys

Planning a party for a boy in your life? Whether it's a preschooler, toddler, or older child, a boy's party can be fun to plan and experience. Here are some ideas for boy-friendly party themes.

1. Dogs and Puppies

Many little boys like dogs and puppies. This theme could work for toddlers, preschoolers, or gradeschoolers. Here are some ideas for this theme.

* For younger kids, have face-painting to make them look like puppies or dogs. Dog ears that can be attached to their heads are also fun.

* Favors could be bobble-head dog figures, bone-shaped crayons, or small stuffed puppies.

* A bone-shaped cake would set the theme, or a sheet cake decorated in spots or with pictures of dogs. You can also make "puppy chow" with cereal. For fun, serve food in clean dog bowls.

* Games for a puppy dog theme might include pin-the-tail-on-the-puppy, a dog piñata, or even a visit from a real dog of your own or someone you know.

2. Trains

Boys often go through a "train stage." You can build the theme around characters, such as Thomas the Tank Engine, or just do a generic train theme. Here are some ideas.

* A train cake can be bought or made; since they're basically rectangles, you can get imaginative and create a multi-car train cake. Try using a cake cone covered with icing for the smoke stack.

* Train-shaped favors could include pencil sharpeners, stickers, or small toys.

* Games could involve a train-themed obstacle course with a kid-sized train tunnel. You could also do a train-themed variation of duck-duck-goose (how about chugga-chugga-choo?).

* Trains lend themselves to crafts. Party guests can make their own trains out of cardboard or construction paper.

3. Pirates

Costumes can be a fun way for guests to celebrate the pirate theme! Other ideas for a pirate party could include:

- * Make your own sword craft using cardboard and aluminum foil.

- * A treasure hunt could take the form of a pirate-themed scavenger hunt. Make up maps and age-appropriate, cryptic directions to help guests find the treasure.

- * Chocolate gold coins, eye patches, and/or stuffed parrots make fun favors.

- * A treasure-chest cake is not too hard to make and creates a visual impact.

4. Water

If the time of year is right, water makes a great party theme for boys. An indoor pool party can be fun, too, if it's not hot outside.

- * Water guns, age-appropriate scuba gear, thong sandals, and/or water masks and goggles can be given as favors.

- * A water fight with balloons and the water guns can be great fun. Other games and fun could include playing in a sprinkler, a yard-sized water slide, or, if you're lucky enough to live near a creek, a wading party complete with looking under rocks. Get creative and hook up a sprinkler and garden hose by your swing set or slide.

- * A water-themed cake could be done using a sheet cake, or use a flat sheet of blue Jell-O and decorate it with candy shells, sugar "sand," and so forth.

Throwing a 1980s Party

Remember the 80s? Many parents of young kids grew up in the 80s. Even if you didn't, it's a fun era to replicate in a party! Here are some ideas for throwing a 1980s party.

Entertainment

Rent 80s movies, such as *Back to the Future*, *Rocky*, *Dirty Dancing*, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, *Pretty in Pink*, *Footloose*, or *Ghost Busters*. Find DVDs or, if you have a VCR, video tapes of 80s classic TV shows like the *Smurfs*, *Thundercats*, *Growing Pains*, or, if possible, music videos from the era.

Music is part of the entertainment, so raid your old cassette tape collection and ask your friends if they can loan you some. You can also get a CD of 80s hits so there's a good mix and variety. Bands like Duran Duran, Culture Club, Michael Jackson, and any of the famous "hair bands" are classics.

Do you know anyone who has an old Atari game console? It would be a real blast from the past to get one of those hooked up for your party guests. Pac-Man, anyone?

Decorations

Records and 45s were part of the 80s scene as well as tapes. Go to your local antique store or flea market (or your own basement!) and dig out old records to put on the walls and around the room.

Pastel colors were big in the 80s, as were arcade games like Pac-Man and Space Invaders. Use light pink, blue, and yellow streamers, cups, napkins, and tablecloths, and decorate with cut-outs of your favorite arcade game characters from the 80s. Neon colors were also popular in the 80s, usually combined with black.

