

Ditch the balloons and swap the plastic toys for cake: how to have a waste-free birthday party

Level 3: Advanced

1 Warmer

a. Discuss the following questions in pairs.

1. How do people typically celebrate birthdays in your country?
2. What are some ways parties and celebrations might have a negative impact on the environment?
3. What small changes would you suggest to someone who wanted to have an 'eco-friendlier' celebration? How practical do you think these changes would be?

2 Key words

a. Find the words from the box in the article. Then use the words to complete the definitions.

bash	couches	environmental	repurposing
biodegradable	cutlery	footprint	sidestepped
bunting	daunting	integrated into	thrifted
compostable	disposable	lollies	to boot
cost the earth	dumped	normalise	

1. _____ is knives, forks and spoons used for eating.
2. If something is _____, it can naturally break down and return to the environment without causing harm.
3. A(n) _____ is a colourful decoration, often made of fabric or paper, that is hung up for parties or celebrations.
4. If waste food is _____, it can break down safely in a compost pile and turn into soil.
5. The expression _____, means extremely expensive.
6. _____ are long, comfortable seats that several people can sit on, often found in living rooms.
7. A(n) _____ is an informal word for a celebration or party.
8. If something is _____, it seems very difficult or frightening to deal with.

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9. If something is _____, it is made to be thrown away after one use.
10. When something is _____, it is thrown away carelessly, usually in a place where it shouldn't be.
11. Your _____ is the effect your actions have on the environment, especially regarding waste and energy use.
12. When something is _____ something else, it becomes a natural part of it.
13. _____ are different coloured sweets on a wooden stick.
14. When you _____ something, you make it seem usual and acceptable to people.
15. _____ is finding a new use for something old instead of throwing it away.
16. If something is _____, it is deliberately avoided.
17. If you have _____ something, you bought it second-hand, often from a thrift store.
18. _____ is a phrase that means 'in addition' or 'as well'.

b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity in the correct form.

1. The new conference centre was beautifully _____ the landscape, making it almost invisible from a distance.
2. After the festival, piles of plastic cups and plates were simply _____ in the nearby park by the volunteers.
3. Although the task seemed _____ at first, Bobby and Joe managed to complete it ahead of schedule.
4. Olivia _____ most of the furniture for her apartment, giving it a unique style.

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5. Instead of throwing away old jeans, why not try _____ them into tote bags?
6. The company's decision to use only _____ packaging has been praised by environmental groups.
7. Daniel's constant flying and luxury lifestyle leave a significant _____.
8. The café was decorated with strings of _____ to celebrate its grand opening.
9. Most of the cosmetic products Ella sells in her store are _____, so they break down naturally without polluting the soil.
10. Tom held a big _____ to celebrate the end of the university term.
11. It's important for influencers to help _____ discussions about mental health.
12. Not only was the house extremely expensive but it also needed massive renovations _____.
13. At her daughter's birthday party, Gemma set up a buffet table with a variety of _____ and sweets for the children.
14. The event organisers managed to _____ the city's strict regulations by claiming it was a private gathering.
15. Buying _____ paper plates for a party may seem convenient, but they contribute greatly to landfill waste.
16. 'Take a seat on one of the _____ in the waiting room and the therapist will be with you shortly,' said the receptionist.
17. Imported luxury items tend to _____, making them unaffordable for most people.
18. When Amelia opened the drawer, she realised they didn't have enough _____ for all the guests who were coming to dinner.

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Low waste doesn't have to mean no fun – with a little creativity you can celebrate an occasion without hurting the planet

