

EXPERT ANSWERS

***FOR ALL YOUR
SWEET 16 PARTY***

QUESTIONS

An e-Booklet from Ira's Peripheral Visions
Written by Karen Shapiro

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About the Author

In 2000, Ira and I took our Greeting Card business into the world of Custom Invitations. From the very beginning, we developed a huge following amongst Sweet 16 girls and their parents. As the years went by, our children each passed their 16th birthdays and spent years on the local Sweet 16 circuit. I have spoken with hundreds, if not thousands of Sweet 16 parents since we printed our first Sweet 16 design and by now I feel as if I've heard every horror story and every wonderful moment that ever transpired at a Sweet 16. My goal in writing this booklet is to pass these stories on to you in hopes of making the way smoother while you plan and celebrate your Sweet 16.

Expert Answers For All Your Sweet 16 Questions

Table of Contents

1. Why have a Sweet 16?
2. Planning in Advance
3. Setting a Budget
4. Whom Are You Going to Invite?
5. How to Throw a Party on a Shoestring Budget
6. The Invitations
7. The Standard Sweet 16 Rituals
8. Structuring the Party
9. Entertaining the Family and Adult Guests versus Entertaining the Teenagers and Children
10. Games
11. The Importance of Photos and Videos
12. Circulating During the Party
13. Alternatives to the Big Party
14. Including a Religious Ritual or Tradition
15. The Sweet 16 Girl Gives Back
16. Checklist (From Dreams to Thank You Cards)

Chapter One

Should My Daughter Have A Sweet 16?

Chapter One - Should My Daughter Have A Sweet 16?

There are girls who wait all their young lives for the day when they can finally celebrate their Sweet 16s. They've spent their childhoods sighing over tiaras, ball gowns with puffy floor length skirts made of tulle, and sensational hairstyles. For just this one night, they can play the part of the princess at their own fantasy ball.

What teenage girl wouldn't want that?

As the mother of a teenage daughter, I strongly advocate celebrating a Sweet 16. The occasion is so much more than the trappings of jewelry and fabulous shoes and posing for the camera. Like the Quinceanera in the Latino tradition, the Bat Mitzvah in the Jewish tradition, or the Debutante Ball in high society, the Sweet 16 marks a girl's passage into womanhood. Even though most middle class American girls tend to prolong their childhood through their college years, still the Sweet 16 should symbolize that the girl is ready to take on some mantle of responsibility as a participant in her family and community.

That's a nice aspect of the celebration to keep in mind, especially as the girl's imagination is running away with her (and your credit card). While she dreams of the big party, let her understand that her transition into womanhood has begun, and that her friends and family are coming together to celebrate this occasion with her.

If you're hesitating to throw a party due to financial strains, I'd still advocate having a scaled down party. Because my daughter had previously become a Bat Mitzvah at age 13, my family decided

against throwing her a lavish Sweet 16 only three years later. We wound up staging a small surprise party in our home with only 12 guests. Our budget was less than \$200. With a little bit of research and a little imagination, we put together a beautiful party. When it was said and done, our daughter thanked us profusely and told us that it was one of the most memorable parties she'd ever attended. For more information about this, see **Chapter 5, How to Throw a Party on a Shoestring Budget.**

Finally, the most important reason to have a Sweet 16 is this:

Life will bring each one of us more than our fair share of sadness. We'll be given more than enough opportunities to gather with friends and family to mark sad events, illnesses and funerals. That's why I believe it's crucially important to embrace the happy milestones in life. As the stress of the approaching Sweet 16 date begins to mount, whether you're having a huge lavish affair or a house party on a tiny budget, focus on the fact that life has given you a wonderful moment of celebration. Do everything that you can to rejoice in the excitement of the girl's transition from child to adult. Take a moment to appreciate how beautiful she looks in her dress, how wonderful it is to be surrounded by friends and family, and how much fun it is to dance and be entertained. If she's opening a fresh mouth to you or slacking off at school, do not use deprivation of this party as a weapon with which to punish her. Be happy with your beautiful daughter, be proud of how far she's come, and treasure your fondest dreams of where life will take her from here.

Chapter Two

Planning in Advance

Chapter Two - Plan Ahead!

It goes without saying: The more time you leave yourself, the easier it will be on you and the guest of honor as the big day approaches. I'd recommend that as early as a year and a half before the girl's 16th birthday, you begin to consider your budget and options. At this point, you can make phone calls to get prices on local venues, caterers and entertainers. Collect brochures and make notes of the information that you gather, and keep the notes together in a file. If you are bookmarking web pages, create a separate folder just for Sweet 16 Information. When you make phone calls, ask for the name of the person giving you the information and make a note of it, so that you can speak to the same person when you call back.