Costumes

An 80s party lends itself to costumes. Big hair with lots of spray, hoop earrings, sheer fluffy skirts and leggings, lace gloves, and high heels are just some of the 80s costume ideas for your party guests. Stretch pants and leg warmers are another look from the 80s - and remember, pastel colors were in back then! Teach everyone to talk like a Valley Girl and try not to "gag on a spoon."

Favors

Favor ideas for an 80s party might include:

- * "Jelly" bracelets
- * Bangle bracelets (guests need lots because you have to wear more than one at a time!)
- * Smurf figurines
- * Rubik's cubes

Food

Party food of the 80s was not exactly the natural and healthy type. Junk food defined the 80s - cheesy corn chips, Fritos, colas, Kool-Aid and candy were the usual fare. If that makes you uncomfortable, you can always incorporate 80s themes into healthier foods, such as Prince's Pizza or Cindy Lauper's Spaghetti.

Fun Slumber Party Ideas

Slumber parties or sleepovers can create memories that last a lifetime, and they're something exclusive to childhood. Boys and girls can enjoy a sleepover, and there are various approaches and themes you can use. Here are some ideas.

Camp Out

A really fun outdoor slumber party idea is to have a campout in your yard. Guests can bring camping supplies and you can supply some to make a fun, outdoor party. Guests can sleep in tents and, if age-appropriate and with adult supervision, they can cook out on a grill or bonfire. Before it gets dark, guests can go on a scavenger hunt. Once it gets a bit darker, they can play flashlight tag.

Movie Night

Gather lots of age-appropriate movies, and set up a concession stand in the room where your guests will be watching the movies. You can make a concession stand with cardboard, plywood, or other materials, or just use tables. Serve popcorn and candy in red-and-white striped bags (you can make or purchase these). Set things up so that guests can watch movies for as long as they like. Have activities such as board games or crafts for guests who grow tired of the movies and want to take a break.

Spa

Girls will love a spa theme for a slumber party. Guests can do each other's hair, play with make-up, nail polish, and facial masks. Adults should supervise any hair styling that might be dangerous, such as the use of curling irons. Powdered drink mix can, with parents' approval, make fun, temporary hair color. Let everyone have a makeover! For drinks, consider alcohol-free margaritas and daiquiris served with little umbrellas.

Game Night

Have guests come prepared to play their favorite games as late as they want - whether it's board games, electronic games, or sports. You could combine several different types of games for interest - maybe a game of football or Frisbee outdoors, then inside for board games, then settle into sleeping bags and play video games.

Pajama Party

If your child/children are too young for a sleepover, why not have a pretend one? Guests can come for dinner and leave at bedtime, but they can change into their pjs (or show up in them), get into sleeping bags, and bring along stuffed animals. You can serve fun finger foods for dinner, and s'mores for dessert. Guests can use fabric markers to decorate their own pillow case to take home.

Girls' Party Themes and Ideas

Party theme ideas for girls can span all ages of child, and they can be a lot of fun to plan. They're also fun to experience, and can be a bonding time for you and the little/young girl in your life. Here are some theme ideas.

1. Tea Party

Few things say "feminine" like a fancy tea party. Try some of these ideas to throw a lovely tea party for a little girl.

* Provide a trunk of dress-up clothes, complete with dresses, high heels, gloves and hats, for guests to dress for the "formal" party. A local consignment shop, yard sales, and second-hand store can help provide fun, dressy clothes.

* Stuffed animals and dolls can be made welcome at the party. Guests can bring their own along.

* Consider plastic or other non-breakable tea cups for younger girls. For older girls, a pretty tea cup can be a favor and hold their tea for the party.

* Serve tea-appropriate dishes such as finger sandwiches and petite fours.

* Tea bags, cups, and jewelry make nice favors.

2. Fairy Princess

Little girls often dream of being or meeting a fairy princess. For a party theme, try some of the following ideas to make her dream come true.

* Ask a friend or neighbor (or do it yourself!) to dress up as a fairy princess and interact with the guests. Or let your little girl dress as a fairy princess for the day.

