



## Tone down kids' parties for charity

The children's birthday party, once a simple celebration involving cake, ice cream and Pin the Tail on the Donkey, has evolved into a spectacle featuring clowns, bounce houses and a mountain of gifts. If you have the deep, deep, pockets of Tom and Katie Cruise, why not drop \$100,000 on Suri's second birthday party?

There is an alternative to the supersized children's party.

Debbie Zinman and Alison Smith, two mothers living in Toronto, have created ECHOage, a Web site that combines birthday celebrations with charity. No gift-wrap necessary.

It's pretty simple, too. Parents log in to [www.echoage.com](http://www.echoage.com) and select invitations to e-mail to friends. Friends receive the online invitation and can use a credit card to donate \$10, \$15, \$20, \$25 or \$30. Half the money (after ECHOage deducts its 15% administrative fee) goes into a fund to buy the child "one big gift" with the rest going to a charity the family selects. The parent receives a check in the mail to buy a gift and a charity deduction receipt.

It's not about cutting out the party or celebration, the moms say. It's about "One Gift. One Cause."

"This is a shift in thinking," Smith says. "It's bringing more meaning to a birthday instead of more toys which will eventually be discarded and end up in a landfill."

How did parents get themselves into this mega-birthday party mess in the first place?

"I think parents had good intentions," Zinman says. "Parents indulge the child thinking they will like them better, the child will be happy or feel fulfilled," she says. "Good parenting is about setting limits. Giving kids tons of stuff harms them. They have a lack of appreciation."

Both Zinman and Smith, who have four children between them, have seen excess at children's parties.

"I have seen loot bags where the party favor was a huge toy for the guest," Zinman says.

Since starting in the U.S. this year, Zinman says they have held 1,000 ECHOage parties from California to New York.

"Moms have said, 'We have enough stuff and don't need anymore,' " Zinman says. "It's a great way to educate our kids and help the environment."

How will kids react?

"The parent has to sell the child on it," Zinman says.

For example, parents can tell their child how they are making it possible for a child to eat or have trees at their playground.

The choices of charities are Nourish America, International Child Art Foundation, Girls Inc. and EarthCorps.

After the party is over, moms can e-mail thank-you notes for the donations.

If you think your child will be emotionally scarred from being denied a boatload of gifts, think again, Zinman says.

"We have witnessed a lot of parties," she says. "The kids were more interested in interacting with each other than amassing gifts. The guests would give the gift to the host and the birthday child didn't seem particularly interested. The gifts would be opened and, after 15 minutes, the kids would move on."

An ECHOage party frees parents (moms) from having to buy a gift, birthday card and gift-wrap.

"It makes Mom's life easier," she says.

*The columnist can be reached at [maquirre@fresnobee.com](mailto:maquirre@fresnobee.com) or (559) 441-6482. Check out her blog, and others, at [centralvalleymoms.com](http://centralvalleymoms.com).*