

## Making Kids' Birthdays an Event

By KAREN LUNDEGAARD

August 17, 2004; Page D2

Children's birthday parties have become big business as inflatable moonbounces and elaborate themes make magicians and clowns passe.

Chains and franchises looking to cash in on birthday one-upmanship are popping up to offer everything from planning services to moonbounce rentals. Build-A-Bear Workshop Inc., which lets kids make their own teddy bears, has more than 150 stores. It filed to go public last week and plans to raise \$125 million to open more stores. Disneyland and Universal Studios each began offering birthday packages about a year ago. At Universal, \$895 buys park admission for 16, a decorated room for two hours and a meet and greet with Shrek or Spider-man, among others.

"The birthday market has exploded," says Frank Price, founder of Holly Springs, N.C.-based Birthday University, which holds two-and-a-half day training sessions for party planners. "Parents are willing to pay anything" for somebody to take over the frustrations of throwing a birthday party. That certainly applies to us. We tested five birthday packages on our own kids, including some parties at home and others, thankfully, out of the house.

Build-A-Bear Workshop might not have been the best choice for 11 rowdy 3-year-olds. The stores, which are mostly in malls, don't have party rooms so the party is essentially selecting and stuffing the bear, and then getting it a birth certificate. The birthday boy's father and another adult missed most of the fun because they had to go set up tables in the mall's food court and order the pizza. Adding to the chaos was the fact that the staff member assigned to lead the party had never done a party of 3-year-olds before.

Build-A-Bear President Barry Erdos declined to comment, saying the company is now in a quiet period following its IPO registration.



Better than Elmo: **Radical Rob's** dry-ice experiment kept 18 preschoolers rapt.

For a 9-year-old and 17 friends, we hired Kimberalla Parties, Sterling Heights, Mich., to throw a spa party, complete with facials and manicures. The owner, Kimberly Williams, and her three teen assistants kept the girls active the whole time, making sweet-smelling sachets for their dresser drawers, and creating scrapbook pages with Polaroids of their white facial masks and cucumber-covered eyes. The low point: When one girl held her "mood" nail polish upside down and stained the carpet.

**A science-themed party with mad "scientist" Radical Rob (he wore a white lab coat) kept 18 mostly 4-year-olds rapt for the entire hour. He conducted eight experiments, including running an electrical current through two kids to light a fluorescent bulb. For the finale, everyone got to make slime to take home. Our only regret was not paying an extra \$50 for the cotton-candy experiment. Mad Science Group of Canada has more than a hundred franchises in North America.**

At Imagine It! Children's Museum of Atlanta, we had our own room and two staff members to run the party of nine kids, mostly 3-year-olds. For the \$375 deluxe package, we got a sing-a-long, a game as well as pizza, a beautiful three-layer cake and an art project of paper-bag elephant hand puppets. We picked the "Discover the Friendly Forest" theme, but it was mostly confined to the elaborately decorated cake. Museum marketing director Reagan Smith says staff was supposed to lead the party to the museum's tree-hut section for forest-themed playtime, but often -- as with our party -- things "go haywire," with kids scattering in all directions and formal activities petering out. Our 3-year-old reverted to a terrible two and ended up in a time-out for part of the party.

One of New York's hottest dining spots for kids and dolls was the choice for our 11-year-old's birthday party: American Girl Place. Though we had heard that you need to book months in advance for a party, we got in for a Saturday evening in August with just two weeks notice. In the pink-and-black party cafe, some 100 American Girl dolls were propped up on booster seats in front of zebra-striped cups and saucers. "Creepy," noted our 15-year-old Ramones-loving niece. For a kids' place, the restaurant was downright elegant, with white tablecloths and white china. And so was our dinner: mahi mahi with mashed potatoes and asparagus and a choice of wine or champagne to drink.

--Ilanthe Jeanne Dugan, Jeffrey Zaslow, Ann Carrns and Hannah Kate Kinnersley contributed to this article.