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Special Series



Calendar of
Events



Family Matters
Family Fun



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Get the Party Started

My younger son was the last among his friends to have an in-person birthday party before the pandemic hit. I'm still amazed that nobody who attended his Ninja Warrior-style shindig got sick. Rowdy kindergartners jumped on top of each other in the foam pit and squeezed together in the party room for cake as their parents stood shoulder to shoulder on the sidelines, chatting casually about this new virus called COVID-19. Obviously, nobody was wearing a mask.

A year later, my son may be one of the last in his class to have a drive-by birthday party. At the end of February, we handed out individually packaged cupcakes to friends dressed as characters from one of his favorite video games. He was Mario, my older son was Luigi, my husband was Toad and I was Princess Peach, of course. We were a sight to behold; my son even affixed a bushy black mustache to his mask. It was a hilarious way to celebrate his special day, and best of all, it was easy for everyone.

Now that vaccines are making the return of in-person parties possible — outdoors and masked up, per health

experts — it's easy to feel overwhelmed by the thought of planning something more complicated than a car parade or a Zoom hangout. But don't worry: Our Party Issue is packed with tips to make your child's second pandemic birthday celebration an effortless affair.

You know who else is deserving of a celebration? Teachers! The first week in May is Teacher Appreciation Week, and after this crazy year of remote and hybrid learning, our children's educators deserve so much more than a coffee shop gift card. Erica Rimlinger shares creative ways to express gratitude for their endless patience after months of your child repeatedly forgetting to mute themselves on Zoom.

May is also Mother's Day, and with two very loud boys at home, I know exactly what I want: a quiet morning to sleep in. Writer Jenny Splitter has suggestions to help all moms give themselves the gift of a great night's sleep.

Happy reading, and stay safe!

PJ Feinstein



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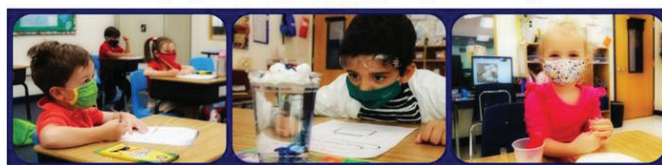
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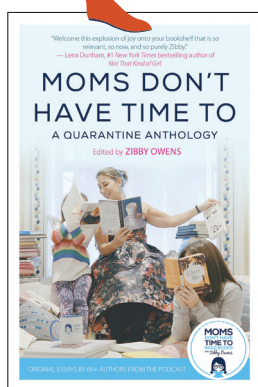
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BY ELENA EPSTEIN,
DIRECTOR OF THE NATIONAL
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Payal Thomas

Co-founder of Every Girl Dolls

BY JENNIFER MARINO WALTERS



Why is it important for children to have a doll that looks like them?

It can make a child feel represented. Growing up, I felt so separated from my South Asian culture. My family moved around so much that we didn't have a strong community.

I was always the only Indian kid at school, so I never really connected with my culture. I realized that if I don't feel connected, how do I expect my children to? Now I'm trying to engage them with the culture, and Every Girl Dolls is one way to do that.

Were you surprised that it was so hard to find a South Asian doll for Kaila?

Yes! I thought I'd be able to easily find a doll that was brown and looked Indian or South Asian. But there weren't any. The majority of dolls are marketed to Caucasians or African Americans. A brown doll should be widely available. It shouldn't be something that's so special that I have to custom order it.

How did you link up with Snehal Patel?

I made a survey to get feedback from other parents about what they were looking for in a doll. I posted it in a group of South Asian women called Little Brown Diary. Snehal messaged me and said she had been thinking about creating a doll line and would love to work with me on it. It's been great! If I was doing this alone, I wouldn't have gotten this far. I needed a push. Snehal helps to keep me more accountable.

How did you design the doll?

We interviewed a couple of South Asian designers whom we found on Instagram. We found one we really liked, and she helped us design the doll. Then we found a manufacturer that makes 18-inch dolls. They're almost finished with the mold of

the face, and then we'll get a prototype that we can start sharing. The doll will be sold in a modern South Asian outfit, but it will be able to wear American outfits, too, because they're so widely available.

What will come after the initial South Asian doll?

We plan to put out Asian and Latina dolls next. I would also like the dolls to come with books that can further tie children to their culture.

How do you find time to get work done for the company?

I usually work on Every Girl Dolls two to three nights a week after the kids go to bed, between 8:30 p.m. and midnight. I wake up by 7:45 a.m. so I can be online for my day job at 8 a.m. I try to fit stuff in throughout the day. It's busy, but it's a good busy! I am working on stuff all the time, but it's not as hectic as it was in December, when I was doing research constantly.

What has been the hardest part about balancing it all?

I feel like it's very hard to be 100% present for anything. Sometimes when I'm working, I feel bad because I feel like I should be doing something with the kids.

What do you like about living in the Washington, D.C., area?

I love that there are so many activities for kids. I love all the parks, the rec centers and the trails. My family loves to go hiking, and we are always able to find new places to do that.

What do you hope your kids will learn from seeing you pursue this dream?

I hope they'll be inspired by seeing that I put myself out there and tried something new.

I hope it will open their eyes to understand that they can try anything too! ■

When Payal Thomas went doll shopping for her daughter last November, she couldn't find a doll of South Asian descent. Rather than paying \$200 to customize one, Thomas decided to start a doll company with another Indian American mother, Snehal Patel.

Every Girl Dolls, which officially launched in February, will offer dolls representing various ethnicities. The first, a doll representing South Asia, will likely be available by the end of this summer on the company's website, everygirldolls.com.

