On Your Mind

Fall, 2017 Column

Dear Dr. Robinson,

 I have a young daughter, Cassidy, who is turning age 2 shortly. She’s old enough to somewhat know what’s going on (cue older brother and sister giving her the low down), and she’s looking forward to her birthday party this weekend. We’ve invited her play group and their parents. Later, we’re having a private birthday party for her with just the family and grandparents (both sides, they get along.). My fear is that Cassie will be overwhelmed by it all, and that people will buy way too many birthday gifts for her. Also, can her playmates handle her getting all the gifts, or should be get token gifts for each of the 7 boys and girls in her play group? Signed, Are We Over The Top?

Dear AWOTT,

 In a word, yes. You sound like you are going over the top for Cassie’s birthday. I know she’s your pride and joy, and any birthday deserves celebration. However, do you really want to set the bar so high at such a young age?

 Developmentally, at age 2, Cassie is just now learning to play cooperatively. Until age 2, most children engage in parallel play. That is, in the same room, playing, but not necessarily interacting. Also, young children think only concretely, not abstractly. That means, Cassie will not necessarily appreciate all of the attention. She could become overwhelmed and melt down. Side note – time the festivities around her nap, so she will be physically able to enjoy herself. Finally, young children are developmentally drawn to bold, loud colors.

 With these things in mind, allow me to indulge in a few suggestions. First, children this age really don’t care for expensive toys and electronics. The novelty is there, of course, but you will find them playing more with the packaging than with the contents. The value is lost on their concrete minds. So, find simple, hands-on playthings that pique their imagination.

 Second, it’s a birthDAY, not a birthWEEK. Be careful, and sympathetic to yourself, not to spread the festivities out. I’m sure the family can also enjoy the play group party. Put a request for only 1 gift per guest and put a dollar limit on the gift. This will save you from guests getting into out-doing each other. Remember, the party is about Cassie, not about the guests. Oftentimes, however, parents put together a small trinket bag for their child to give out to her playmates. This helps the child learn the joy of giving, in addition to getting.

 Finally, cake and presents are incidental. Cassie wants to play with her friends. Organize play activities and interactive games that all guests can join in playing. These things will be what people remember about Cassie’s Awesome! Second birthday.

Dear Dr. Robinson,

 My ten year old daughter wants to have a coed sleepover for her birthday party this year. She says all the parents are allowing this and, of course, she’s just friends with the boys. She is kind of tomboyish, even plays Little League baseball with some of her male friends. I don’t want to be a curmudgeon about this. Is she crossing a line? Signed, Confused

Dear Confused No Longer,

 You find yourself on a slippery slope here. I smell manipulation afoot. Don’t get me wrong. I’m sure your daughter is well-intentioned, if not a bit naïve. So, hold firm. You can offer a well chaperoned, coed birthday party, but the boys go home, while the girls can stay for the sleepover.

 At age 10, even if she has not started her menstrual periods, your daughter’s hormones and neurochemicals are expanding, preparing for adulthood. Unfortunately, in my clinical practice, I’ve treated children who conceived as young as 9 years old! Even if she has not a clue, you can only account for her perspective, not for that of her guests. She is right at the golden age of childhood sleepovers and I’m sure the girls will have a great time together. Just make the sleepover gender exclusive.

 “All the parents are allowing this.” Really? I don’t think so. This is classic manipulation. Of course, you can call her bluff by calling several of the other parents. Even if it is true, don’t cave. Hold to your values and morals even in the face of consensus.

 “Just friends with the boys.” Again, she can tell herself (and you) that, and still not be allowed private, alone time with any boy at her party. A party is just that, a group activity where all have a great time. Set up interactive games, collect the crew and go to a local fun spot, have popcorn and movies, but tell each parent when to come pick up their son (that night) or daughter (next morning).

 In my book, Teachable Moments: Building Blocks of Christian Parenting, I devote an entire chapter to these things. I call it “Children Will Always Test the Limits.” That’s true, but they test them to be sure the limits are in place. Having no limits will increase the child’s anxiety and fear. They are not old enough to set their own boundaries. Maybe the best birthday present ever from you to your daughter this year is healthy boundaries. No means no.