

Children's Birthday Parties

Lucila Neira*

Birthdays are supposed to be joyous occasions. At its core, it is the commemoration of the day when we were brought into the world, crying and distressed after having left the cosy confines of our mother's womb. In theory, birthday parties are meant to be amusing for everyone, the children playing and celebrating, and the adults drinking and feeling nostalgic. But, somehow, almost everybody ends up crying or feeling upset at some point during the party, and by the end of the evening people are wondering what went wrong. Did it start after the cake was brought out, or was it before the party even began? Every case is different and must be evaluated in isolation, but in general it all originates at the beginning and starts going downhill from there.

The moment the birthday boy or girl sets foot in the party venue, the celebration has begun. One would think it begins after all the guests have arrived, or when the music has started playing and the snacks are already set on the tables. But that is a common misconception, for in the mind of the child, the party has already been set in motion. The gears of jitters and pent-up excitement are beginning to move in that child's head, in anticipation of all the mysterious presents they will receive, all the delicious food they will eat and the mouth-watering cake that will close the evening. The adults, on the other hand, simply can not wait until it is over. Of course, they love their children and seeing them happy is of their utmost priority, but they have implicitly assumed the responsibility of looking after nearly fifty children, and they are aware of this fact. The dread that builds up inside them after every child shows up, plunges their emotions into a confusing amalgam of delight, helplessness, guilt and weariness. It is around this time that we can pinpoint the seeds of distress beginning to germinate in the parents' minds.

Only once the party is well under way does the actual crying and distressing begin. At first glance, it just seems that children are playing merrily with each other, engaging in the various activities that were proposed and pre-planned for the evening. However, upon closer inspection, we can observe raw jealousy emerge because some kids refuse to share their toys, because one of them ate the last chip in the bowl, because Jenny got the orange cup and she wanted the pink one, because Billy is pushing everybody around in the ball pit, because the man disguised as Barney actually looks rather terrifying and everyone is thinking that, maybe, this was not such a good idea after all. The first tears begin to appear the moment some child or other is pushed a little too violently and their crying activates a chain effect where his friend is also distressed and starts crying, one of the girls who has a crush on that friend starts crying, the kid who shoved the boy in the first place starts crying, the other kids hear the commotion and start crying because they think something is wrong and the remaining children start crying because otherwise they would feel left out. While the adults are trying

* Premio a la originalidad del Concurso Literario USAL en Lengua Inglesa – Categoría ensayo (2020).

to placate the bawling toddlers, they come up with the only solution that would make everybody happy again: the cake.

Near the end of the party, the adults have their glasses refilled with champagne, the kids with juice or Coke, and they all gather around the guest of honor standing in front of the cake waiting to blow out the candles. Once the first verse of the "happy birthday" song is heard, some of the adults start crying. The cause may vary, but usually it is a combination of pride, fatigue over the recent events, relief that the party will end soon, plus one drink too many. Once the candles have been blown out, the kids are pouncing on the cake, grabbing at pieces with their bare hands before the smoke has even dissipated. This celebration has been salvaged and now everything seems to be alright. Before the sugar rush kicks in, the kids are being taken home one by one and, with every child that leaves, a weight is lifted from the parents' shoulders. Soon it will be just an empty room, with confetti scattered all over the floor, dirty plates on every table, and a sticky substance on the wall whose source can not be determined. All's well that ends well.

Birthday parties are not to be a literal recreation of our birth, where children and adults are distressed and cry, but it can not be helped. Birthday parties are, like all celebrations, emotionally charged. Nobody can help being sad, excited, anxious, or even afraid. It is as if the occasion called for all the cardinal human emotions to surge out in the span of four or five hours. Truth to tell, there is nothing wrong with that. Emotions are part of our everyday lives, so refusing to feel them when they appear or denying their existence is fruitless. People should stop thinking that we should only feel happy at parties, and rather embrace the fact that we all feel different emotions at various points in time, depending on the situation. Birthday parties are, after all, just another fleeting moment in the large span of our lives, so why not just let go of all prejudice and simply feel?