

EXPERT ANSWERS

***TO YOUR
SWEET 16 PARTY***

QUESTIONS

An e-Booklet from Ira's Peripheral Visions
Written by Karen Shapiro
07/08 Version 002

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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR:

In 2000, Karen Shapiro and her husband Ira took their Greeting Card business into the world of Custom Invitations. From the very beginning, they developed a huge following amongst Sweet 16 girls and their parents. As the years went by, their children each passed their 16th birthdays and spent years on the local Sweet 16 circuit.

While taking orders for her Custom Invitation business, Karen has had the opportunity to speak to hundreds, if not thousands of Sweet 16 parents. She now believes that she's heard every horror story and every wonderful memory that ever transpired at a Sweet 16.

She is not a party planner or an etiquette expert. She's just a business woman and a mother of teenagers who has spent 8 years immersed in the world of Sweet 16s. Her goal in writing this booklet is to pass these stories on to you, along with a little bit of practical common sense advice, in hopes of making the way smoother while you plan and celebrate your Sweet 16.



EXPERT ANSWERS TO YOUR SWEET 16 QUESTIONS

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CHAPTER 1

WHY HAVE A SWEET 16?

CHAPTER ONE - WHY HAVE A SWEET 16?

There are girls who wait all their young lives for that magical day when they finally reach their 16th Birthday. In our culture, this birthday seems to mark the girl's transition into womanhood. Though most girls are ill prepared to handle the responsibilities of womanhood at the age of 16, many are eager to receive the new privileges, like permission to wear make up, or to date, or to have a later curfew, or to drive a car.

Many dream of the fabulous party that will accompany this milestone. They've spent their childhoods sighing over tiaras, admiring ball gowns with puffy floor length skirts made of tulle, and dreaming of being pampered and styled at the salon. For just this one night, they will be able to 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 luxuriating in the trappings of dressing up and partying 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 gives you an opportunity to present your Sweet 16 Girl to your friends and family as someone who is ready to take on some mantle of responsibility as a participant in her family and community. Childhood is slowly fading away and the woman within the Sweet 16 Girl is beginning to emerge.

That's a beautiful aspect of the celebration to keep in mind, especially as the girl's imagination is running wild with ideas for celebrating the big event. As she dreams of her party, remind yourself that her transition into womanhood has begun. Imagine how wonderful it will be to have her friends and family come together to mark this milestone 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, complete with an expensive reception attended by 100 guests, 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 for 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, **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 sorrow. 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 turning points 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 to celebrate. Do everything that you can to enjoy the excitement. Take a moment to appreciate how beautiful the Sweet 16 girl 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.

A girl's 16th year can also be a time of great pressure. The Junior Year of High School can bring along what seems like an unending parade of big challenges to face and big decisions to make. Some girls are taking their first AP classes and struggling with the work load. Some may have had their first heartache from breaking up with a boy. Some may feel pressure to excel on their SATs, while their scores come up to be less than spectacular. Every last teenage girl I've ever met is way over scheduled with extra curricular activities. Here in New York City, many High School Juniors also face a battery of Regents exams, the results of which could profoundly affect their GPAs. The whole subject of looking ahead to college brings so many new and difficult decisions with it, and some girls find themselves so overwhelmed that they don't even want to discuss it.

As a result, a parent may find her daughter opening a fresh mouth at home, slacking off at school, or shutting down completely. The parent may find the daughter's behavior to be exasperating. If this is happening in your

home, remind yourself that the girl only does this at home because it's her only outlet for letting off steam while she attempts to cope with these new pressures. If her behavior pushes you over the limit, please do not even consider using deprivation of the Sweet 16 Party as a weapon with which to punish her. She's growing up and will quickly learn how to play the cards that life deals her.

Be happy with your beautiful Sweet 16 Girl, be proud of how far she's come, and treasure your fondest dreams of where life will take her from here.



CHAPTER 2

PLANNING AHEAD: SETTING A BUDGET AND CHOOSING A THEME

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It should go without saying: The more time that you leave for yourself to plan the party, the easier it will be on you and the Sweet 16 Girl 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. **I'd advise against making any purchases or putting down any deposits at this time, because a lot can change in a year and a half.** But you'll stand a better chance of making the best decisions if you're not feeling pressured by the calendar.

Set a Budget:

The cost of a Sweet 16 party can vary from approximately \$200 to well into six figure sums, as we've seen courtesy of MTV'S My Super Sweet 16. If finances aren't a problem and you have an unlimited budget for your party, then congratulations! Call your party planner and get busy.

But if you are attempting to hold down the expenses of your party, by all means, do so. Do not feel ashamed or apologetic. Come up with a realistic affordable sum, and once you arrive at that number, do everything that you can to stick to it.

Planning in advance can help you to save money. If you have time to shop around, you'll find the best venue, DJ, and gown at the most affordable prices.

If, while shopping, your Sweet 16 Girl becomes entranced with a party item that is way out of your price range, put the brakes on immediately. Do not buy on impulse. Give yourself a moment to breathe, and if you can, go home and sleep on it. Will this pricey item really make any difference in your daughter's happiness or the happiness of your guests? (Because when it's all said and done, the goal of the Sweet 16 Party is for the Sweet 16 Girl, her family, and her guests to enjoy themselves.) A week after the party, when

it begins to fade into memory, will anyone remember or care about whether or not you had this expensive item at the party? Teenagers can sometimes be lured into believing that possessing material things can be a matter of life and death, but the adult holding the purse strings is responsible for doing a careful evaluation of the cost versus the benefit of the item.

