

Birthdays That Make a Difference

By Bridget Belden

As founder of Ripple Kids Inc, a nonprofit organization seeking to inspire and empower kids to take action in their communities, I believe that kids have a natural inclination to want to give back. As a parent, I find that sometimes that is easier said than done!

I am always interested in finding ways to get my own kids (ages 13 and 10) excited about helping others. Because of my work, they are involved in a variety of community service activities by default, but I also want them to initiate their own projects. One idea that I first heard about a few years ago that is gaining in popularity is the “give-back” birthday party. Rather than receiving gifts, the birthday girl or boy asks guests to bring something that will be donated to others. This might be money for a favorite charity or a toy for kids in need. Whatever the case, kids are involved in the process, which will make them more aware of the needs of others.

I started researching this idea for my son’s 11th birthday in February. I found that most of the articles written on the subject

I believe that kids have a natural inclination to want to give back

of charitable birthdays assume that all kids are going to do this willingly, while my own experience has proven otherwise. My son, for example, was not initially eager to give up his gifts - no matter how great the cause. I know this because I failed to present the idea properly, and was met with a less than enthusiastic response.

Undeterred, I gave it some more thought, and came up with the following ideas for approaching the conversation. You may find that just one of the ideas below does the trick, or as in my case, you may have to use all of them!

HOW LUCKY WE ARE

An important reminder at any time, this one is best to bring up in advance of the “What are we going to do for my birthday?” discussion. There are so many people who have so little, especially when the economy is as bad as it is. It’s important for our kids – particularly in Orange County – to know that not everyone has it as good as we do. In following up this conversation, you might say, “The good news is that we can do something

to help other kids. Instead of birthday presents this year, why don’t we ask your friends to bring a toy to your party and we will donate it to kids at the homeless shelter?”

WHAT DID YOU GET FOR YOUR LAST BIRTHDAY?

As you begin discussing birthday party options with your child, ask her what toys she plays with from her last birthday. If she can’t remember, or hasn’t played with them, you can say something to the effect of, “Since you don’t really play with the toys you got last year, why don’t we ask your friends to bring a donation for the local Animal Shelter instead of a birthday present this year?”

IDENTIFY A CAUSE THAT SHE’S PASSIONATE ABOUT.

Last summer, I took my kids and a few other Ripple Kids to visit the Make-A-Wish Foundation in Tustin. We learned that, when a Make-A-Wish representative first visits a Wish recipient, he/she brings a toy for that child and for all of the child’s siblings as a way to break the ice. Consequently, one of the Foundation’s greatest needs is for toy donations. When my son and I discussed the concept of bringing gifts for a cause, the first one he thought of was Make-A-Wish.

One thing that I’ve learned from having these give-back birthday conversations is that, if you remind your child that he’ll still get presents from his family, it makes the idea a little easier to swallow. In order for your child to be truly empowered by this experience it is critical that 1) he picks the charity or recipient, and 2) he is present for the delivery of the gifts or donation so that he can see the impact he’s made.

Good luck with your quest, and don’t forget to have your child visit ripplekids.com after his party so we can share his give-back birthday idea to inspire other kids. For more ideas on charitable projects for kids, as well as charities to support, please visit the resources section on the Ripple Kids website.

Happy Birthday! 🎉

Art by Nicole Howard, Miss ‘N Nick Designs (missnnick.com), a full-service invitation, notes and greeting card company. Be sure to check them out!

