

The Birthday Budget

This family kept party spending under control by putting the birthday girl in charge of the planning **BY KERRIE FLANAGAN**

Idea of the Month

"Mom! My birthday's in two months!"

"Mom! Can I have my party at the Fun Factory?"

"Mom! Can I invite ten people?"

My daughter, Delaney, was turning nine, and she was eager to start planning her party. But as usual, I was struggling with how much to spend on it. A part

of me always wants to make Delaney's wishes — birthday and otherwise — come

true. But I know that wouldn't be good for her, or for my bank account. So I began my annual internal debate:

"Fun Factory? Does she know how much that costs?"

"But it is easy. We just have to show up, and everything's taken care of."

"I don't want to spend a fortune on one day, though. We have to buy presents too."

"Maybe I can get her to have it at home."

"Right. She won't want to do that."

Finally, I asked my husband, Rich, for his opinion.

He thought for a minute, then said matter-of-factly, "Let's give her a budget."

"A budget? She's only eight, you know."

Rich, nevertheless, convinced me I didn't have much to lose by trying it. And the upside was that I wouldn't be the bad guy telling her she couldn't have what she wanted — I could blame it on the budget.

But how much to give her?

"Fifty dollars," he said.

My skepticism returned. "That won't get a lot."

"It will be plenty," he assured me. "It'll make her think about what she really wants."

So a few days later, I called Delaney into the den.

"Your dad and I talked, and we decided that you can have fifty dollars to spend any way you want on your birthday party."

"I can do anything I want?" she asked incredulously. It sounded too good to be true.

"Yep. Anything you want, so long as it doesn't cost more than fifty dollars,"

I answered.

"Wow! Then I want to go to the Fun Factory and invite ten people!"

"Well, I looked up the prices online, and they charge a minimum of ten dollars a person."

She started counting on her fingers, then she looked at me and frowned. "I could only invite four friends, plus me."

"That's right. But you can do that if you want. Or you can find someplace else. Or you can have it at home."

Her smile returned. "What about the Pizza Palace?"

"I have a coupon that says a party would cost twelve dollars per person



ILLUSTRATION BY KELLY KENNEDY

My Great Idea The Birthday Budget

for pizza, cake, and game tokens. You have to have at least six people, though.”

She got a pencil and paper for that one. “That would be too much too, Mom. I really want to go to the Fun Factory!”

“You can,” I answered.

“But not with all of my friends,” she half-whined. “How many can I invite if we have it at home?”

“Ten.”

I felt myself holding my breath while I waited to see if this was going to work, or if she’d rebel against the idea altogether. “Okay,” she finally announced, “I want to have it here.” After a pause, she perked up and asked, “Will you help me plan it?”

We got a notebook and started brainstorming a party based on her favorite cartoon character, SpongeBob SquarePants. And unlike years past — when I’d spent solitary hours figuring out the details of her parties — we had a great time coming up with ideas together, including what silly games to play, food to serve, and favors to hand out.

After a while, we picked the best ideas and listed the supplies she’d need, along with an estimated price for each. (I decided to cut her some slack by letting her use items we already had at home, such as napkins and plastic forks.) When Delaney added it all up, the total was a little high. So she carefully reviewed her list and figured out what was most important to her. She changed the store-bought ice-cream cake to a homemade one and crossed off the yellow helium balloons. Now she was within her budget.

She was so excited about her plans that we decided to head to our local discount store the very next day (we’d save the grocery-store portion of the list for closer to the event).

Notebook in hand, Delaney led me around as she looked for all the items she wanted. Success! We found everything and headed for the checkout line. Then she stopped suddenly. Something had caught her eye. It was a SpongeBob video.

“Oh, Mommy, can I get this too?” she begged. “*Pleeease?* It’s only six dollars.”

I hesitated. She would just be a little

over budget. No big deal.

But then I thought, *What would I be teaching her?*

So I swallowed my urge to buy the tape and said, “That looks nice, but it would put you over the fifty-dollar limit.”

She looked devastated for about 30 seconds, then peered into the cart, studying all the candy she planned to give as favors, the jigsaw puzzle she wanted to put together with her friends, the invitations, the sponges for the sponge ball craft, the soda, and the themed paper plates. She did some counting on her fingers and then said, “I really want to watch this video at the party, so I’ll put back the plates, because we have some at home, and the invitations, because I can make my own. That equals about six dollars, so now I can get the video.”

“Good choice,” I beamed. I was happy with her for sticking to our agreement and, frankly, happy with myself for not giving in and blowing the whole experiment.

Finally, the big day arrived, and so did all ten children. Delaney’s arrangements went like clockwork. The kids all liked the Krabby Patties (hamburgers, for you non-SpongeBob fans) that Rich grilled. They thought Delaney did a great job decorating the cake. Laughter filled the room while they watched the video together.

Afterward, Delaney declared it her best birthday party ever. She was understandably proud of what she’d organized and of how much fun her friends had following her plans. When I asked her what she thought about the budget, she said enthusiastically, “It taught me not to spend, spend, spend!”

There was a lesson for me there too: I was reminded of how important it is to give kids the chance to learn the skills they’ll need later in life, even when it isn’t easy. Now I’m looking forward to my son Drew’s eleventh birthday, when he’ll get a shot at working within a budget as well. Who knows what he’ll pull off with \$50?

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