If You're Considering Booking Far In Advance:

Some places will give you a discount if you book way in advance. Before going this route, please consider the following:

1. Will there be any events that may wind up conflicting with the date you've chosen? Consider events within your extended family, within the girl's life, and within the city or town where you live. Take a moment to check the calendar for school holidays and events, religious observances, out of town games, dance competitions, SAT prep classes and exams, etc.
2. Be absolutely certain that you're booking with a reliable professional. Avoid putting down deposits for venues that have

just opened, recently changed management, or are located adjacent to any huge capital improvement project that's liable to be noisy, dusty and drag on for years. These are all possible danger signs that the business might not make it long enough to host your party.

When choosing the venue or caterer for the party bear the following in mind:

1. It's easier to go with a place with which you're familiar, where you've dined or celebrated before, where you know the service and the food is good. In this case, the fewer surprised, the better.
2. Consider the level of formality you're seeking. You don't have to break the bank on a semi-formal affair. I've seen VFW Halls transformed into beautiful fantasies when an imaginative party planner is enlisted. This may be a much more economical choice than booking a venue where dinner will be over \$75 per plate and the atmosphere will be too stiff for young people to enjoy themselves.

Entertainment:

1. A talented DJ can make a party. Before you hire one, be sure that you've seen him work and that you're comfortable with his style. He should be well organized, prepared to set up and break down in an efficient fashion, and willing to take direction from you.

2. He should have a varied catalogue of dance music and he should be prepared to play something other than the top hits of the day. Your elderly guests will be thrilled to hear a couple of Frank Sinatra songs, and your middle aged guests might like to hear a few hits from the 60s, 70s and 80s.
3. He should be charismatic without being overbearing. You want to be sure that he is entertaining your guests without getting “in their faces”.
4. Hired dancers can make a very big difference when it comes to getting your guests off their feet and on to the dance floor. If your budget allows, I’d consider this a good investment.
5. See to what extent the DJ can help you in preparing a video screen for your Memory Reel. Many of them are outfitted with this equipment. Check prices in advance.

The Meal:

1. There is absolutely nothing wrong with offering a buffet at a Sweet 16. Just make sure that your guests leave their tables to serve themselves in an orderly fashion. You want to avoid having one hundred guests standing in a long line all at once. You might like to have your MC or DJ announce, “Tables 2 and 8, please join us at the buffet!” or something like that.

Chapter Three

Setting a Budget

Chapter Four

Whom Are You Going to Invite?

Chapter Five

How to Throw a Party on a Shoestring Budget

Chapter Five - Party on a Shoestring.

These days, it's not unusual to hear a news report detailing the financial struggles that many families are having to endure. If you find yourself facing some kind of financial hardship just as your child's Sweet 16 date is approaching, try to avoid eliminating her party in the interest of saving some money.

Our family had thrown a somewhat lavish reception for our daughter when she became a Bat Mitzvah at age 13. We'd invited all of her friends, all of our son's friends, all of our friends and neighbors, and all the relatives from both sides of the family. We had a guest list of over 100 people for a sit down dinner with entertainment, a DJ, a photographer, a gorgeous dress and shoes and hair styling, and the whole nine yards.

So for us, it didn't seem appropriate to do the whole thing all over again only 3 years later when our daughter turned 16. She seemed to accept this without any fuss and went about her life assuming that there'd be no enormous party to mark her 16th Birthday.

But as the day drew near, I had second thoughts, and I wanted to do something special for her. Because she didn't know this, I decided to enlist her friends and make the whole thing a surprise for her. On a budget of less than \$200, I was able to put together a party for her and 12 of her friends. When her guests were leaving, more than one told me that it was one of the best Sweet 16s they'd ever attended. I know that my daughter was over the moon about her party.

On the cheap:

Invitations: Because you are keeping the guest list very short, you may be able to invite your guests over the phone or via e-mail. Be clear with them that you need them to reply, and give them a deadline, the same way that you would if you were sending a formal invitation. You're going to want to have a final head count. If you have to place strict limits on the number of guests, be sure they know that they can't bring along anyone else unless you've decided otherwise.

If you still want to have an Invitation, turn to your computer. Most kids have some degree of fluency in some kind of graphic design software, or even Microsoft word. Have the Sweet 16 girl put together her own flyer. Just be sure to proof read it before she prints them, to make sure that the spelling and grammar is correct, and that she's included all the pertinent information. (Occasion, guest of honor's name, day, date, time, location with address, dress code [if any], host's name(s) [optional] and RSVP information.) Many office supply box stores sell small quantities of high quality yet affordable decorative papers that can be used on your home printer. Make sure that you clean your printer heads and run a test print on plain bond paper before you do the entire run on the stationery papers.

