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**SPENDING**

## **Playing Pin the Tail on the Donkey Just Won't Do**

By JENNIFER ALSEVER

WHEN Chris Szarka threw a party for her daughter's first birthday at their home in Denver, the guest list included goats, ponies, chickens, rabbits and pigs.

Ms. Szarka paid \$275 for this personal petting zoo as part of an elaborate celebration for her daughter, Morgan, and about 60 human guests. Ms. Szarka handed out cowboy hats filled with barnyard toys and helped 20 children build their own stuffed horses.

Years ago, birthdays were simple, with a handful of children playing in the backyard while mom lit the candles on the cake. Today, birthday parties are bigger and more elaborate than ever, with the guest list spanning entire preschool classes and price tags that can reach \$1,000 or more.

And, as in so much of life, the pressure is on not to be outdone. Jennifer Neglia, a homemaker in the affluent community of Randolph, N.J., worries that her own children will think their parties are boring if she doesn't follow suit.

"It's almost competitive at this point," she said. "I wouldn't expect to see favors at a party. But I feel like I have to have them at my party."

Ms. Neglia spent \$350 on an elaborate tea party when her daughter turned 6. Her husband rented a tuxedo and served 18 girls who wore white gloves, ate finger foods, played whisper games, decorated straw hats, made pearl bracelets and had their photographs taken on a wing-backed chair.

"It probably cost more than I wanted," she said. "But we had a really good time."

It's tough to quantify how big the birthday business is for vendors, entertainment centers and suppliers, because no single organization tracks the children's birthday industry. But business appears to be booming.

The once-bankrupt Chuck E. Cheese leads the way, having opened about 30 restaurants a year for the last five years to reach 495 restaurants and sales of more than \$654 million. The restaurants offer both walk-in dining for families and space for big parties. Rivals with names like Pump It Up and Monkey Bizness are opening in warehouses and strip malls, with amenities like 5,000-square-foot play areas and inflatable slides.

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But the definition of play area is expanding. Youngsters now celebrate with tea parties at bed and breakfast inns and visit nail salons for makeup and manicure parties.

Hundreds of vendors rent inflatable castles with enclosed trampolines for backyard events, and parents can hire ice cream sundae caterers, storytellers, magicians, professional photographers, snake handlers and puppeteers. "The market is exploding," said Frank Price, who owns Birthday University, a company in Raleigh, N.C. He gives business seminars to birthday service providers nationwide.

Working parents with two incomes but increasingly less time help fuel the trend. Parents have doubled their party budgets in the last three to four years, even as the economy has faltered, Mr. Price said.

"Families and parents are looking for something unique and different that will give their child a lasting memory, and they're willing to spend almost anything to do it," he said.

Perhaps most extravagant is the guest list. Today's parties can easily swell to 60 people, with children, siblings and parents. Some families invite the entire class so no child feels left out.

Susan Fagerstrom, a mother of two in Beaumont, Tex., said, "You don't want 40 kids in your home." Many parents move the parties elsewhere so they can enjoy them, she said, and "they don't think, 'I have to get the cake' or 'I need to clean this up.' "

Ms. Fagerstrom said she and her two daughters, 5 and 7, attended 20 parties in the last seven months.

"I've been to parties at the movie theater, Chuck E. Cheese's, backyards with blowup slides, makeup and accessory parties, minigolf parties, puppet show parties, tea parties at home, roller skating and bowling parties," she said.

The multitude of invitations can also mean a multitude of gifts, and more pressure on parents. "You want to give a nice gift," said Christine Driscoll, a mother in Ridgewood, N.J. "You have 20 kids in a class. You get invited to 20 parties, and at \$20 a pop, it just gets expensive."

Ms. Szarka, of Denver, admits that she has gone over the top on birthdays for her daughters, now 4 and 3.

For her younger daughter's first birthday, she and her husband paid \$50 to rent a clubhouse, \$200 for machines to dispense cotton candy, hot dogs and popcorn, and \$250 for a woman to give a Little Mermaid performance.

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For another birthday, Ms. Szarka hired a \$100 face painter for 20 guests, as well as a tea party organizer for \$300, so the kids could don princess costumes and enjoy a tea party with miniature fine china.

"I like making my kids feel special," she said. "It's the one day of the year where the focus is all on them. We spend a lot, but we don't buy them as many toys and we only do it once a year."

Parents like Ms. Szarka were clearly on Charlotte Cassese's mind when she opened a birthday party center called Glam Jam last spring in Randolph.

For \$300, parents can give a party for 10 girls at Glam Jam's warehouse operation, where guests create their own lotions, lip gloss and eye shadow. The girls, ages 6 and up, can then get their faces painted and dress up in boas and sunglasses for a red-carpet fashion show. A big-screen TV projects their images as they strut down the carpet. Parents can buy their own video of the show before they leave the event.

YOU'D be amazed at what people will do for their birthday parties," Ms. Cassese said. One mother wanted a party for 40 children, but Glam Jam's limit is 20. So the woman held two parties - one with 20 children on a Saturday and another the next day for 20 more. She spent a total of about \$1,200.

In the last two years, the warehouse area surrounding Glam Jam has seen the rise of a gymnastic center, rock climbing center, indoor soccer arena, ice-skating rink and two indoor play areas - and all play host to frequent birthday parties.

"This is the party place of Morris County," said Karl Lens, who runs Time In, a nearby 5,000-square-foot warehouse play area that has slides and equipment similar to those at a McDonald's. Mr. Lens, a father of three, started the business three years ago and is trying to open other locations through franchises. He said he runs about 600 parties a year, charging an average of \$400 apiece. During the week, parents use the warehouse as a play space for smaller groups or individual children. But his expenses are substantial. Mr. Lens said he paid about \$1,200 a month for insurance, while a single play system costs \$50,000 to \$100,000.

**Some families still prefer an old-fashioned approach. Christine Walker of Chicago, a mother of three, celebrated her son's fourth birthday last July at home. The children played in the backyard, with no organized games or entertainment.**

**"We thought they'd have more fun playing with each other and in the yard, which they did," she said. "I tell my kids what you have is really great - not necessarily better, but certainly as good as other people's parties. I'd rather put \$500 toward a 529 college savings plan."**