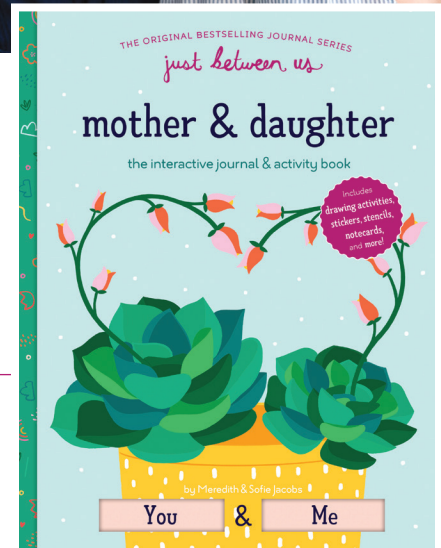
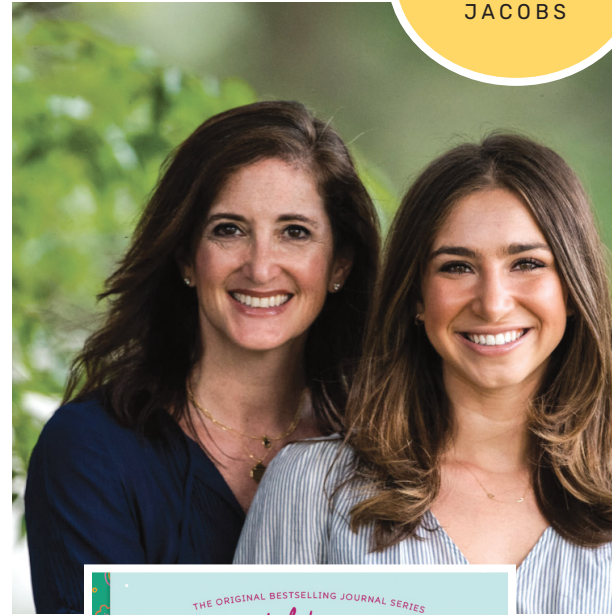
Launching a company with no entrepreneurial experience is challenging enough on its own. But Thomas also works full time for the IRS from her Burke, Virginia, home. Throw in a husband (Kevin), two kids (Jace, 7, and Kaila, 5) and a pandemic, and her work is even more impressive.

Thomas talks to *Washington FAMILY* about her inspiration for Every Girl Dolls and how she manages all her work.

BUILDING Mother-Daughter BONDS

The interactive “Just Between Us: Mother & Daughter” journal by Meredith and Sofie Jacobs of Rockville, Maryland, is an updated edition of their bestselling book, first published more than a decade ago.

BY JENN ATTANASIO



Like many 9-year-old girls, Sofie Jacobs’ cheeks turned bright red at the thought of talking about boys with her mom. But she needed advice. So, Sofie journaled about her crush and asked her mom, Meredith, to respond in writing. Using pen and paper to work through a sensitive situation — and avoiding a potentially awkward conversation — proved so successful that the Rockville, Maryland-based mother and daughter continued to journal back and forth.

In 2010, Meredith and Sofie published “Just Between Us: Mother & Daughter,” a journal with writing prompts and quizzes, so other moms and daughters could bond in the same deep and meaningful way. Journals for mothers and sons, sisters, and grandmothers and granddaughters came later, too.

Now, the mother-daughter co-authors are back with an interactive follow-up to their original bestselling journal. The new “Just Between Us: Mother & Daughter” features updated prompts, art and playful content, such as stickers, notecards and stencils, for today’s moms and daughters.

Washington FAMILY caught up with Meredith and Sofie, a college grad living in New York City, about writing, staying connected and more.

USING PEN AND PAPER

to work through a sensitive situation proved so successful that the mother and daughter continued to journal back and forth.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF MEREDITH AND SOFIE JACOBS

Q: What inspired you to publish the first journal?

Meredith: I was on tour for another book, and I would often be speaking to a room of moms. And when I would share that Sofie and I were doing this, I noticed that everyone in the audience started writing down a note — I'm assuming, like, "Go buy a journal." I thought, what if we use what Sofie and I have been doing and create a template for other mothers and daughters to connect?

Q: What has the response been like from other parents and kids?

Sofie: It's been really incredible. Even looking at our Amazon page, there are so many reviews from mothers who say, "This changed my relationship with my daughter." When my mom and I made the journal, it was a tool that we loved and we were excited to share with other people. But just to see the impact that it's made has been so incredible.

Meredith: I remember we had an in-person signing at a Barnes and Noble near our house, and this little girl came up to us to get Sofie's signature because she loved the journal. She was so excited. The way she looked up to Sofie — as a mom, it was incredible to see.

Q: Why was it time for an updated journal?

Sofie: There are so many things we wanted to touch on that are relevant now, such as social media and the political climate. Kids these days might have a lot of questions that normally they would be asking

later on. So, we wanted to give mothers the opportunity to talk to their daughters about them.

Meredith: We have a way of initially approaching these topics in a fun way, but it also very much opens up important conversations. I feel that it's a journal where everyone can feel a sense of belonging.

Q: How has creating and publishing the journal brought you two closer over the years?

Sofie: When the journal started, I just wanted to be able to talk to my mom about things that might've been a little tricky to talk about in person but easy to write down. As I got older, we almost didn't need to journal anymore — it felt so easy and natural to have those conversations.

Meredith: When Sofie was in college, we could see how easy it was for us to communicate, even by a text or having a phone call. Because we had that foundation, knowing how to talk to each other through writing.

I often wonder if we had a different texting relationship because of our journaling.

Sofie: I was going to school a plane ride away. And it just felt very natural to keep up the close relationship we had. I still felt that strong connection with her.

Q: What advice would you give to people who want that kind of close connection with their child?

Meredith: When she would write to me, it gave me that space to really hear her and really let her express what she wanted to say. And I could think about it and respond more thoughtfully. You listen better when you're reading. That's what I tell parents: there's times when you have to just listen.

Q: Anything else you want our readers to know about the new journal?

Sofie: It is so cute and so much fun. And we're just really excited about what the journals mean to so many families. ■





THE WEEK SURROUNDING MOTHER'S DAY is easily the busiest for Tracy Callahan, owner of Bethesda Florist in Bethesda, Maryland. Business booms, he says, because so many people celebrate the holiday.

