

Ideas for Parents: Non-food Ideas for Birthday Celebrations at School

We all know that birthdays are important to every child and that kids like to celebrate with their classmates. However, sending in a food treat to the classroom to celebrate can exclude those children who have food allergies, diabetes or other dietary restrictions. According to the Centers for Disease Control (2011) allergies have increased more than 20% among American children since the mid 1990's. Many teachers will also admit that they would rather not have to deal with food in the classroom, especially cupcakes (very messy!).



If you would like an alternative to food treats for your child's birthday celebration at school, below are some suggestions. **Always check with your child's teacher first** to see what he/she finds acceptable for their classroom and be sure to provide advanced notice to make sure that they can fit the birthday plans into their schedule.

1. **Party favors** (bouncy balls, matchbox cars, erasers, tops, magnifying glasses, notepads, balloons, whistles, bubbles, etc.). You can get these at a party supply store, dollar store, dollar shelves at stores like Target and Michaels and catalogs like Oriental Trading Company.
2. Come into the classroom and **read a book** to the class.
3. **Buy something for the classroom** (books, games, music, class pet such as fish or turtle, plant, etc.).
4. **Decorate a box** and send it into the classroom. Also send index cards or smaller pieces of paper. Have the teacher ask each child to use one sentence to write something nice about the birthday kid and put it into the box. The birthday kid gets to take the box home at the end of the day. You could also do the same thing using an autograph book.
5. Send in supplies and directions for a **craft** for the kids to do instead of eating a snack. It is a bonus if the parent comes in to help with the craft.
6. Arrange for the kids to **play a game** instead of eating a snack. If you don't have any ideas, talk to your child's teacher. They are likely to know what the kids will enjoy and what will work well in the classroom setting. Again, it is a bonus if the parent comes in to play games with the kids.
7. Ask the teacher for **extra recess** in honor of your kid's birthday. If they are willing to take the time to eat a snack, they may be willing to use that time to let the kids play.
8. Bring in something that all the **kids can sign** as a birthday treat for the birthday kid (shirt/sweatshirt, tote bag, autograph stuffed animal, pillow case, etc.).
9. Arrange a **treasure hunt** around the classroom for the kids. There can be a special treat (see #1 or #3 for ideas) at the end. You can even use a theme that ties into what they are learning in class.
10. Ask the teacher if you can have a **show and tell** time for your child on their birthday. They can make a poster, bring in some of their favorite things, bring pictures, tell the kids about their favorite things or life at their house, etc.
11. **Sponsor a child** overseas and ask the kids to write to the child. You can bring in things to teach the kids something about the child you have chosen to sponsor, including information about where they live, what kind of games kids there like to play, etc. Continue to provide information to the class about the sponsored child throughout the school year.
12. Have the kids work on a quick **community service project** together. There are many websites with great ideas (examples: <http://www.kidactivities.net/post/Community-Service-Ideas-for-Kids.aspx>). One idea would be having each kid write a letter to someone in the military serving overseas. You could also provide supplies for the kids to make things to donate to a charity.
13. Ask the teacher if you can send in a dance song, and have the whole class do the hokey pokey, the chicken dance, or the booty slide, whatever is your child's favorite! Invite the nurse or principal!

Compiled by Megan Palovchik, parent of a student with food allergies at Hilliard Crossing Elementary School, Hilliard Ohio. Thanks Megan, for sharing!

Ideas for PTO's and Teachers -- Non-food Rewards



As teachers know, classroom rewards can be an effective way to encourage positive behavior. Food rewards, especially candy, are often used because it is inexpensive and students like it. It is important to understand, however, the potential harmful effects that using food, even “healthy food” has on our youth. Obesity among children had tripled over the past 20 years and has become a national concern. Health problems related to obesity include diabetes, heart disease, and high blood pressure.

