Happy Birthday! Let’em Eat Cake!

After completing my pediatric training, I worked for a couple of years in a large pediatric office before I had any children of my own. I was always struck by the Life Event of a child’s first birthday. This milestone carries so much meaning and emotion for families. My patients’ parents described huge birthday parties with characters such as Elmo walking around or Moon Bounces, large catered affairs with numerous friends and family members and entire neighborhoods.

Often I would see a child sick in my office a few days before such an event with parents who were panicked that their child might be sick on his Big Day, or I would see a child for his one year well check and hear many details about the enormous party. Of course I also saw plenty of children a few days after their first birthday party who became ill, most likely, from a well-intentioned friend or relative who was already sick and passed the illness on to the birthday child at the party. I heard about the kids who clapped for the Happy Birthday song and kids who cried and one who vomited from excitement… all over the birthday cake. Many of my patients had their first full blown temper tantrum during their own over-stimulating first birthday party.

I remember not quite understanding why parents go through such effort and expense to throw a party that their child will never remember at a developmental stage where 99 percent of children are having stranger anxiety and separation anxiety, often forgoing daily routine to skip naps, eat at erratic times, and then expect their birthday child to perform in front of a large crowd singing loudly at them. “My husband and I will do it differently,” I would tell myself.

Now, three of my own children later, I must apologize for not quite understanding about that first birthday. I remember

waking up on the day my oldest turned one year. My pediatrician brain first exclaimed “Hurray! No more SIDS risk!” Then my mommy brain took over, “Ohmygosh, I survived the first year of parenthood!” This day is about Celebration of the Parent. I finally understood completely why my patients’ parents needed all the hoopla.

Because I am actually a little uncomfortable in large crowds, my son’s first birthday party included all close relatives who lived nearby, people he was well familiarized with. Some pediatric tips I had picked up which I will pass on:

1) Sing the Happy Birthday song, complete with clapping at the finale, for about one month straight leading up to the birthday. Children love music and hearing a very familiar song sung by a large group is not as overwhelming as hearing an unfamiliar song.
2) Plan mealtime around your child, not the guests. If you are inviting people close to your heart, they will accommodate. Dinner can be at 5:00pm if that’s when your child usually eats, or have a lunch party that starts midmorning and then end the party in time to allow your child to have his regularly scheduled afternoon nap. Most one-year-olds are usually at their best in the morning anyway.
3) If your child becomes sick, cancel the party. Your child will not be disappointed because he won’t understand what he is missing. You as parent would have a lousy time anyway because all of your attention will be on your ill child and you will be anxious. Your guests who are parents will appreciate your refraining from making them and their own children sick.

Recently while performing a one-year-old well child check I asked about my patient’s birthday party and her parent told me “Oh, we didn’t have a party. It was like any other day, although we did give her a cupcake for dessert.”

Now THIS is a pragmatic approach to parenting because, again,

no child will ever have memories of her own first birthday. However, I hope the parents did take time, at least with each other, to congratulate themselves and to feel really good about making it to that huge milestone in their parenting career. I hope they savored their accomplishment as much as their child savored the cupcake.

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