"Everyone has a mom," Callahan says.

Mother's Day is the most popular time of year for floral shops all over the country — even beating Valentine's Day, believe it or not. And it's during May when florists like Callahan see an increase in orders and requests for carnations.

With their fringed petals and clean smell, carnations may not seem all that remarkable. They're certainly not as flashy or eye-catching as a bright orchid or a colorful tulip. Yet for more than a century, they've been the official flower of Mother's Day.

Moms and grandmothers alike can thank Philadelphia activist Anna Jarvis for the carnation tradition — and even the holiday itself. On May 10, 1908, Jarvis sent hundreds of white carnations, her late mother's favorite flower, to her hometown church in West Virginia for a

PRETTY IN PINK (AND WHITE)

BY JENN ATTANASIO

How carnations
became the official
Mother's Day flower



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Carnations may be customary, but another flower is starting to steal the Mother's Day spotlight: roses.

celebration honoring all mothers. That same day, she hosted a similar event in Philadelphia.

Over the next few years, as the number of Mother's Day celebrations across the county increased, so did the popularity of the white carnation, which came to symbolize a mother's love. (Thanks to Jarvis' campaigning, Mother's Day became a national holiday in 1914 under President Woodrow Wilson.)

Decades later, another person living in the White House made carnations even more fashionable: Mamie Eisenhower. Callahan says the trendy first lady popularized what's called the "peppermint" carnation — a flower with elegant red and white stripes.

"Mamie Eisenhower kind of elevated the carnation from an ordinary flower to something special," he says.

Traditionally, the colors of the beautiful spring flower carry different meanings on Mother's Day: white carnations honor a mother who has died, while pink ones celebrate a mother who is living.

Carnations may be customary, but another flower is starting to steal the Mother's Day spotlight: roses.

Diana Mubarak, owner of Little Shop of Flowers in Washington, D.C., says that the classically beautiful red flowers

are "by far" the most popular purchase when May rolls around.

Roses also tend to be a fan favorite for nationwide flower chains, such as 1-800-Flowers. The company says that roses alone make up 35% of its Mother's Day orders. Callahan also says roses are popular in his shop as well as hydrangeas and lilies.

Callahan believes that carnations are sometimes overlooked because they're simple and may seem cheap — or like filler flowers — compared to other options. However, it's all about arranging them well and taking good care of them.

Carnations can easily last two weeks, Callahan says. In the store, he's even seen them stay alive for close to three weeks.

The secret? Avoiding bacteria. That's more important than sunlight or any other factor, he explains. Once bacteria from the air land in your vase water, the flowers will struggle to survive.

"The single best thing you can do is change that water every single day," says Callahan.

But no matter if you go the classic carnation route or opt for an exquisite bunch of roses, flowers will be a wonderful way to show appreciation for the moms in your life this May.

"It is a gift that is so special because of the freshness of it, the beauty of it and the fragrance of it," Callahan says. ■



Meghan Mattingly is up again. On most nights, the Capitol Hill mom is awoken several times by one or both of her boys. When they can't sleep, she can't sleep. And Mattingly has to deal with her own sleep issues, too. She frequently

BY JENNY SPLITTER

suffers from fragmented sleep, waking up around 2 or 3 in the morning, her mind immediately turning to work. "Then I'm awake for two to three hours," she says, "just tossing and turning."

The struggle to get more sleep is one to which most moms can relate. Hormonal changes that occur during pregnancy and after giving birth — in addition to menstruation and menopause — can all trigger poor sleep.

"Between the ages of 25 to 69, women disproportionately experience shorter sleep duration and greater sleep fragmentation," says Christine Spadola, a sleep researcher at Florida Atlantic University. In fact, a November 2020 review of 13 insomnia studies published in *Frontiers in Psychology* found a

FOR MOTHER'S DAY,
QUALITY SLEEP
IS THE GIFT
THAT KEEPS
ON GIVING

A Rested Mom
is a Happy Mom

significantly greater prevalence of insomnia in women than in men.

Good sleep can feel frustratingly elusive for mothers, but there are ways to boost both the amount and quality of your slumber. If you can implement any of these sleep tips, you may just be giving yourself the best Mother's Day gift of all: the gift of a good night's rest.

The biggest challenge may be shifting your mindset. For many moms, staying up late feels like an act of self-preservation.

"Moms report that their day is not their own," says Spadola, so they stay up late to enjoy the solitude. Alternatively, they may believe they're more productive at night when their homes are quiet. Yet the research supports the opposite, according to Spadola. "When we sleep better, we're more efficient," she says.

Moms, like all adults, need at least seven hours of sleep a night for optimal health, says Shalini Paruthi, a sleep specialist and member of the American Academy of Sleep Medicine. Getting much less on a regular basis is associated with numerous "adverse health outcomes," according to the AASM, including obesity, diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, depression and an overall increased risk of death. Parents often find poor sleep impedes their caregiving abilities, says Paruthi. Her patients often tell her, "When I'm sleep deprived, it's really hard for me to function as a mom."

Fortunately, there's much you can do to get more sleep, though some advice may be easier to follow than others.


Spadola says maintaining a regular sleep schedule — both when you go to bed and when you wake up — is the most important thing you can do for your circadian rhythm, the internal process that regulates our sleep-wake cycle.

On this point, Paruthi recommends setting an alarm in the evening as a reminder to start getting ready for bed. As for moms who feel like they have to stay up late to do chores, Paruthi suggests letting the kids share the burden during the day so you can get the R & R you need in the evening. "Dividing up that work is, I think, really important," she says.

Stress is another common roadblock for moms who want more sleep.

"A lot of times, we have sleep fragmentation or insomnia in the middle of the night because we have unresolved stress from the day," Spadola says.

Paruthi agrees. "Moms have a lot of chatter in their brain, like 24-seven," she says.



"Between the ages of 25 to 69, women disproportionately experience shorter sleep duration and greater sleep fragmentation."