* Crafts can work well with a fairy princess theme - guests can make their own tiaras, fairy wands, necklaces, and bracelets, then take them home as favors.

* You can decorate in a castle theme, maybe using cardboard to make castle turrets and doorways. Or use ethereal lace and gauzy material to decorate. A castle centerpiece can be made or bought.

* Party games might include a dragon piñata, or pin-the-horn-on-the-unicorn.

3. Cats and Kittens

Don't many little girls love cats and kittens? Try a party theme along these lines.

* Use face painting to make guests look like cats, and have some cat ears on headbands for guests to wear. Guests can wear leotards or other cat-like costumes if they like.

* Serve foods in (clean) kitty bowls and dishes.

* Decorate with cat toys and posters of cats and kittens.

* Favors might include a pot of live catnip, small stuffed cats, kitty stickers, and kitty-themed jewelry.

* Cut party foods into shapes of fish, mice, and chicken legs.

4. Horses

A lot of little girls love horses. Try an equine party theme!

* If possible, see if guests can interact with a real horse or pony. A miniature horse would make a fun outdoor guest, or, if you can afford it, arrange horse or pony rides for the party. If you know someone with a horse (or you have one yourself), supervise guests and let them feed the horse carrots or go for a brief ride.

* Bales of hay or straw can provide seating for guests outdoors. Outdoor games might include a game of horseshoes, or hang apples on a tree and let the guests eat them without their hands! Indoors, you can always pin-the-tale-on-the-pony, or let guests paint their own model horse.

* Small toy horses, stickers, bracelets with horse-shaped charms, or paint-by-number sets make creative favors.

* A horseshoe-shaped cake can be fun, or decorate a sheet cake with small plastic horses.

"Make Your Own" Parties

Hosts and hostesses sometimes worry about what food to serve at their child's party, or wonder if they can handle all the work of a theme party. It's hard to find food that everyone likes, and making party decorations and favors can be tiring.

Why not make food or crafts the theme in a "make your own" party? Guests can make their own food as part of the party fun, and then everyone can make food according to his or her taste. Guests can make masks, jewelry, or other crafts. There are ideas along this line for almost all ages. Here are some suggestions.

1. Make Your Own Pizza

This one has all kinds of possibilities, from sweet to savory. For individual pizza crusts, you can use pita bread, homemade or store-bought mini pizza dough or crusts, bagels, or English muffins. Some toppings you can put out might include some of the following:

- * Peanut butter
- * Jelly
- * Chocolate chips
- * Tomato sauce
- * Shredded cheese
- * Pepperoni
- * Olives
- * Peppers
- * Ham
- * Pineapple

- * Cream cheese

- * Fruit

These pizza ideas can be mixed and matched, some eaten cold and some baked. Just be sure an adult does the baking for a kids' party!

2. Make Your Own Shish kabob

Like pizzas, shish kabobs have all kinds of possibilities. Set out some of the following foods along with skewers. If you like, you can cook meats ahead of time and just heat the kabobs under the broiler or in the microwave.

- * Cheese cubes

- * Chunks of cooked chicken, beef, and ham

- * Bell peppers

- * Onions

- * Cherry tomatoes

- * Chunked fruit such as pineapple, bananas, cherries, melon, apple, kiwi, etc.

- * Marshmallows

3. Make Your Own Cupcake or Cookie

Cupcakes and cookies can be decorated or made by the guests. For cupcakes, it might be better for guests to do the decorating. Cookies might be fun if guests cut them out with cookie cutters, bake them, and then decorate them. However you do it, here are some ideas for decorating those cupcakes and cookies.

* Frosting in various colors (Use a separate butter knife for each color, or put the frosting in plastic zip-top bags, snip a tiny bit off of one of the bag's corners, and squeeze the frosting out the hole)

* Candies and chocolates

* Sprinkles

* Sugar paste (This can be rolled, shaped, and cut into all kinds of decorative shapes, even flowers)

4. Make Your Own Stuffed Animal

There are several ways you can do this kind of "make your own" party. You can:

* Go to a store where guests can choose their own "unstuffed" animal, and then store workers stuff each child's animal.

