Birthday Celebrations
Just Like Other Families

“Usually we have a cookout and invite everybody over, like our family and friends. We just have a little cake, ice cream, and presents. Nothing real fancy and major, just an at-home little thing.”

The majority of this group of low-income rural families had fairly typical birthday celebrations by celebrating with a party and gift(s). However, there were some low-income families that could not or did not celebrate their children’s birthdays.

- **Aspirations for “big” parties:** Most mothers hoped to have “big” parties. They believed that the party size symbolized how much they valued their children’s birthdays. Their aspirations for “big” parties revealed the social expectations of birthday parties.

- **“Family” celebrations:** Birthday parties were mostly attended by family members; however, sometimes other significant people such as the child’s friends or the parents’ friends and neighbors attended. Children’s birthdays were considered family events that gathered the extended family members together, making these parties truly a “family” ritual.

- **No celebration:** Approximately 11% of the low-income rural families did not or could not celebrate children’s birthdays in ways they wanted. Challenges they faced were the financial cost of the party and gifts as well as conflicts with employment schedules, such as working at night. Mothers who could not celebrate with parties or gifts were very unsatisfied with their situation.

Expenditures for Birthdays within Limited Resources

“It really depends on how much money I have at the time. My daughter, who’s ten, didn’t get a birthday party this year because that was when I was just catching up.... We’ve talked about it several times, but she hasn't.”

**Cost of birthday gifts**

- Several families did not or could not buy the birthday child a present. Several families could not afford to buy a gift because they did not have enough money or because they chose to spend money on the party itself.

- About 2/3 of the mothers who reported the amount of money they spent on a gift, spent $50 or less per child.

- Almost 1/4 of the families spent more than $50 on a gift, and some families even spent over $100. These families talked about how they chose to buy expensive presents, not because they had sufficient money, but because they wanted to spend as much as they could to make the birthday special.
Situational expenditures

The families’ spending on gifts was not always consistent due to their unstable financial situations. Factors affecting the amount they spent were:

- **The timing or season of the birthday:** The families could spend more if a birthday was around tax refund season or after receiving a pay check. However, the amount spent on a birthday was lower if a mother was temporarily out of work or if a birthday was before payday or during the Christmas season.

- **The birthday child’s age:** Some mothers reported that young children would not remember what they received or how much money was spent on a gift. In these situations, mothers usually spent less if the children were infants or toddlers.

- **What the child wants:** These mothers strived to buy gifts that their child wanted. They hoped to make the child feel that her or his day was special. Making the birthday child feel happy and “normal” was the main goal even though many of these families’ budgets for the celebration depended upon several factors.

- **What the child needs:** Buying necessities as gifts may be uniquely relevant to the financial situations of low-income families. A birthday may be a good occasion for these low-income families to purchase items the child is in need of while still participating in the family ritual of celebrating a birthday.

**Resource Management Strategies for Birthday Celebrations**

- **Reducing expenditure:** Selecting low cost food, gifts, or party places was one of the most common strategies. Several mothers substituted time and other resources for money by having parties at home or at public parks instead of going to a location that charged a fee. Other mothers reduced costs by making their own cakes or other food instead of purchasing it.

- **Planning ahead:** Some mothers saved money for birthdays, purchased gifts when money was available, and set a budget before shopping.

  "I’ve been in crisis mode forever. But, I buy him some presents…. I usually start plenty of time before birthdays and Christmas. I have October and two December birthdays, and then there’s Christmas. So, I usually start in June. I just buy things when I see them that are right for all of these."

- **Changing priorities and pooling:** A few mothers who did not have enough money put items on layaway or credit cards or chose to pay a bill or rent late. Another strategy unique to birthday celebrations was pooling resources by combining birthday parties with another child.

  "His and my niece’s are four days apart. We always do it together. The idea was, her mom was working and I wasn’t. She had a job and I didn’t. I got Food Stamps and she didn’t. So, she bought the stuff, and I bought the food. That's how [it worked]."

- **Receiving social support:** Receiving social support was a main strategy for many families. Assistance from informal networks, especially from the mother’s extended family, was vital to a birthday celebration. For instance, family members helped with the costs of the party or gifts as well as the party preparation, such as providing transportation for shopping.

  "My father's helping me with that [birthday celebration]…. He said, 'Well, let's get something bigger. Something he can grow into.' I said I don't get that money. He said, 'I'll help you out. Shaun is the newest thing in our family."

- **Utilizing formal support:** Several mothers accessed benefits from formal assistance, such as Food Stamps, food shelves, and Earned Income Tax Credits.
Supporting Low-Income Families for Birthday Celebrations

Supporting celebrations like children’s birthdays is important to low-income families as well as society. These are suggestions to consider.

- **Policymakers**: It would be helpful for policymakers to understand the significance of celebrations for low-income families. Most of our policies that support or help low-income families ignore desires for rituals and celebrations and deal only with the economic environment of a minimum day-to-day living.

- **Local governments and public agencies**: Public libraries, for example, could offer party supply rentals or mobile birthday party service. Government-owned facilities could provide free admission to a zoo, a museum, or a swimming pool or provide free public transportation for the birthday child. Programs like Head Start could develop a birthday club and plan a special event each month for children with birthdays in that month.

- **Schools and parents**: Schools could educate parents to consider low-income families when they have birthday parties. One mother who participated in the Rural Families Speak project mentioned a five-dollar limit for birthday gifts in her child’s class. This is an example of how schools and parents can deal with the social expectation of celebrating birthday parties as well as the economic reality of their cost.

- **Community groups**: Some community nonprofit organizations have ongoing efforts that should serve as best practices for other communities to help preserve this important family ritual. Food pantries in some communities have birthday supplies available such as cake mixes, candles as well as small presents for children. Local businesses could partner with community organizations to offer free products for the birthday child.

- **Society as a whole**: Efforts to change our consumption-oriented birthday celebrations into meaning-oriented rituals have implications. Recently, community action to raise awareness of the societal pressure of children’s birthday parties became more visible. These movements will bring more beneficial outcomes by taking careful account of low-income families that have to deal with the social expectation of celebrating birthday parties as well as with the economic reality of their cost.

**Authors’ note**: This brief draws heavily from the following article. For more information, contact Jaerim Lee at jalee@umn.edu


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