DR. CHRISTINE SPADOLA

Both recommend keeping a worry journal as an outlet for that stress. Just jotting down bullet points can help, but Paruthi notes that one shouldn't journal too close to bedtime.

Creating a peaceful mood before going to sleep can also help alleviate stress. Moms, like babies, benefit from a regular bedtime routine, says Spadola. That could mean playing relaxing music, doing a bit of light stretching or yoga or breathing in the smell of lavender before crawling under the covers.

And all of us would sleep better if we turned off our phones.


"Holding a screen close ... emits blue light into the eye," says Spadola. Essentially, "the light is telling us to wake up."

There are blue light filters on phones you can use as well as blue light filtering glasses — Paruthi says inexpensive pairs are just as good as the higher-priced options — but Spadola cautions that these filters can only do so much. The ideal solution is to turn the phone off altogether.

By the way, blue light isn't the only problem that comes from using your phone before going to sleep.

"Doom-scrolling" — the practice of reading through copious amounts of bad

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The best Mother's Day
gift of all: the gift of
a good night's rest.

news — can heighten anxiety before bed. Paruthi suggests trying to schedule phone time earlier in the day, whether for reading the news or listening to your favorite podcasts, so you aren't tempted at night.

What you do during the day matters, too. Skip naps, but if you need one, keep it short and early in the day, says Spadola. Getting regular exercise, a huge mood booster on its own, can also do wonders for your sleep, adds Paruthi. And limit alcohol and caffeine, particularly at night, but also later in the day.

Ultimately, think of your bedroom as a “sleep sanctuary,” says Spadola. Keep it cool

— research suggests the ideal temperature for sleep is between 65 and 72 degrees, says Paruthi — quiet and dark. Blackout shades are extremely effective, but an eye shade works just as well. (On the flip side, let light in as soon as you wake up, so that you feel awake when you need to be.) White noise machines work well for some patients, too.

Finally, leave your work outside of the bedroom, says Spadola. Of course, that can be especially challenging these days, as many bedrooms double as work stations. If that applies to you, try using a dividing screen to separate your bed from your working area.

Mattingly is constantly working on improving the sleep situation at home, knowing how critical it is for her to take care of herself so she can be at her best to take care of the children. “You know how you should always put on your own oxygen mask first? I think it really rings true,” she says. ■

Jenny Splitter is a science journalist and a co-founder of SciMoms, an evidence-based blog for parents and caregivers. She lives in the H Street NE neighborhood of Washington, D.C., with her husband, two kids, a cat and a dog.



Bye-Bye, Bad Dreams

How to Help Your Child Deal With Nightmares and Sleep Terrors

BY LAURA BOYCOURT

The first time my daughter experienced a sleep terror, I was terrified.

Our typically happy preschooler was crying out, hands shaking and eyes wide open. I tried to comfort her, but she continued frantically searching for me — even though I was standing in front of her. I didn't know that she couldn't see me because she was actually still asleep.

Whether it's anxious slumber, nightmares or a full-fledged terror, sleep disturbances are unsettling for children and caregivers. Fortunately, parents can learn strategies to help their little ones get back to sleep and prevent the scaries from returning.

Bad Dreams: What Causes Them

Nightmares — a common and normal part of development — are a psychological response to a child's insecurities and fears. They are most common in school-age children but also occur in preschoolers and adolescents.

Dr. Melody Hawkins of the Pediatric and Adolescent Sleep Center in Fairfax, Virginia, says that the type of nightmares kids experience depends on their age.

"Usually in younger kids, frequently the concern is that they've been separated from their parent," says Hawkins. Older kids often have nightmares that something might happen to them, such as instances where they might experience harm or embarrassment.

Dr. Maria Veronica Bautista, head of the division of pediatric pulmonary and sleep medicine at MedStar Georgetown University Hospital in Washington, D.C., adds that bad dreams in smaller children typically happen within a day or two of a frightening event.

Common causes of bad dreams include scary movies, fears, traumatic events and big life or schedule changes. Situations such as being bullied can also cause nightmares in older children. However, the biggest culprit is lack of adequate sleep.

Nightmares vs. Sleep Terrors

A nightmare is simply a disturbing dream. Sleep terrors, on the other hand, fall under the category of sleep disorders or parasomnias. While we still have a lot to learn about them, explains Hawkins, sleep terrors are thought to result from the sympathetic nervous system's fight-or-flight response, wherein a child physically reacts to anxiety during slow-wave sleep. She says terrors may be related to a dream, although the jury's still out.

When a terror strikes, "a child will cry out, scream out (and) will appear very agitated, very frightened," says Hawkins. Children may also give caregivers a glassy-eyed stare, mumble or not answer questions appropriately. Some might even sleepwalk.

"They're not really aware that you're there, and although they actually seem to be awake, they're actually usually very deeply asleep," she says.

While terrors can be painful for a parent to watch, Hawkins says they aren't as bad as they seem.

"A sleep terror is actually much less upsetting for a child than a typical nightmare would be, which is ironic, because for the parent, it's going to be much more upsetting," says Hawkins.

After a child has a bad dream, Bautista and Hawkins recommend offering reassurance. Young children may need physical comfort, Bautista says. A security

object or a dim nightlight can also be helpful.

When your child has a sleep terror, trying to interfere can make things worse. Instead, wait it out and make sure the space is safe and secure in case they start walking.

Preventing Bad Dreams

To reduce bad dreams, Hawkins and Bautista say that it's essential that children get enough sleep. They also suggest avoiding the scary or disturbing triggers that have previously caused nightmares.

Bautista adds that putting down technology and sticking to good bedtime habits can go a long way. "We tend to recommend not using electronic devices or screens two hours before bedtime," she says. Instead, she suggests opting for relaxing stories and avoiding any overstimulation.

Hawkins says one way to prevent sleep terrors in children who experience them often is to wake them up an hour and a half after they've fallen asleep to "disrupt that initial slow-wave sleep period."

If your child has a nightmare, Hawkins recommends discussing it the next morning.