* If you're handy with fabric, you can sew unstuffed animal "skins" ahead of time, leaving a small opening for guests to use polyester or cotton fill to stuff their creations. Then stitch the small opening closed.

* Use white socks, fabric glue, and fabric markers or paint to let kids create their own sock creature. Guests can decorate the socks before stuffing, and the socks can be tied shut once stuffed.

5. Other Ideas

Some other quick ideas which you can use as a springboard include:

a) Make Your Own Candle

- b) Make Your Own Chocolate Bar
- c) Make Your Own Sundae
- d) Make Your Own Mask
- e) Make Your Own Jewelry

Murder Mystery Parties for Tweens and Teens

The murder mystery party can be great fun and drama for various age groups. Tweens (usually defined as children aged 9 to 12) and teens are usually the age groups you think of for murder mysteries. Here are some ideas and tips for throwing a memorable murder mystery party.

The MM Dinner

Host a murder mystery dinner. If your home is not the right size or location, see if you can use a local space such as a church or, weather permitting, a park shelter. An actual restaurant can be really fun, too, if it's within your means.

Serve grape juice in wine glasses for a formal dinner air. Someone dressed as a butler could go around with trays of appetizers and drinks. Guests don't have to have acting ability, but for those who enjoy such things, encourage costumes and dramatic reading.

Wild West Murder

Set the stage with Wild West decorations, such as cardboard saloon doors and a bar where you can serve (non-alcoholic) drinks. Serve western fare such as beans, cornbread, and chili. If you like, incorporate well-known Wild West personalities as characters, such as Buffalo Bill, Annie Oakley, or Billy the Kid.

Games

Murder mystery games are a fun, low-pressure way for guests to enjoy a murder mystery theme. Serve appropriate foods and decorate according to the game's theme, and let guests solve the mystery without a murder. Many such games have mysteries where guests have to find a missing item or person.

A Royal Mystery at High Tea

Who killed the Queen or King? Where is the Queen's special guest, the Duke? Guests can solve a royal murder mystery over high tea. Tea, cookies, biscuits, small cakes, and other tea foods can be served. Characters may include a duke and duchess, princess and prince, and other members of the royal court. Serve non-alcoholic Bloody Marys for this one.

Magic

Weave an evening of magical fun as guests come to see a magic show, only to have someone really disappear. Guests can enjoy a magic show while they solve the mystery.

Kits

There are all kinds of murder mystery-themed kits available online. You can customize a kit to fit the theme, your child's age, and other details. These kits usually cover everything from the invitation to parting gifts.

Although tweens and teens tend to be the age group for murder mystery parties, there are age-appropriate mystery games and themes for younger kids, too. These are usually murder mystery games rather than a more complex party theme.

What Foods to Serve at a Child's Party

Depending on the age of the children you are inviting, the time of day, and other factors, what kind of food you're going to serve at a child's party can vary. Make sure you check with the parents of all the guests to find out if there are any food allergies among your prospective guests.

Here are some ideas for party foods according to various ages.

1. Toddlers

For a party with toddlers as the main guests, it helps to focus on finger foods that toddlers can pick up and eat themselves. Make sure the foods served are soft and not choking hazards. Some ideas include:

- * Slices of fruit (melon, strawberries, peaches, and ripe pears are good)
- * Cheese slices
- * Small sandwiches with soft filling like peanut butter and jelly, cheese, egg salad, and so forth
- * Pizza bites, either frozen or simply pizza that's been cut into small slices or pieces
- * Cookies that are relatively soft, not hard or that contain nuts
- * Jell-O cut into fun shapes

2. Preschoolers

Like the food at toddler parties, preschoolers' party food is probably best if it is simple and can be eaten with the fingers. However, preschoolers have more advanced coordination, are less prone to choking, and can enjoy a wider range of foods. Here are some ideas for preschoolers:

- * Fruit pizza (made with vanilla cookie dough and topped with cream cheese-based icing and fruit)

- * Chips and dip (corn chips and salsa, potato chips and French onion dip, pretzels and honey mustard, etc.)

