

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

### Level 2: Intermediate

#### 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 can have a negative effect on the environment?
3. What small changes could people make to have more 'eco-friendly' celebrations?

#### 2 Key words

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

ban  
borrow  
bunting

compostable  
cutlery  
disposable

outfit  
packaging  
reusable

second-hand  
skip  
thrift shops

1. \_\_\_\_\_ is knives, forks and spoons used for eating.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ are places that sell cheap things that are not new.
3. When you \_\_\_\_\_ something, you say it is not allowed.
4. To \_\_\_\_\_ means to take something for a short time and give it back later.
5. A(n) \_\_\_\_\_ is a decoration made of small, colourful pieces of cloth, usually hanging on a string.
6. When something is \_\_\_\_\_, it can disappear naturally and safely in the environment.
7. A(n) \_\_\_\_\_ item can be used once and then thrown away.
8. A(n) \_\_\_\_\_ is a set of clothes you wear together for a special purpose like a party.
9. The materials used to wrap or protect products are called \_\_\_\_\_.
10. \_\_\_\_\_ means you can use something again and again.

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11. When something is \_\_\_\_\_, it is not new and was owned by someone else before.
12. To \_\_\_\_\_ means to decide not to do something.

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

1. Angelica wore a new \_\_\_\_\_ to the wedding.
2. You can usually find cheap clothes at \_\_\_\_\_.
3. Try not to use \_\_\_\_\_ cups if you want to reduce waste.
4. Can I \_\_\_\_\_ your pen for a minute?
5. Our school has \_\_\_\_\_ mobile phones in class.
6. We \_\_\_\_\_ dessert because we were full.
7. I bought a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ bike online because it was cheaper.
8. Don't forget to bring a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ water bottle to school.
9. We put up colourful \_\_\_\_\_ around the garden for the party.
10. In my opinion, there's too much plastic \_\_\_\_\_ on fruit in supermarkets.
11. These plates are \_\_\_\_\_, so they won't harm nature.
12. Can you place the \_\_\_\_\_ on the dining table, please?

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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 party to celebrate my 40th last year, I wanted a stylish and memorable celebration that didn't cost a lot of money. Parties often create a lot of rubbish. There's food waste, plastic packaging, cheap decorations and fast fashion. Luckily, using less doesn't mean less fun. With some help from my friends and a few creative ideas, I organised a colourful garden party. It didn't create much waste, and it was cheaper too. Here are some ideas to help you plan a similar party.

#### 2 Reduce food waste and packaging

3 Disposable plates, cups and cutlery are among the most wasteful aspects of parties. I avoided all that by having a pot-luck dinner – where each guest brought a plate of food to share – served using metal cutlery and compostable plates.

4 Another option, says author Erin Rhoads, is the national Party Kit Network. Community members offer reusable decorations and even party games to borrow, use and return locally. "As a parent, planning a party for your child can be really stressful," Rhoads says. "With the kit, everyone gets to see how easily reusable items can be part of a celebration."

#### 5 Reuse, borrow and rent

6 Consider how you might find items without having to buy new ones. I used items I already had. I gathered sofas and chairs from around my house and put them in the garden – after the party, they simply went back inside. In the weeks before the event, I found a free rug and a couple of extra chairs. Instead of buying new glasses, I used old jars.

7 When I needed extra items, I turned to my community and borrowed things. If you do need to buy, try second-hand first. I got my complete 1920s-themed outfit at thrift shops.

#### 8 Skip presents or try a 'fiver birthday'

9 At this stage in my life, I have most things I need. To avoid unwanted gifts, I simply asked for none. However, you could request experiences, food and drink, and even second-hand gifts from thrift shops.

10 Rhoads says a "fiver birthday" is a great option for children's parties – and helps take the pressure off parents. Each guest gives just \$5 so the birthday child can buy themselves a larger gift. Handmade cards can be nicely personal. Or just ask if there's anything special that the child needs or wants. "There's no point giving a kid a gift they'll never use," Rhoads says.

#### 11 Choose low-impact decorations and party bags

12 If you make just one change at your next party – ban the balloons. Balloon pollution is a major problem for seabirds and turtles. Instead, consider homemade decorations made from wool, cotton, wood, paper and even plants and flowers from the garden or neighbourhood. Fabric bunting can be folded up and reused again for future parties.

13 "Showing these swaps can still be joyful – and perhaps save money as a bonus – is a fun way to get people to live sustainably," she says. "It helps change habits and behaviours in the long term."

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#### 3 Comprehension check

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

1. What was the writer's main goal when planning their 40th birthday party?
  - a. to have a large number of guests
  - b. to have a stylish celebration without spending much money
  - c. to organise the party very quickly
2. How did the writer serve food at the party?
  - a. They ordered food from a restaurant.
  - b. They cooked all the food themselves.
  - c. They asked guests to bring food to share.
3. What is the Party Kit Network?
  - a. an online store for ordering party food
  - b. a company that sells party decorations
  - c. a community service where people can borrow reusable party items
4. How did the writer get furniture for the garden party?
  - a. They used furniture from inside their house.
  - b. They bought new garden furniture.
  - c. They rented furniture from a company.
5. What did the writer request instead of presents?
  - a. money
  - b. specific gifts from a list
  - c. no gifts at all

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6. According to the text, what is one important change people should make for parties?
- to avoid using plastic cups
  - to stop having balloons
  - to try not to serve too much food

#### 4 Key language

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

Noun	Verb	Adjective	Adverb
1) _____	2) _____	wasteful	wastefully
3) _____	celebrate	celebratory	-
4) _____	help	5) _____ / unhelpful	6) _____ / unhelpfully
memory	memorise	7) _____	memorably
colour	8) _____	9) _____	10) _____

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

- I have no \_\_\_\_\_ of my first day at school.
- We had a small \_\_\_\_\_ at home for my sister's graduation.
- I planned the party with the \_\_\_\_\_ of my friends.
- The holiday was really \_\_\_\_\_ because we saw dolphins for the first time.
- The room was \_\_\_\_\_ decorated with balloons and bunting.
- Try not to \_\_\_\_\_ food; only take what you can finish.

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#### 5 Discussion

**a. Discuss these questions.**

- What was the best party you have ever been to? What did you do and what made it so memorable?
- Are there any eco-friendly ideas from the text that you would like to try for your own parties in the future? Which ones and why?
- The article suggests borrowing items instead of buying new ones. What problems might people face when trying to borrow things for a party?

#### 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.**