"A SLEEP TERROR IS ACTUALLY MUCH LESS UPSETTING FOR A CHILD THAN A TYPICAL NIGHTMARE WOULD BE, WHICH IS IRONIC, BECAUSE FOR THE PARENT, IT'S GOING TO BE MUCH MORE UPSETTING."

— DR. MELODY HAWKINS, PEDIATRIC AND ADOLESCENT SLEEP CENTER

Another useful exercise is letting kids use art to put their bad dreams to rest, so to speak. Ask them to "draw a picture of the bad dream and crumple it up and throw it in the trash," she says. "It's a symbolic way of saying, 'I'm done with that.'"

Children can also write down their dream with an alternative happy ending, says Hawkins.

Conversely, sleep terrors don't need to be brought up, since children usually don't remember them. However, if terrors or bad dreams begin interfering with daily life, Bautista and Hawkins recommend speaking

with a pediatrician or sleep specialist to get some help.

These days, my daughter still experiences infrequent terrors, but now I have the tools to help. I can rest a bit easier each night knowing that we're doing what we can to make sure she has an uneventful night. ■

Laura Boycourt is a freelance writer and journalist living in Virginia. When she's not meeting deadlines, she enjoys playing sports and exploring the great outdoors with her husband and two daughters. You can find her on Twitter @BoycourtWrites.





Party LIKE IT'S 2021

After a year of car parades and Zoom parties, kids are looking forward to the return of in-person birthday celebrations with family and friends. If your party-planning skills are a little rusty, don't panic. We're sharing tips and ideas to make your child's big day fun for everyone.



BY WF STAFF

One of the hardest parts of the pandemic for parents was making birthdays feel just as special as they did in the Before Times. We invited friends to honk car horns down our streets and hired magicians to perform over Zoom. We decorated cupcakes virtually and hosted outdoor laser tag parties in the dead of winter. And we mostly succeeded in making our kids' celebrations seem normal, despite the extraordinary circumstances in which we were living.

Today, vaccines are bringing us closer to our pre-pandemic lives, including the return of in-person birthday parties. But until children can be vaccinated, health experts still advise against crowded, indoor gatherings — especially without masks. Bounce houses, escape rooms and bowling alleys may be out, but outdoor parties are, well, in.

If you're trying to remember how to plan an in-person gathering, here are some ideas to help you get this party started.



Outdoor Party Themes

Spring is the perfect time for an outdoor birthday party, whether in your backyard or a local park. These party themes work well for a wide variety of ages and party sizes. They can be as simple or complex as you want to make them, and many require only minimal purchases.

MYSTERY

A mystery-solving party is like a classic scavenger hunt — with a twist. Maybe a stuffed animal has gone missing? Or a hidden treasure box of candy has been reported? Plant clues around your backyard, neighborhood or local park that lead the group to the solution. You could even get your neighbors involved to deliver hints. Offer magnifying glasses and small notebooks with pencils as party favors for the young detectives.

CARNIVAL

All you need for a successful carnival-themed party are the right activities and snacks. Pin the tail on the donkey and a ring or bean bag toss are simple and fun games perfect for this type of event. As for the treats, cotton candy, corn dogs, circus peanuts, animal crackers and popcorn (extra points if you snag some classic red and white striped boxes to serve it in) will immediately make your backyard feel like a carnival.

MOVIE NIGHT

This one's simple: all you need is a white sheet, a projector and plenty of popcorn for an outdoor movie party. If you want to get a little more elaborate, rent or buy an old-fashioned popcorn machine and purchase some movie theater candy boxes to hand out to guests. Send tickets with the party invitations so kids feel like they're going to a real theater.

BEACH PARTY

It might not be quite warm enough yet to swim in the ocean, but you can still bring the beach to your backyard. Kids can play in a sandbox, toss beach balls, hang out on towels and even fish for plastic toys in a kiddie pool. Fill your goody bags with sunglasses, small sand shovels and flip flop key chains. Watermelon, ice cream and lemonade are all perfect treats to make it seem like summer's arrived a little early.

FIELD DAY

For an active group of kids, set up a variety of field day games to keep everyone moving. Some ideas include relay races, jump rope, tug of war, sack races and kickball. Medals and whistles would work great as party favors. Just make sure you have Popsicles on hand to close out the party! ■

— ELEANOR LINAFFELT

Stress-free Party Planning

For busy parents, just anticipating the prep involved in hosting a kid's birthday party can cause anxiety. How will you set up the food and drinks? Keep the kids entertained? Clean up without a hitch?

Pro party planner Ashia Watson, owner of Party Sticklers in Ashburn, Virginia, has organized plenty of children's birthday parties. She's sharing her time-tested tips for planning a carefree celebration, whether you're hosting a Batman-themed jamboree or a party fit for a princess.

MAKE A LIST

As you'll remember from the days of college term papers, doing things at the last minute causes so much unnecessary stress. Watson recommends starting to plan two or more months in advance — the earlier, the better.

Search online for free checklists that tell you how much time to allow for buying decorations, booking entertainment and other scheduling needs. Then, make yourself a to-do list. Watson suggests putting pen to paper, typing in a spreadsheet or, if you can, enlisting a party planner like her to help.

SEND FOLLOW-UPS

If you're waiting on people to RSVP, send follow-up emails a week or so before your event. That way, Watson says, invitees will be thinking about the party and can let you know

if they're coming. A few days before the party, draft a text that says, "Can't wait to see you all at Justin's 5th Birthday!" as another reminder for your child's friends and family.

Busy parents might've forgotten to tell you if they and their kids can attend the birthday festivities. Though you can't always control when (or if) people RSVP, Watson says simple yet friendly reminders may avoid no-shows and other guest mishaps.

RECRUIT FAMILY AND FRIENDS

As a host, you balance a lot at once: serving food and drinks, facilitating games and crafts and trying to connect with your guests. But you can't do all of this yourself, Watson says — call in some help!

"It's very important to have a good support system when you are planning an event," she says. "You just don't want to do it solo."

