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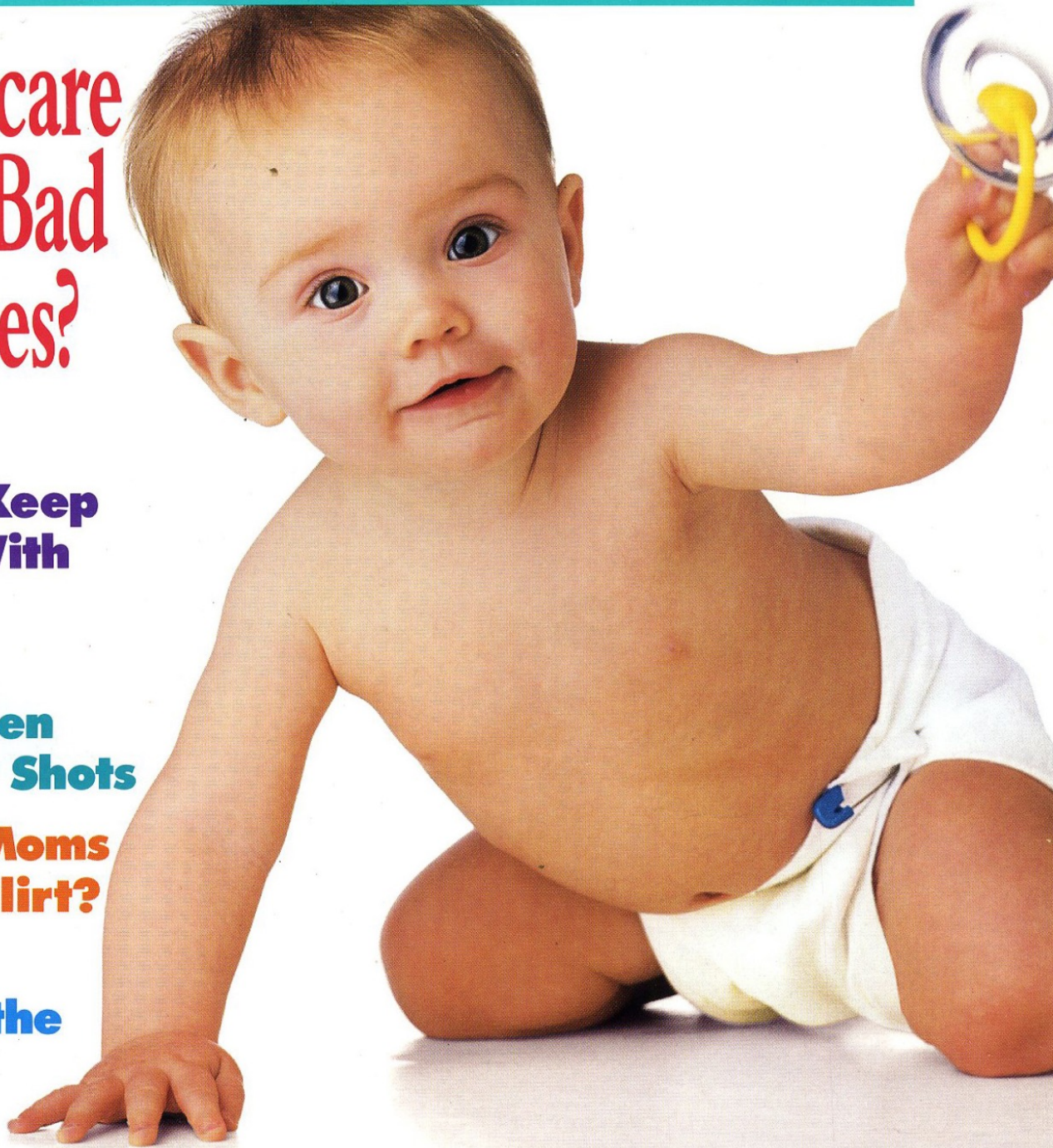
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A Party to Remember

For many children with special needs, having a birthday celebration is a wish come true.

It was not your typical birthday party. In fact, nothing about it was typical. Not the birthday boy himself, nor the kids who came, nor even the sweetness in the air that would transform this early October afternoon into a wondrous and magical one.

Take a nine-year-old boy attached to an oxygen tank, 15 or so of his classmates with disabilities ranging from cerebral palsy to Down syndrome to hearing impairment, add their parents and siblings, his grandparents and neighbors, several special-education teachers and some nurses, and you might well wonder, as I did, what would happen. Actually, what happened was the most incredible thing. But let me back up a few years.

Many birthdays for my son, Lucien, who has heart and lung disease, have been bittersweet—never quite days to celebrate. There have been birthdays in hospitals, birthdays sick in bed, and birthdays with family members gathered round a dinner table

cheering Lucien on. But only once had there been a birthday with his peers.