Decor: A little bit of imagination will take you a very long way. Balloons, streamers, crepe paper, ribbons and construction paper are cheap and they can transform the dulllest room into something colorful and festive. Visit any popular craft or decor web site and you'll find dozens of ideas for fun and easy crafts to create the party decor. Enlist your daughter and her friends to create the atmosphere

for the party. It will get their creative juices flowing and they'll feel incredibly proud when they view the finished result before the guests arrive and as the party is going on.

Food: If you're working with an air tight budget, you might want to make the party a little later in the evening (starting at 8:00 p.m. or 9:00 p.m. for example) and make it clear to guests that there will not be a sit down meal. For instance, on the invitations you can specify that you'll be serving hors d'oeuvres or appetizers, soft drinks and cake (rather than announcing that there won't be a formal sit down dinner). Then, I'd strongly suggest putting together a buffet. You can create a beautiful effect with a disposable table cloth from the 99 cent store, a few little decorations to keep with the party theme, and a bit of crackers and dip, pizza, sandwiches (quartered, so that guests can help themselves to as much as they want, but won't be tempted to take something huge and then leave over 3/4 of it for the trash) crudite, small spinach pies, wraps and cold cuts, etc. Most teens are very easy to please when it comes to food, and aren't in search of 5 star restaurant fare.

Use paper cups, plates and napkins to reduce your clean up. Dessert can be as simple as some sliced fruit (again, you can get very festive with the presentation of something as cheap and simple as a watermelon) ice cream, or a home baked cake. Remember that you don't have to go crazy, and that your guests will be thrilled to see a cake in the first place. It doesn't have to be five tiers high and created by a master baker.

Activities, Games, Music:

Memories and Dedications: Once again, I'd suggest that you enlist your home computer.

If you'd like to present a collection of photos of your daughter from infancy through teenage, you don't have to break the bank. If you have Microsoft Power Point or Windows Movie Maker, or a host of other computer software with a similar function, then you can put together your own presentation. If you have a scanner or have access to one, you can scan the girl's baby pictures and class photos. If you have digital video, it can be edited into the presentation too. For my daughter's Sweet 16, her best friend put together a 10 minute long presentation, with titles and graphics. The girl taught herself the software as she went along, and when she was finished she burned it on to a DVD that we've been able to treasure ever since.

One small word of caution where this is concerned: Advise your daughter that while this part of the party is very important, it's just as important to be concise and well edited so that your guests do not begin to lose interest and drift away. I'd suggest keeping the dedications and memory section down to a minimum of 15 minutes. At first, your guests will be hanging on every single photo. But after awhile, it grows tired, so you want to be sure to finish before your guests begin yawning.

If you are having a surprise party for your daughter, she won't have a chance to prepare dedications. In this situation, I asked my guests to write down a short paragraph about a memory that they had of a good time with the guest of honor. I can't even begin to describe

how effective this was, and what a beautiful moment it made in the party. Not only was my daughter overwhelmed by the outpouring of kind words, but her guests were equally as moved. It gave everyone involved the opportunity to really understand how valuable their friendship is, and that was something that all the money in the world could never buy.

Favors: My daughter has attended dozens of Sweet 16s and brought home dozens of favors. It's been my experience that the lion's share of them go straight into the garbage or the back of a dresser drawer. The ones that are still on display, even if the event passed years earlier, are the photos and picture frames. If you have a digital camera and a printer in your home, you can take group photos of your daughter with her guests. You can purchase picture frames for as little as \$1 per piece. You can have your guests pose for group photos. Then, while they're busy with an activity, or while they're eating, you can download your photos, print out the best ones, cut them down and slip them into photo frames. If this seems like too much work, you can just purchase the photo frames (nothing bigger than a 5" x 7" frame). Ahead of time, you can make a little graphic on a piece of decorative paper, even if it just says Mary's Sweet 16, and slip it into the frame. Then your guest can take it home and use it for her own photo.

Chapter Six

The Invitations

Chapter Six - Invitations

In most cases, the majority of your guests will be teenagers. In many cases, this will be the first time that your teenage guest is receiving her own formal invitation. In many cases, the teenager will not understand the rules of etiquette or the importance of practicing it. Most teens have no concept of what it costs to throw a Sweet 16 party. They may not understand why the host will be needing a final head count. They may not understand why they can't bring five uninvited friends along with them. In my ten years of speaking to Sweet 16 parents, I believe I've heard a story of every misunderstanding that can possibly take place. As a result, I always encourage my Sweet 16 parents to be as clear and concise in their language as they can possibly be. Save the flowery fonts and long hand dates and the formalities for weddings and adult parties. For the Sweet 16, be as basic and straightforward as possible.

Choose an Invitation style that matches the theme of your party, but don't knock yourself out if you can't find one. The Invitation can set the tone for the party, but it doesn't have to. It's not necessary to find a paper that's the perfect blue to match your daughter's dress. Most people won't be bringing the Invitation to the party anyhow, and they won't be comparing it to the decor.