Grandma and grandpa can help

clear off plates while you guide the kids into a game of tag, or you can grab a family friend to entertain the kids when you need a moment to breathe. Just ask in advance, Watson says, and you'll have all the assistance you need for before, during and after the party.

HAVE A PLAN B ... OR C

Sometimes, things just don't go as planned. You might have car troubles, your magician could get sick or a friend who was supposed to help out can't make it. To prevent a few extra gray hairs from popping up during the party, Watson recommends you plan ahead.

Think about what could go wrong, she says, and write down what you'd do or talk it out with your spouse or a friend. For instance, maybe you'll have the local bakery on speed dial in case the cake you're planning to bake doesn't work out.

You never want your guests to be bored, so Watson suggests having some quick and easy games like bingo on hand in case a craft or activity falls through. Having a

back-up plan (or two) will ensure that you're ready for whatever the universe throws your way on the big day.

CLEAN AS YOU GO

Cleanup doesn't have to cause major stress. Instead of waiting for everything to pile up at the end of the party, Watson tells parents to start cleaning during the event. While kids dig into their cake, you can start packing up the food and clearing the table. That way, it'll be a less overwhelming job after your guests go home.

Even better, enlist your kids for cleanup, Watson says. Yes, it's their day, but this is still a good opportunity to have them help and work as a team.

Remember: your party doesn't have to be perfect or extravagant, or better than anyone else's, Watson says. It's all about making sure the kids enjoy themselves. And with a little bit of planning, you're sure to have as much fun as they do. ■

— JENN ATTANASI



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FRUIT AND COOKIE PIZZA

When you place the fruit on the pizza, you can decorate it any way you want. You could spell a name, make a flag for a holiday, or even create colorful patterns, like a rainbow.

SERVES 12

- 1 (16.5-ounce) package refrigerated sugar cookie dough
- 1 (8-ounce) package cream cheese, softened
- ¼ cup sugar
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1 small banana, peeled and sliced
- 1 small kiwifruit, peeled and sliced
- 1 cup sliced strawberries
- ½ cup blueberries
- ¼ cup apple jelly
- 2 teaspoons water

1. Preheat the oven to 350°F.
2. Spread the entire roll of cookie dough out onto a large ungreased baking sheet or pizza pan. Bake 12–14 minutes, or until lightly browned. Use pot holders to remove the pan from the oven. Place the pan on a cooling rack and cool the crust completely, about 30 minutes.
3. Put the cream cheese, sugar and vanilla in a large bowl and mix well with a wooden spoon. Use a spatula to spread the mixture over the top of the cooled crust.
4. Place the fruit on top of the cream cheese layer.
5. In a small microwave-safe bowl, combine the jelly and water. Heat the mixture in the microwave for 20–30 seconds on high until it is melted and spreadable. Brush the glaze over the fruit on the pizza.
6. Refrigerate the pizza for at least 2 hours before serving. Cut it into pieces with a pizza cutter. ■

PER SERVING

Calories: 280 | Fat: 13g | Sodium: 200mg | Carbohydrates: 39g | Fiber: 1g | Sugar: 26g | Protein: 3g

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— PJ FEINSTEIN






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7 Go-to Birthday Gifts

While it's easy to shop for your child, it can be tricky to find the perfect birthday gift for their friends or classmates. Shopping at independent toy stores can make the process easier, says Bridget Stickline, founder and owner of Wee Chic Boutique, with stores in Maryland and Virginia. Staff at your local toy store know their products well and can suggest the best gift for each type of kid.

Don't live near an independent toy store? Here are Stickline's top picks for birthday gifts.

Jellycat Bashful Elephant

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— KATIE BEECHER



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show your appreciation

BY ERICA RIMLINGER

Teachers Had to Rethink Everything This Year. Let's Rethink How We Thank Them.

THE 2020-2021 SCHOOL YEAR WILL BE long remembered — without nostalgia. Whether your child's school was held online or followed a hybrid schedule, education was tough for parents, students and teachers alike.

Early childhood educators were asked to teach kids they'd never met in person. Kindergarten teachers had to capture and hold the attention of an age group with notoriously short attention spans — from a screen. Some teachers lost data and school days to hackers and ransomware, while others had their Social Security numbers shared on the dark web. And many were teaching while their own children were learning virtually from another room at home.

But somehow teachers got it done, persevering through a sudden process overhaul, endless technology glitches and the seemingly insurmountable hurdle of connecting with students through a computer.

While a coffee shop gift card may have seemed expressive enough in past years, teachers who survived this challenging school year perhaps merit a bigger thank you, or at least one that employs even a fraction of the creativity and positive

energy they were asked to bring to the classroom every day.

The Big Class Gesture

The first graders in Martha Edwards' class rose to this challenge in February when they planted her front yard with handmade yard signs, each of them sticking out of the snow with colorful well wishes for Edwards' 50th birthday.

The 17 signs that dotted the yard were all decorated on both sides. One student's sign read "Happy Blue Birthday!" because they knew that "blue was my favorite color," Edwards says with a laugh.

A first-grade parent, Kerry Vayda, arranged the surprise. "She wasn't a room mom," says Edwards. "I didn't have the heart to ask anyone to be a room mom this year. She lived in my neighborhood and organized the whole thing." Vayda even conspired with Edwards' husband to time the late-night sign delivery after Edwards went to bed.

"I'm not a crier," says Edwards, "but that made me weepy."

How did parents know about Edwards' birthday? Well, online school has at least one benefit.

"This year the parents really know me,"



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EDUCATION WAS
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STUDENTS AND
TEACHERS ALIKE.**

DIY Teacher Appreciation Gift

What better way to demonstrate your appreciation for all the hard work your child's teacher has done this year than with a gift requiring a bit of your own handiwork? Package these items with a heartfelt card from your child, and you have a gift that any teacher will cherish.

