

## How to host a memorable children's birthday party for less than €200, according to the experts

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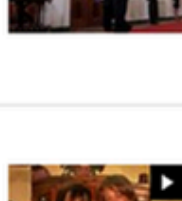
Budgets can fly out the window when planning a child's birthday party, but there are many ways to keep costs down



Planning a child's birthday party can be a stressful – and expensive – endeavour. Photo: Getty

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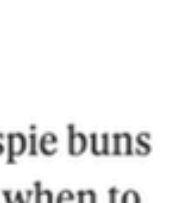
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**Niamh Hennessy**

There was a time when children's birthday parties involved a few Rice Krispie buns and a fizzy drink. The biggest stress for parents would have been knowing when to press stop for pass the parcel or musical statues.

Fast forward to today and children's parties are a much bigger deal, with a whole industry dedicated to providing entertainment, food and decorations. Children's parties are now taking the form of sushi-making afternoons, pottery classes or padel sessions.

A survey from Milano found that two-thirds of parents said planning a child's birthday party is one of the most stressful tasks they will undertake as a parent. Many said they find it more stressful than their day job.

Ten years ago, a survey from MummyPages.ie estimated that Irish parents will spend more than €5,400 on children's birthday parties and gifts by the time their child gets to sixth class.

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The cost of everything has risen in the last 10 years, so it's safe to say the cost of children's parties has too. For instance, cakes now cost close to €100 (in 2016, the estimated cost was €39).

With this in mind, we asked experts to share how they keep costs down when organising a children's birthday party.

**'€5 present parties take the pressure off other parents'**

Jenna McMonagle, on Instagram as @irishmamabuys

With two kids, Jenna McMonagle has hosted plenty of parties and been to more than she can count.

"With classes of 25 to 28 children, the costs can really add up," she said. "I'm always trying to keep things simple, fun and budget-friendly."

One hack she said works well is the €5 gift rule, where children give €5 in a card as a birthday present.

"It takes the pressure off other parents and stops the cycle of spending every weekend," she added. "The children are just as happy and it makes things much easier for everyone."

McMonagle also makes her invitations on Canva, either printing a few for school bags or sending them on WhatsApp.

"It looks great and costs nothing," she said.

She added that, if she has a €200 budget for a party, she can rent the local hall for around €120. It even has a bouncy castle.

"No need to hire entertainment and you can go home to a nice tidy house afterwards," she said. "If the budget is lower, then we just have it at home and let the chaos commence."

Rather than spending €60 to €80 on a bakery cake, McMonagle buys a plain sponge, ices it herself and adds a themed topper.

"It looks amazing and usually comes in under €30, but still feels really personal to whatever theme they're into," she said.

For the party bags, she uses plain brown bags, adds a few stickers to match the theme and puts a small mix of treats inside.

"With a bit of planning you really can throw a brilliant party for under €100 to €200," she said. "And the kids will remember the fun, not how much was spent."

**'Kids do not want fancy cuisine – they're happiest with some easy finger food and a Rice Krispie cake'**

Sauna O'Kelly, on Instagram as @saving\_money\_dublin

One of the biggest expenses for a children's party can be the location, according to Shauna O'Kelly.

By skipping the play centre and hosting a party at home, she said a huge amount of money could be saved.

"If at home is not an option, it is worth considering some other free or inexpensive locations, such as the local playground – weather permitting of course," she added.

"Or, if your child has a birthday in colder months, you could try reaching out to local GAA clubs or community centres.

"If it's a time when no one is using the space, they may be happy to let you have it for a couple of hours."

O'Kelly said that, with food, it pays to keep it simple: "Kids do not want fancy cuisine. They're happiest with some easy finger food and a Rice Krispie cake.

"The best food options include chicken nuggets; sausage rolls; little sandwiches with simple fillings like ham, cheese or jam; some fruit; homemade cakes; and a few sweets.

"Remember, especially with under-fives, they do not eat that much, so don't overdo it."

Some children's parties have decorations fit for a wedding, according to O'Kelly, but, in her experience, kids don't care about decorations as long as they have loose balloons to throw around.

"To cut costs, check out local freecycle pages on Facebook and see if anyone has some decorations they are no longer using, or even [ask] friends and family," she said.

She also advised skipping goodie bags, "the bag of plastic cheap junk that will all be in the bin in 24 hours": "Do not hassle yourself with that kind of expense.

"If you feel the need to give a goodie bag or token, think of alternatives [that are] eco-friendly and frugal, [like] colouring pages with some colours as their goodie bag."

Some party ideas O'Kelly shared include tea parties for smallies, doing arts and crafts, games like musical chairs and duck duck goose, and throwing on some music and just dancing.

"At this age, kids don't see money, they see you spending time with them and having fun," she said. "So have fun and they will too."

**'Once kids have space to run around, they'll entertain themselves'**

Michelle O'Connor, on Instagram as @Michelle\_Pluck\_

With three children, Michelle O'Connor knows how expensive birthday parties are.

"This year, my daughter turns five in May and we are hoping to do a garden party to keep costs down," she said. "We'll have music, balloons and a dress-up princess theme, as she requested this, and will hopefully keep costs down."

O'Connor said she loves giving out party bags and makes them up herself to keep costs low.

"I normally grab a few bits in Lidl and put together simple bags," she said. "They don't need loads in them at all – a few treats and a small toy or bubbles is plenty."