- * Apple slices and caramel dip

- * Hot dogs on a bun cut in half. Condiments can be according to each guests' taste, but it might be less hassle to make the half-dogs up ahead, putting ketchup on some, mustard on others, and so forth. Then the guests can choose.

- * Pizza

3. Gradeschool

Gradeschool spans a wide range of ages, from 5 to 11 years old. For younger kids in gradeschool, say between 5 and 7 years old, the same kinds of foods as you'd have for preschoolers can be served. For kids ages 8 to 11, here are some possibilities:

- * Fruit kabobs (older kids know better than to use the skewers in inappropriate ways!)

- * Watermelon fruit basket (it's not too hard to cut a watermelon into a basket shape)

- * Build-your-own sandwich - set out breads and various sandwich spreads and fillings such as deli meat, cheese, sliced vegetables, etc.

- * Quesadillas with salsa and guacamole dip. You can cut these into fun shapes, too.

4. Middle School

Older kids might appreciate more "sophisticated" and interesting foods. For kids of middle school age, here are some ideas to try.

- * Camp fire cookout. Middle schoolers can cook their own food over a campfire, or cook out on a grill (with adult supervision, of course).

- * Build-your-own pizza, where kids can add toppings according to their tastes. Bagels, English muffins, or homemade or store-bought mini crusts make good choices for the pizza base.

* Ethnic foods can be fun for this age. Try serving various foods from different countries and see how everyone reacts to the new flavors.

How to Throw a Fun Toddler Party

Parties for toddlers can be a lot of fun, but they are different than parties for older kids. Toddlers are still babies in many ways, and large numbers of them can be difficult to manage. Here are some tips on how you can throw a fun toddler party.

Invite Just a Few Guests

Keeping the number of guests low is not just to save your sanity; it's also a safety issue. Unless you plan to have multiple caregivers at the party, stick with no more than six guests. Toddlers can get into trouble in the blink of an eye, and with a large number of them it's easy to lose track of their whereabouts.

One idea is to have most of the parents stay. There can be activities for the toddlers, but the parents can get some visiting in and there will be plenty of eyes and hands to make sure the little guests stay safe.

Time of Day

Toddler parties need to be scheduled around naps if possible. Usually toddlers have only one nap in the afternoon. Even after naps, some toddlers get tired and cranky in the evening hours, too. Late morning is a good time to have a toddler party, and if you like, you can serve lunch and send the guests home right about nap time.

Some good time slots for toddler parties are from 9am-11am, 10am-12pm (sending everyone home for lunch), or 11am-1pm. Two hours is usually plenty of time for a toddler party.

Games

What kind of games do you have at a toddler party? Games with winners and losers are generally best avoided - these can result in hurt feelings, as toddlers really don't understand the concept of that kind of competition yet. Consider games with music, which most toddlers love. Here are some other ideas:

- * Dancing with ribbons - give each toddler a scarf or ribbon on a stick to wave and swirl to music. Turn the music off periodically and have them "freeze," then start dancing again. You can have specific dances, too, that involve everyone in a circle or weaving in and out of the circle with their scarves and ribbons.

- * Crafts are fun for toddlers. Have a simple craft that everyone can make and take home. There are all kinds of resources for toddler craft ideas on the internet, from gluing googly eyes on various objects to homemade puppets!

- * Guess the animal - have everyone get in a circle, then the adult draws an animal name from a hat and whispers it to the toddler whose turn it is. Then that toddler acts out the animal in the middle of the circle. The first one to guess the animal gets to go next.

- * Weather permitting, have some fun in the water. Set out containers of water and a bunch of empty cups, watering cans, and bottles and let them pour and play. A plastic wading pool can be included, but it should not have more than a few inches of water in it.

Themes

You can choose a theme for the party if you like. Some people find this makes the party easier to plan. Some themes that toddlers tend to enjoy include:

- * Trains

- * Dogs/Cats

* Jungle/Safari

* Water Fun