The fact is that Lucien, like many children with serious disabilities, has few real friends to play with. In his case, he's extremely physically impaired, developmentally behind, and hasn't interacted much with children his own age. So why did his dad and I contemplate throwing a birthday party for our son this year? Because he had only once had his own real party. Because he was as strong as he's ever going to be. Because he might not make it to his next birthday.

And so we decided to try it, knowing it might be an utter fiasco.

Well, the party was a smashing success. Everyone we invited came, 34 in all. I was astounded by the excited RSVPs, and realized early on that there would be a big turnout because, sadly, kids with disabilities generally don't get many invitations. Indeed, Heidi Woods, Lucien's special-education teacher, told me that his party was the first student birthday celebration she'd ever attended. And yet, as my family discovered this year, holding parties for children with disabilities is vitally important.

"It's the one day of the year that's completely yours," Woods says, "and no matter what a child's particular disability or limitations, we need to acknowledge his birthdays." Dr. Peggy Finston, a psychiatrist from Prescott, Arizona, and author of *Parenting Plus: Raising Children With Special Health Needs*, agrees. Finston believes that parents of children with disabilities must strive to make their kids' lives as normal as possible: "You want your child to experience the kinds of activities a regular child does—including birthday parties," she says. "Participation in such an event helps to foster a child's sense of belonging and lessens his sense of being somehow 'defective.'" (continued)



Opening presents, painting T-shirts, and eating birthday cake with friends and family were treasured treats for the author's son.

A New Twist on Birthdays

To make the party work, Finston advises parents to modify some of the more standard birthday routines to fit their child's needs. Susan and Don Arnold of Topeka, Kansas, did exactly that when they gave their ten-year-old son, Matt, a fourth-grader with cerebral palsy, a party at the local roller skating rink. "We chose skating because it was an activity that would bring kids who have varying abilities together," says his mother. "It worked out really well. We took turns rolling Matt and some of the others around the rink in their wheelchairs, and the able-bodied kids would skate in front and fall down on purpose to make them laugh. Matt had a wonderful time."

Pamela Margo of Corte Madera, California, invited parents and children to a home-cooked buffet lunch to celebrate the birthday of her four-year-old daughter, who is hearing impaired. But luncheons and skating aren't the only activities that will be fun for both those with disabilities and those without: A softball game, where the child with limited physical ability bats the ball and a friend runs for him, is a good bet, as are piñatas. They can be filled with candy and small toys, and even children in wheelchairs can participate in breaking them open.

For Lucien's birthday party, we decided to try an art theme, but with a twist: We would paint T-shirts. Soon after the guests arrived they were ushered into the backyard, where we had laid out 15 T-shirts of assorted sizes. Each shirt had a flattened paper bag sandwiched inside to prevent wet paint from leaking to the back. We supplied plenty of tubes of special paint that was easy to squeeze right onto the cloth.

The kids took one look at all the beautiful colors and dove in. Those who couldn't talk could still paint. Those who couldn't hear didn't need to. Those who were hyperactive quickly became engaged in this short project long enough to complete it. The colors spoke to everyone. When we were finished we laid the T-shirts out in the sun; by the time the party was over an hour and a half later, they were dry, and the kids took their wearable artwork home as party favors.

One of the reasons the T-shirts worked so well was that the kids had plenty of assistance; while routine birthday parties are often children-only affairs, we made a point of inviting every child's parents so that the adult-child ratio would be

about equal. And even with the other mothers and fathers there, we still asked our family nurses to watch over Lucien and hired a teenager to help serve food and clean up afterward. Having all those extra hands helped guarantee that we'd have a smooth-running party instead of a chaotic afternoon.

For food we opted for a simple meal of hot dogs, potato chips, soda pop, ice cream and cake—foods we rarely eat, but which Lucien is crazy about. Whatever you serve, keep in mind any dietary restrictions the children may have and plan accordingly. For example, I boiled the hot dogs in three different pots of water and served low-salt potato chips because of Lucien's salt restriction; likewise, I set out diet soda for the kids who have to watch their sugar intake. To make sure there's food that everyone can eat, check with each of the parents to see if their child follows a special diet.

Celebrate Again—and Again

One splurge that I highly recommend is renting a video camera. We videotaped the

highlights of the party so Lucien could relive the pleasure and share it with his schoolmates. And for the first few months after the celebration, he played it every day. It's still a family favorite.

But the best part about the birthday party was that our son was there; his dad and I never thought he'd reach the age of nine. As for Lucien, he was so proud, leaning over his birthday cake to blow out the candles, surrounded by his family and classmates, his nurses and assorted friends and neighbors, all of whom have rallied him on over the years. Just having those kids at his house playing and painting together, bringing presents and singing "Happy Birthday," said to him: I have friends. I am part of this group and part of the world. This is my special day, and all of these people are here to celebrate it with me.

What a powerful message to give a child with disabilities. □

Daphne Larkin is a Corte Madera, California-based freelance writer. Her Disabilities column appears quarterly.



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