Experience has shown me that it's probably best to send these Invitations out a maximum of 6 weeks in advance. Most teenagers do not keep datebooks and calendars, so you don't want to invite a situation in which a teenage guest says she's coming months in advance and then forgets what she promised. Most RSVP deadlines are a minimum of 2 weeks before the event, so a 6 week lead time

will give your guests a month to reply to you; that's not too short a time and not too long a time either.

Information needed for the Invitation:

- 1. Obviously, you'll make a choice about wording. You'll include the Guest of Honor's name.**
- 2. The day and date of the party:** I'd advise against presenting the date as "Saturday, the twelfth of July, Two thousand eight" Do not give your teenage guests any cause for misreading or misunderstanding the information. "Saturday, July 12, 2008" says it all and says it clearly.
- 3. The Closing Time:** Unless you live in an area where the driving age is very young and each of your guests has his or her own car, I'd strongly suggest putting a closing time on your invitation, especially if the party is going to run late into the evening. This is a great courtesy for the parents of the guests, and it will make the ending of your party go more smoothly. If the parents are waiting at the end of the evening to pick up the guests, then no one will be left behind having given no thought on how she would get home. Again, do not allow for any vagueness where the time is concerned. Skip the "eight o'clock in the evening" and use "8:00 p.m. - 12:00 midnight" instead.
- 4. The Dress Code:** Use your best judgement here. I've heard a wide sweep of reports from different quarters regarding issues with party attire. By far, the most popular suggested attire for the Sweet 16s that we've done is "semi-formal". This indicates

that the guest is expected to leave the jeans, sneakers, micro-mini skirts and belly shirts home. At the same time, the boys aren't expected to wear jackets and ties. If you'd like your guests to arrive in fancier dress, I'd suggest that you put the words "formal attire please" on the invitation. If your child or her friends tend to dress in a style that's a little more casual or provocative than you like, you might want to come right out and state the words, "no jeans, do rags, sneakers, etc." directly on the Invitation. Some may find this harsh, but at least the guests will be unable to plead ignorance of the dress code.

5. RSVP Information: This is one of the most important details on the Invitation, and it's the one that's most likely to be overlooked by teenage guests, who do not realize that you're paying \$50 per plate for them, or what it took for you to earn that \$50, or the fact that you'll need a final head count. Too many teenage guests are likely to reply to your daughter verbally, and if your daughter is the typical teenager, she will have forgotten who said what by the time she gets home. I've had too many parents tell me that the replies would arrive in the form of, "I saw Debbie in the hall during passing and I think she said that she was coming. Or maybe it was Mary who said that. Or was Mary the one who couldn't make it? But I think Debbie said yes." This is going to be of little help to you when the time comes for you to call the caterer with the final headcount. Many parents dislike using Response Cards for Sweet 16s because they feel that they'll just be lost along the way and never returned. But then, if you're resorting to collecting replies from 100 guests via telephone, you'll need to be highly organized in order to keep track of who called and whether or not they'll attend. I find

that if you're going to pass on Response Cards, e-mail RSVPs are the best. You can collect them in a separate folder and have a better record of the status of your replies. Another way to handle this is to stipulate on the Invitation "Attendance by Invitation and Response Only". The problem is that just because you cover all the bases in the Invitation, an Invitation is not a legal document, and there's still no guarantee that the teenager will read your intention, retain the information, behave correctly, and mark the date down in her calendar. However, the more measures that you take to ensure a proper response from your teenage guests, the more accurate your final head count will be.

6. Response Cards - Number of People Attending: For any other event, I always design Response Cards in which the guest is given a blank to enter the number of people attending. For a Sweet 16, I'd think twice about this. Does Debbie really understand that she can't write the number "5" in that space and then bring along 5 uninvited guests?

Inviting "second tier" guests after a declined invitation:

I purposely don't quote etiquette experts because I'm not one and because a lot of their expertise conflicts. But based upon personal experience, my advice about having a second tier of possible guests is this: Don't do it. It's very insulting to the guests who find themselves on the second tier. Chances are good that they'll find out that they were invited as a second choice because your first choice guest declined the invitation. I have found myself in this situation and it cast a pall on the relationship that I had with the host which never quite cleared up. Either you invite a guest or you don't. I'd advise

against creating a hierarchy on your invitation list.

Chapter Seven

The Standard Sweet 16 Rituals

Chapter Eight

Structuring the Party

Chapter Nine

Entertaining the Family and Adult Guests versus Entertaining the Teenagers and Children

Chapter Ten

Games

Chapter Eleven

The Importance of Photos and Videos

Chapter Twelve

Circulating During the Party

Chapter Thirteen

Alternatives to the Big Party

Chapter Fourteen

Including a Religious Ritual or Tradition

Chapter Fifteen

The Sweet 16 Girl Gives Back

Chapter Sixteen

Checklist (From Dreams to Thank You Cards)

