**ON YOUR MIND ---Celebrating Birthdays**

By Dr. Jon Robinson

Dear Dr. Robinson,

I have a rambunctious four year old boy. He has no brothers or sisters yet. He has one speed, 100 mph. His fifth birthday is coming up and he’s so excited, he’s beside himself! My parents live close by and they’ve planned an all-out, day-long party. They told him no rules on his birthday. Because it’s his special day, no punishment for anything he does. I gave my mama the sternest stare I could muster, but she said they’d pay for everything and, after all, he’s only five once. My son has a laundry list of presents and activities and friends he wants for his birthday bash. If I can’t stop this train wreck waiting to happen, how can I manage it and minimize the fallout? Signed, Off the rails Mom.

Dear Off the Rails,

Ahh, grandparents. Ya gotta love’em. Of course, you know that they mean well, but, in your wisdom you ask, at what cost!! Sounds like the birthday celebration will have a hefty price tag in and of itself. My concern, however, is the emotional and relational cost to all involved.

Before all of this gets set in motion, you and your husband need to have a sit-down with your parents. This is where you practice setting healthy boundaries and being assertive. Without intending to rain on your parents’ parade, and they will be up for the “best grandparents ever” award after this day-long bash, help your parents appreciate the enormity of the undertaking they are planning. It’s been a long time since they’ve had to corral a herd of five-year olds. Be specific in your presentation. Use what I call the Oreo consulting method. That is, start with your concerns, add your appreciation and good wishes, and conclude with your restated concerns. Basic message is that you love that they can do this for their only grandchild, but it’s on them.

If it were my child, I’d plan for him to go over early and sleepover at grandparents’ home. You can offer help in planning, but no splitting expenses and no supervising at the party. This makes the day a win-win. Grandparents get all the kudos and you and hubby get quality time. Before or after the big day, plan a private, family party time, distinguished from the birthday bash. One event for the three of you (maybe out for breakfast?) and each gives one, special, personal gift and card to your son. With all of the hoopla of his birthday bash, I’m betting quality time with his folks will be the part of the day he remembers.

The risk with these kinds of show-stopping events is that each year has to out-do the previous year. When does it all stop? Also, the focus seems to be on the event, how much and how big, rather than on the relationship. Finally, the no rules-no consequences because it’s your birthday is an invitation for your son to act out, no matter how cute and conforming he might be. In my book, **Teachable Moments: Building Blocks of Christian Parenting**, I devote a whole chapter to the premise that children will always test the limits. They test them to be sure that they are there. Children need parents and grandparents to be in charge, with rules and with consequences that are enforced. It’s how they practice being in a grown-up world with accountability and responsibilities.

By keeping the birthday bash at grandma’s home, you maintain your rules and consequences within your home, and remind your son after his bash, that house rules are back in effect. Hopefully, after the celebrations, you and junior will be back “on the rails.” Good luck.

Dear Dr. Robinson,

We have identical twin girls born to us on Christmas Eve ten wonderful years ago. They are bff’s to each other. They prefer dressing identically, and they like tricking others about who’s who. Now that they are getting older, I try to help them distinguish who they are as individuals. Birthdays are particularly challenging in this regard, both because they share the day and also because their birthday bumps right up against Christmas. Any suggestions? Signed, Two Peas in a Pod

Dear Two Peas,

Good for you for trying to help them distinguish who they are as individuals. Twinship is exciting, engaging, yet challenging as well. They *are*individuals, who just happen to look the same. I’m sure that you and other family members know their “tells,” but it sounds like they love being twins.

Developmentally, children enter a transition in personal identity during ages 10 to 12. They are getting ready for adolescence. Up to age 10, mom and dad are the best thing since sliced bread. Children want to be just like them when they grow up. During the latency ages of 10 to 12, the jury’s out. They know they are changing, but they don’t know what to do about it. With adolescence, until about 18 or so, most teens want to be just opposite of mom and dad. That’s not necessarily a bad thing. This is when they are forming just who they will be for a lifetime. As they move into this developmental phase, be sure they know that their identity is not an either/or question. They can be both a twin and an individual.

As for the dilemma around their birthday and the holidays, have a sit-down with them, a family meeting, several weeks before the big day. Get their ideas about how they could celebrate differently this year. Brainstorm, where there is no bad idea, so you get a breadth of options. Everything, of course, ultimately must conform to your time and resource limitations. Help them think outside the box, about how each could have an individual birthday experience, while also being twins. Take their lead as much as possible.

Also, even though time is of the essence, separate your holiday experience as much as possible from their birthday experience. I’ve known of some families who just wrapped all the presents for one occasion and labeled some Happy Birthday and others Merry Christmas. Not a good idea. Separate the events if at all possible.

For example, if your house is already decorated for the season, maybe plan to have the birthdays elsewhere. If two parties can be an option, and the girls like that idea, see how that might be done. Include each in the planning, so that they own the outcome. Timing is of the essence as well. For example, some families open Christmas presents on Christmas Eve. Probably not a good idea in your case, as it infringes on *their* day. Sleepovers are out because other families will want everybody to wake up and open presents on Christmas Day. You could have a family birthday on the date and a birthday sleepover party on the nearest weekend.

Their physical identity is a gene thing. No changing that. But, their feelings, temperament, attitude and behavior are very individual. Celebrate their twinship, as they do, but highlight how they are different in many ways as well. As they get toward adolescence and look to form an individual identity, they may want to dress differently, have different friends, go and do different things. That’s okay. Use empathy and active listening as they seek your counsel to become the best individuals they can be.