O'Connor also always makes her own cake. She said it feels more personal and 'saves a fortune' compared to ordering one.

When it comes to venue, she advocated for keeping it simple: "For parties, summer birthdays are perfect in the garden or park if the weather behaves."

"In winter, a local sports hall works great. You can keep it really budget-friendly by bringing your own sandwiches, party bags, cake and a speaker for music.

"Once kids have space to run around, they'll entertain themselves."

Some games O'Connor recommended are treasure hunts, sack races, egg and spoon races, or limbo with a broom.

"Honestly, it doesn't have to be over the top," she added. "A bit of space, some music, games and cake, and they're happy out. And two hours is normally the perfect time for the party."

**'Instead of spending €5 per child on party bags, give each guest a book'**

Áine Murphy, on Instagram as @youngirishbudgeter

Áine Murphy is well experienced in planning parties, from hens and going-away parties to birthday parties.

"I love creating a 'wow' moment," she said, "but I do not love the price tags that come with having balloon arches made, custom cakes or overpriced party bags.

"The good news is you can create impact without overspending."

Murphy said she makes her own balloon arches with balloons and rubber bands: "I promise you do not need to be a craft queen to do it. Tie balloons in groups of four, secure the groups together and keep layering until you create your shape.

"There are simple tutorials online. It is affordable and makes a big visual impact."

She also creates ceiling balloons without using helium.

"Helium balloons look beautiful, but can be costly," she said. "Instead, attach streamers to regular balloons and use small pieces of double-sided tape to stick them to the ceiling. From below, the effect looks the same and costs far less."

She also advised giving guests books instead of spending €5 per child on party bags.

"Books can cost €1 to €3 in discount or charity shops," she said. "For 20 children, a €100 budget could cover 20 to 30 books.

"You can let children choose their own book, add a party sticker inside the cover, wrap them simply or match them to the theme."

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**'Children do not measure a party by how much it costs'**

Shane Tobin, chief executive of lowquotes.ie

According to father of four Shane Tobin, birthday parties can become unexpectedly expensive.

"Venue hire, entertainment, party bags, decorations and food can quickly push the total beyond €300," he added. "For many families, particularly in the current cost environment, that level of spending creates unnecessary strain."

Tobin, who works in financial planning, said the key is not to cut corners, but to remove pressure.

"There is a big difference between being thoughtful and being extravagant," he said. "Children do not measure a party by how much it costs. They measure it by how much fun they had and who was there to celebrate with them."

Tobin said it is easy to get swept up in expectations, and to feel pressure after looking at social media posts and photos online, which can create the impression that every party needs a professional theme, custom signage and co-ordinated outfits.

One practical approach, he said, is to separate 'must-haves' from 'nice-to-haves': "A space, a cake and a few organised games are essential. These form the core of the celebration. Custom themes, branded decorations and elaborate party bags are optional extras.

"When you define that line clearly, decision-making becomes much easier."

He said one cost-saving strategy is to reduce the guest list, as smaller gatherings are often more manageable, less overwhelming for the child and significantly cheaper.

"Fewer children means less food, fewer party bags and lower venue requirements," he added. "In many cases, a smaller group creates a more meaningful experience.

"Time control is another overlooked factor. A two-hour party is more than sufficient. Extending the event increases food and activity costs without necessarily increasing enjoyment. Children's energy peaks quickly, and shorter events often feel more exciting and focused."

Tobin also said joint parties are becoming more common, and sharing venue hire and entertainment costs with another family can reduce individual expenses considerably and "bring a social element that children enjoy".

"Sensible collaboration can ease financial pressure without compromising the experience," he added.

Tobin said that, from a budgeting perspective, he would encourage families to treat annual events like birthdays as planned expenses rather than surprises: "Allocating a small amount each month towards known annual costs spreads the impact across the year. That approach removes last-minute financial stress and prevents reliance on credit.

"A well-planned, enjoyable birthday party does not need to cost more than €100 or €200."

**'In the current cost-of-living climate, it's worth reminding ourselves that small children want very little'**

Cian Carolan, managing director of DNG Financial

Cian Carolan said that people really have two options when it comes to children's birthday parties.

"Option one is hosting at home," he said. "Often cheaper, but more onerous from a planning perspective because every detail falls to you.

"Option two is using a dedicated party venue. Generally, far more convenient, but significantly more expensive.

"Neither is right or wrong, but the financial gap between the two can be substantial."

He said that, from experience, it's worth taking advantage of the early years.

"When children are very young, parties tend to be family-focused, with cousins, close relatives, a simple cake and a few balloons. At that age, kids don't measure the day by the venue or the spend.

"Once they hit primary school, however, the pressure creeps in – particularly the unwritten rule of inviting the entire class."

He said one practical solution he has used is co-ordinating with other parents whose children share the same birthday month: "A joint party in a venue allows you to include the full class without carrying the full cost yourself. It reduces expense, spreads the workload and avoids anyone feeling left out.

"It also reduces the number of parties happening, because otherwise they do add up.

"In the current cost-of-living climate, it's worth reminding ourselves that small children want very little: a party hat, a happy birthday song, candles to blow out and their friends around them. The extravagance is rarely for them.

"Keeping things simple in the early years can save hundreds annually, without reducing the joy of the occasion."