What is even more important to think about are the long-term psychological effects of using food for reward, comfort and instantaneous gratification. What many people don't realize is that the number of adults rewarding a child with food within a single day can be staggering in our culture. Even if your child, or your children are not currently overweight, please consider the following:

There are many disadvantages to using food as a reward:

- It undermines nutrition education (our words do not match our actions)
- It excludes some students who cannot (or should not) eat these foods – allergic and diabetic children cannot be at their best when they consume some of these foods.
- It teaches kids to eat when they're not hungry as a reward to themselves.
- In smaller children, the empty calories end up replacing higher nutrient-dense foods that would be eaten at the next mealtime. It is well known that children who suffer from poor nutrition score lower on tests.

The following is a list of options for nonfood rewards in the classroom. It is by no means a complete list; some are geared for individuals, some are geared more for classes. Many additional ideas for nonfood rewards exist. Instead of asking parents to send in candy for doing well in the classroom, or rewarding children with food for selling “X” amount of flowers, please consider the following more inventive ideas, many of which “loop” back to helping with literacy, writing, physical activity at home and at school.

- Stickers, pencils, pens, scented pencils or markers, colorful erasers
- 3-D Bookmarks, stencil rulers
- Many vendors exist for trinkets (frisbees, jump ropes, beach balls etc.) Can be something they use in the classroom, during recess, or take home to be physically active.
- Paper notepads, small journals to encourage writing, literacy
- Books, Activity/game sheets, Puzzle books, i.e. Sudoku
- A half hour of game time, Play Jeopardy or Monopoly as a Class
- Reading time in a special place, i.e. outside under a shady tree
- Outdoor game, i.e. parachute play, tug of war game
- Play a cooperative game as a class - here are many fun options!
(<http://www.playworks.org/games/playworks-2010-2011-playbook>)
- Extra credit, points, bonus “bucks”
- Extra art time
- Do a special craft together, create something they take home
- Extra Computer time
- Be the helper, student gets to “Teach” class
- Extra recess, recess with a “special” guest (pe teacher, principal, school nurse, secretary)
- Sit by friends



Think Outside the Box!

- Eat lunch with the principal, PTO president, mayor, the school nurse, the superintendent
- Eat lunch outdoors, eat snack outdoors or at the pond
- Have lunch or breakfast in the classroom
- Private lunch in the classroom with a friend
- Be a helper in another classroom
- Do an exercise video together. (some schools have created a library of exercise dvd's for staff to choose from - or audio - dance song cd's)
- Have a "special" guest come to class and do a dance with the students.
- Go for a walk around school grounds with special staff person
- Take a fun physical activity break – hula hoop contest, jump rope contest, relay race
- Dance to favorite music in the classroom
- Show-and-tell
- Bank System—earn tokens for privileges
- Teacher special guest volunteer reads a special book to class
- Teacher, principal or nurse performs a special skill (singing, cartwheel, etc.)
- Teacher, principal or nurse does something silly (gets slimed, wears Michigan shirt for a day)
- Have free choice time, let children vote between three of any of these options
- Listen to a book on tape
- Listen to music while working
- "Field trip" – is there a pond or creek nearby your school that students could walk around the pond to investigate the signs of spring, cloud patterns, tie in whatever studying in class.
- Coupons/gift certificates for video stores, music stores, and movies

Recognition or Rewards

- Phone parents to tell them what a great child they have
- Give a note to the student commending his or her achievement
- Design a "Caught Being Good in the Act" coupon
- Maintain a photo recognition board in a prominent location in the school
- Recognize a child's or class's achievement using the morning announcements and/or the school or classroom website

Make your Own – Customize to your school and the reward!

Reward students by making low cost items such as bookmarks at school by printing bookmarks on a color printer and laminate. The following websites offer free printable bookmarks, certificates, and/or posters: www.abcteach.com (teaching extras), www.andreaspalding.com, www.janbrett.com www.motivationposters.com

Purchasing Items for Rewards

Try the vendors listed below to purchase inexpensive or bulk items:

- Oriental Trading – 1-800-875-8480; www.oriental.com
- Mello Smello – 1-800-394-1406; www.mission-nutrition.com
- Really Good Stuff – 1-800-366-1920; www.reallygoodstuff.com
- Teachers Paradise.com; www.teachersparadise.com
- Carson Dellosa – 1-800-321-0943; www.carsondellosa.com
- For inexpensive books go to www.bookecloseouts.com