FABRIC TASSEL BOOKMARKS

If your child's teacher loves to read, pair a bookstore gift card with a homemade bookmark. You can make these stylish bookmarks by following the easy step-by-step instructions at Purely Katie. purelykatie.com



PERSONALIZED FABRIC TOTE BAGS

Purchase plain fabric tote bags and let the kids embellish them with permanent-marker drawings or cutout shapes and designs that you help them iron on. "Pretty Handy Girl" Brittany Bailey shares more decorating ideas for tote bags on her blog. prettyhandygirl.com



POTTED PLANTS

Tell your child's teacher "You Rule!" with a school-inspired planter by DIYer Melissa Caughey. Fill it with an easy-care plant, such as a succulent, that doesn't require much effort. hgtv.com

SELF-CARE KITS

Help a teacher relax after a stressful year with a sugar scrub and whipped body butter made by you and your child. Amanda Smith of Bayside Beauty, a producer of natural handcrafted soaps, shares the recipes at washingtonfamily.com ■



appreciation from a student.”

Retired teacher Ginny Bishop says she was “always most touched by personal notes. It’s just a bonus they never get used up or stale.” Notes, she adds, “keep forever.” Many teachers mentioned that they do, in fact, keep them forever. Drawings, notes Sara Wallace, are also loved.

Perhaps unsurprisingly in a year when so much human contact has been off-limits, many teachers wrote that they missed hugs. Until hugs are possible again, teachers will love “cards and notes for sure,” says Alicia Danyali.

The Personalized Gift

If, like Edwards’ class parents, you’re able to eavesdrop while you help your child with online school, you have the benefit this year of knowing your child’s teacher better than you would have during a typical school year. Put this knowledge to use when you thank your teacher. You could name a star after a teacher who is a NASA fan or adopt



Craft a personalized mask

a critter at the zoo for the animal-loving teacher whose pets made cameos in the online classroom. One of Emily Brewster’s students made her a “personalized face mask” for Christmas.

There’s no excuse for a catchall coffee shop card this year, unless your child’s teacher showed up on Zoom every morning with a coffee cup on his or her desk. Check out the Zoom background, and while you’re at it, check in on the teacher. Does your child’s teacher seem a little stressed out? A gift card for a massage or aromatherapy treatment might be appreciated. You, and your students, are more connected to

your teachers this year than you might think.

After all, the kids who filled Edwards’ yard with signs hadn’t met Edwards in person yet. It demonstrated to Edwards that “it is possible to make those connections virtually. Building relationships is the key to teaching students — even if we aren’t in the same room.”

That’s what teachers have been doing all year, she says: “making connections, Googling, finding solutions.” On days when the technology isn’t cooperating, it’s about “making it work.”

Although Edwards says she won’t miss the 2020-2021 school year, she will miss all the students in her class this academic year. She says the kids and families couldn’t possibly top their birthday surprise. For the end of the year she wants “nothing. Really.”

She pauses, then concedes there might, in fact, be something she’d like.

“Pictures,” she says. “We haven’t had much opportunity to be together. I wish I had more pictures.” ■



12 Books to Read During National Inventors Month

Learn the true stories behind inventions that changed the world for better (and for worse!). Read about kid inventors and even try some fun STEM projects at home.

BY JENNIFER ROTHSCILD

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PICTURE BOOKS

"Mr. Ferris and His Wheel"

By Kathryn Gibbs Davis,
illustrated by Gilbert Ford

When Paris hosted the World's Fair, they built a large tower as the centerpiece. In 1893, it was Chicago's turn, but with only 10 months to go, they still didn't have anything that could outshine the Eiffel Tower. Then George Washington Gale Ferris Jr. had an idea: what if he built something large like a tower, but it moved? Facing challenges at every turn, Ferris managed to build his wheel, a design that has since been reproduced all over the world.

"Izzy Gizmo"

By Pip Jones,
illustrated by Sara Ogilvie

Meet Izzy Gizmo, who loves to invent things and carries her toolbelt everywhere she goes, just in case. One day, she finds a bird with a broken wing and is determined to invent something to help. Unfortunately, her first idea doesn't work. Neither does her second nor her third. Will she ever be able to make an invention to help the bird fly?

"Sweet Dreams Sarah: From Slavery to Inventor"

By Vivian Kirkfield,
illustrated by Chris Ewald

After slavery was abolished, Sarah E. Goode moved to Chicago and opened a furniture store. Many of her customers needed furniture to fit their small living spaces and budgets, so Sarah invented a bed that folds up during the day, earning one of the first patents awarded to an African American woman.

EARLY READERS

"The Invention Hunters Discover How Machines Work"

By Korwin Briggs

The Invention Hunters fly around the world seeking out the world's greatest inventions. When they land in a construction site, they discover — and misidentify, to great comedic effect — a series of wonderful inventions. This fun story explores simple machines and how they're used. In later volumes, the Invention Hunters learn several other STEM concepts, such as electricity.

"Truth or Lie: Inventors!"

By Erica S. Perl,
illustrated by Michael H. Slack

From Velcro to the airplane, this book uses the fun children's game three truths and a lie to teach the backstory behind inventions that are now part of our everyday lives.