Koren Helbig

21 March, 2025

- 1 When planning a big bash to celebrate my 40th last year, I wanted a stylish and memorable celebration that didn't cost the earth.
- 2 Between food waste, plastic packaging, single-use decorations and fast fashion, the environmental footprint of festivities can quickly add up. Thankfully though, low waste doesn't have to mean no fun.
- 3 With a little creativity, out-of-the-box thinking and some help from my community, I was able to throw an entertaining and colourful back yard garden party that produced little waste – and was more affordable to boot. Here are some ideas to help you plan a low-impact party.
- 4 **Reduce food waste and packaging**
- 5 Disposable plates, cups and cutlery are among the most wasteful aspects of parties – they're single-use, wrapped in plastic and usually get dumped in the rubbish. Over-catering food is also costly to both the environment and your hip pocket. I sidestepped all that by hosting a pot-luck dinner – where each guest brought a plate of food to share – served using metal cutlery and compostable plates.
- 6 Another option, says zero-waste author Erin Rhoads, is the national Party Kit Network. Community members offer reusable tableware, decorations and even party games to borrow, use and return locally. Some party kits are free, while schools and childcare centres may charge a small hire fee for fundraising. "As a parent, planning a party for your child can be really stressful," Rhoads says. "With the kit, everyone gets to see how easily reusables can be integrated into a celebration."
- 7 **Reuse, borrow and rent**
- 8 Consider how you might source your get-together's needs without purchasing new. I began by repurposing items I already had. I gathered couches and comfy chairs from around my house and set them up in the garden – after the party, they simply went back inside. In the weeks leading up to the event, I kept an eye on roadside rubbish and found a free rug and a couple of extra chairs. Instead of buying new glassware, I used old jars.
- 9 When I needed extra items, I turned to my community and borrowed fairy lights, a fire pit, small coffee tables and extra seating. If you do need to buy, try second-hand first. I thrifted a drinks dispenser online – for one-third of the usual retail price – and sourced my entire 1920s-themed outfit, from headpiece to dress and shoes, at thrift shops.
- 10 **Skip presents or try a 'fiver birthday'**
- 11 At this stage in my life, I have most things I need – and I'm fussy about what I want in my home. To avoid unwanted gifts, I simply asked for none. Alternatively, you could request experiences, consumable treats such as foods and drinks, and even second-hand gifts from thrift shops, helping normalise sustainable giving while reducing costs for your guests.
- 12 Rhoads says a "fiver birthday" is a great option for children's parties – and helps take the pressure off parents. Each guest contributes just \$5 so the birthday child can buy themselves a larger gift afterwards. Handmade cards add a personal touch. Or just ask if there's anything specific the child needs or wants. "There's no point giving a kid an eco-friendly gift they'll never use," Rhoads says.
- 13 Avoid disposable wrapping paper, which mostly can't be recycled due to metallic dyes, plastic coating and stray plastic sticky tape. Instead, try newspaper or second-hand options such as old sheet music, fabric, scarves or tea towels, decorated with ribbons saved from previous presents. Ensure you choose biodegradable tape, too.
- 14 **Choose low-impact decorations and party bags**
- 15 If you make just one change at your next party – ban the balloons. Balloon pollution is a major threat to marine life including seabirds and turtles, which can die after mistaking balloons for food. Instead, consider homemade options made from compostable materials, such as wool, cotton, wood, paper and even plants and flowers from the garden or neighbourhood. Fabric bunting and paper garlands can be folded up and reused again for future parties.
- 16 To make kids' party bags more sustainable, avoid plastic-wrapped lollies or cheap plastic toys that break easily. Or, Rhoads says, simply send guests home with a slice of birthday cake in a paper bag.

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17 “Showing these swaps aren’t that daunting and that events can still be joyful – and perhaps save money as a bonus – is a fun way to get people to rethink living sustainability without the lectures and statistics, which can scare them into inaction,” she says. “It helps shift habits and behaviours in the long term.”

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3 Comprehension check

a. Choose the correct answer (a, b, c or d).

1. What was the writer's main motivation for hosting a low-waste party?
 - a. to save money on the celebration
 - b. to create a stylish and environmentally responsible event
 - c. to start a trend among their social circle
2. According to the text, what approach did the writer take to minimise food waste and packaging?
 - a. preparing exact portions for each guest
 - b. using biodegradable plates and cutlery
 - c. organising a potluck dinner with reusable tableware
3. The phrase 'costly to both the environment and your hip pocket' implies that ...
 - a. environmental damage is directly proportional to financial expense.
 - b. protecting the environment requires significant financial investment.
 - c. poor environmental choices also tend to be financially wasteful.
4. What does the writer suggest as an alternative to purchasing new items for a party?
 - a. Combining repurposing, borrowing and second-hand purchasing.
 - b. Exclusively using items already owned.
 - c. Renting everything needed from professional services.
5. According to the text, why might balloon use be particularly problematic?
 - a. They create non-biodegradable waste.
 - b. They are typically made from petroleum products.
 - c. They pose a specific lethal threat to wildlife.

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6. The concluding paragraph suggests that sustainable celebrations are valuable because they ...
- educate people about environmental statistics.
 - demonstrate eco-friendly living without intimidating lectures.
 - promote minimalist lifestyle choices.

4 Key language

a. Complete the table with the correct forms of the words.

Noun	Verb	Adjective	Adverb
1) _____	2) _____	sustainable / unsustainable	sustainably / unsustainably
3) _____	celebrate	4) _____ / 5) _____	-
6) _____	7) _____	affordable / unaffordable	affordably / unaffordably
reuse	8) _____	9) _____	-
10) _____	normalise	11) _____ / 12) _____	13) _____ / 14) _____

b. Choose the correct form of the words from the previous activity to complete the sentences.

- Running a marathon in 40-degree heat is largely _____ for all but the most experienced long-distance athletes.
- A(n) _____ mood hung over the awards ceremony as the industry confronted its recently exposed inequalities.
- That architectural firm specialises in the _____ of old industrial buildings and converting them into residential units.
- Meteorologists described the unseasonable drought as _____ severe, showing a major change from historical rainfall patterns.

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5. Saddiq and Justine's wedding _____ incorporated cultural traditions from both families.
6. Despite his significant inheritance, Jules couldn't _____ to maintain the historic estate due to the rising costs of restoration and conservation.

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

- Think about the last celebration or party you attended. Which of the ideas mentioned in the article could you realistically implement in your own event? What might prevent you from adopting some of these practices?
- The article focuses on private celebrations. How could these ideas be applied to larger events such as corporate functions, public festivals or community celebrations?

6 In your own words

a. Create a simple 'how-to' guide that shows people how to make parties better for the environment. Choose ONE topic from the article such as food, decorations or gifts. Include:

- a short introduction explaining why it's important
- numbered step-by-step instructions
- a list of materials that are needed
- one helpful tip at the end

b. Share your 'how to' guides with your class.