"Hedy Lamarr's Double Life"

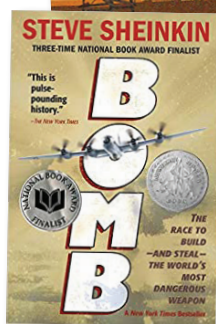
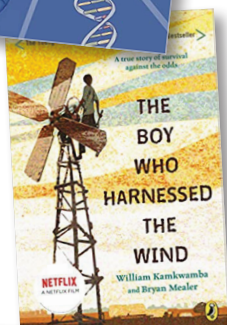
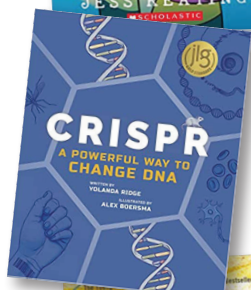
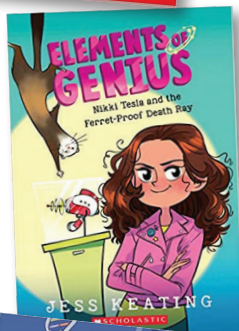
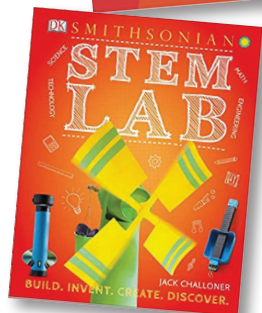
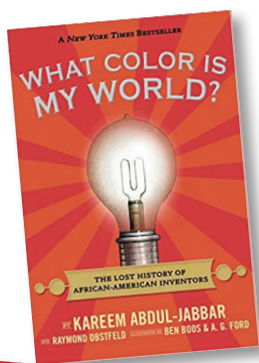
By Laurie Wallmark,
illustrated by Katy Wu

Hedy Lamarr was a popular movie star, but despite her international fame, most people didn't know that she was also an inventor who developed technologies to help the United States during World War II. Even though some of her biggest breakthroughs were ignored at the time, they're now used in our personal electronics.

MIDDLE GRADE

"What Color is My World?"

The Lost History of African-American Inventors
By Kareem Abdul-Jabbar



and Raymond Obstfeld,
illustrated by Ben Boos and A. G. Ford

Twins Herbie and Ella aren't happy about their new house — it needs so much work! While talking with their parents' handyman, they learn about 16 Black individuals who invented many of the things around their house. With sidebars, fun flaps and some comic-style pages, this book is a fun one to flip through.

"STEM Lab: 25 Super Cool Projects: Build, Invent, Create, Discover"

By Jack Challoner

Kids can create items like homemade instruments and wind-up cars by following the clear instructions in this DIY book. The scientific concepts behind each of the 25 projects are clearly explained as well as their real-world applications.

"Elements of Genius: Nikki Tesla and the Ferret-Proof Death Ray"

By Jess Keating

The first book in the Elements of Genius series introduces readers to Nikki Tesla, kid inventor extraordinaire. Unfortunately, her inventions tend to cause destruction and mayhem. When her pet ferret sets off her death ray and explodes her bedroom, Nikki's mother packs her off to the Genius Academy. Nikki isn't certain about the other kids there, but she'll have to make friends and learn to work with others when someone steals her death ray.

YOUNG ADULTS

"The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind"

By William Kamkwamba and Bryan Mealer,
illustrated by Anna Hymas

After a flood devastated his family's crops and left them with nothing to eat, 14-year-old William Kamkwamba went to the library to see if he could find a solution. Using the information he learned in books, he built a windmill out of bicycle parts and scrap metal to electrify his family's home and help pump water from deep underground to use on the fields. Older teens may be interested in reading the original version of this book, first published for adults.

"CRISPR: A Powerful Way to Change DNA"

By Yolanda Ridge

This book offers a clear, concise introduction to CRISPR, the gene-editing technology. In addition to explaining the science, Ridge explores the exciting developments that could result from using CRISPR as well as its unknown consequences. Each chapter



ends with questions for further thought, inviting the reader to critically engage with the issues at play. This thought-provoking book makes an excellent read for teens, especially those considering a career in medical science.

"Bomb: The Race to Build — And Steal — The World's Most Powerful Weapon"

By Steve Sheinkin

During World War II, both sides raced to invent a new type of weapon that used nuclear energy to create maximum destruction. In this gripping book, readers not only learn about the science behind nuclear weapons, but also the high-stakes story surrounding its invention, complete with daring raids by saboteurs and secret labs hidden in the desert. Sheinkin doesn't shy away from the devastating consequences of the invention and will explore these issues even further in his upcoming September release, "Fallout." ■



CARPOOL CONVERSATIONS

After 20 years of driving my kids around, I miss my role as chauffeur.

By Maureen Stiles

I was driving in the car with my youngest son last week when a song from 2015 came on the radio. We both marveled at the way all the kids loved that tune back in the day. He asked if it drove me crazy when the entire car full of mostly tone-deaf preteens tried to imitate its rapid-fire interlude.

My answer? A resounding no. The fact was I loved it — and driving carpool, too.

By my estimation, I have spent 20 years driving people around town. Those days were hectic for sure, and my time was not my own, but all the time on the road added up to a whole lot of conversations with my kids and their friends.

I knew which songs and trends were in and which were totally lame (usually the ones I thought were hip), who was the latest YouTube sensation and which teachers were to be feared or adored.

Now that every child in my house possesses a valid driver's license, the dawn of spring makes me nostalgic for the days of loading up the car for outdoor activities: sports, picnics, hikes and daytrips to the zoo. As the days grew longer, so did our time away from home. Eventually, my SUV morphed into more than transportation. It became an endless, snack-filled opportunity for bonding.

There was something magical about the car that made my kids lose their inhibitions. They sang louder, laughed more and shared thoughts as the miles went by. I like to think the conversations we had on the road cemented our relationships, and I imagine moments during the day now when they think, "I need to tell Mom about this when I get a chance."

Finding these chances is where the challenge lies. My kids are at an age where we can actually have deep discussions and meaningful exchanges, but time is fleeting. Between the responsibilities and hectic pace

of having older children, fewer opportunities exist for these types of connections. It is more work than simply settling in for a ride and letting conversation arise organically.

Years ago, in the thick of the chaos of rearing younger kids, I never could have imagined missing my role as chauffeur and basically living in my car. Yet, here I am.

As with most things in life, we need to adapt to the changes and stages of parenting to find new, creative ways to stay connected. I may not have hours and hours in the car to prompt discussions, but laying that foundation for communication has ensured that our conversations bloom again and again — just like flowers in the spring. ■

Maureen Stiles is a D.C.-based writer sharing the chaos and joys of parenting three boys. She has been interviewed for a range of parenting topics for articles in The Washington Post and The New York Times and has been published on many parenting websites and in publications.

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