Weigh your options. I've seen teenagers at \$75 per plate dinners who were bored stiff and uncomfortable with the formality. I've seen shabby VFW Halls transformed into gorgeous fantasies when the right decorator was enlisted. A family should feel under no obligation to go into debt over this event. No matter what your budget is, be assured that you can put together a beautiful party.

The family must feel absolutely no pressure to keep up with the Joneses. Almost every Sweet 16 Girl will spend a good deal of her High School years "on the circuit", attending one Sweet 16 after another. There is a tendency, in some quarters, to want to outdo the previous party, or at least to maintain the same standard. Some parents may even believe that their daughter will be embarrassed if they don't overspend for the party. I can't even count the number of times when I heard a parent's voice drop to say, "I didn't want to have such-and-such at the party and I really couldn't afford it, but Mary had it and Sue had it, so my daughter had to have it."

No, your daughter didn't have to have it. The Sweet 16 rituals all focus around the fact that the Sweet 16 girl is stepping into womanhood. The sooner that a woman understands how to manage a budget, the better off she'll be. The sooner that a woman learns how to stretch a dollar as far as it will go, the more creativity she'll be able to develop. A Sweet 16 girl who is being given a lavish party with a hundred guests is liable to forget about that bank-breaking purchase that she wailed over a few months earlier.

The family must also remember that if the girl cries and sulks over having to pick and choose what she can have as the budget dictates, it's possible that she's not even focused on the expensive item, but instead is troubled about any one of the high school circumstances that I've outlined in Chapter 1. With womanhood comes pressure, and it is not the parents' job to make the pressures go away. Rather, it's the parents' job to teach the child how to make the best decisions when under pressure.

Consider everything that goes in to the party:

Choosing the date:

Will there be any events that may wind up conflicting with the party 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. If you plan to host guests from out of town, consider any possible snags that could hold up their travel plans. If your Sweet 16 Girl has a summer birthday, consider whether or not her friends will be away at summer camp or on family vacations on your party date. You may want to consider moving the event to June or September. If your Sweet 16 Girl's birthday falls near the Christmas season, when almost everyone is overbooked, you might want to consider having her party in January, when things tend to be quieter and people are looking for things to do to liven up a dark winter night.

Choosing the venue:

What is your budget?

How long is your tentative guest list?

How big a place do you need?

Is your party going to be formal, semi-formal or casual?

Will this be a house party?

Are you familiar with the catering hall or restaurant you're considering? Have you dined or attended a party there before? Is the food and the service good? What guarantee do we have that the place will be clean and beautiful on the night of your party?

I'd advocate choosing a hall with which you're familiar. The fewer surprises that you have while planning your party, the better.

Will you be adding to the decor?

Will the decor and the menu have a theme?

What ideas do you have about appetizers, main courses, side dishes and desserts?

Will you be serving alcohol?

Please think very seriously about this. The Sweet 16 girl knows her guests and she will know if they'll behave themselves properly and abstain from alcohol if it's served to the adults at the party. If there's any doubt that the young guests will observe rules about teenage drinking, consider eliminating alcohol from the party completely. If that seems too drastic, you can offer a cash bar, or give your bartender a very stern warning about who can be served and who can't.

Is the dance floor large enough to accommodate all your guests?

Are you considering hiring a DJ? What will this cost? Is there room for him to set up?

Will there be buffet? Is there room to set it up?

Will you be given a discount if you book way in advance?

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 hall may not be able to stay in business long enough to host your party.

Will your guests be able to park their cars? Will there be valet parking available?

Will you be having elderly or disabled guests? Will the venue accommodate them?

Will you be indoors or outdoors?

An evening's cruise on a yacht can provide an idyllic setting that is if it doesn't rain. If you choose to have your party outdoors, take a moment to consider what will happen if fate hands you a thunderstorm that night.

Make phone calls to get prices on local venues, caterers and entertainers. Raise some of these questions. Collect brochures and make notes from the information that you gather, and keep the notes organized 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.

Hiring a DJ or any kind of entertainment:

A talented DJ can make a party come to life. 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.

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 and Tony Bennett songs, and your middle aged guests might like to hear a few hits from the 60s, 70s and 80s.

He should be charismatic without being overbearing. You want to be sure that he is entertaining your guests without getting "in their faces". Be sure that he can control the volume on his music. Avoid seating your elderly guests anywhere near the DJ speakers, for they may find this annoying, if not painful.

Hired dancers can make a very big difference when it comes to getting your guests on their feet and on to the dance floor. If your budget allows, I'd consider this a good investment.

See to what extent the DJ can help you in preparing a video screen should you want to show a video of the Sweet 16 Girl's childhood memories. Many of them are outfitted with this equipment. Check prices in advance.

Yes, you can have a party without hiring a DJ. If your hall has a sound system, then you can provide the music. If it doesn't, perhaps you have a friend or family member who is a musician or an audiophile who can help you to set up a sound system in the hall. Is there a charismatic family member or guest who can play the part of the host and make the announcements for the party? Do whatever you can to have a microphone available to you, because it will be nearly impossible for a room full of guests to hear you without it. Again, I'd advise you to think ahead. Take a few hours to consider how a DJ may choose the music he plays, what type of announcements he might make, or how he'd supervise games for the guests. It's really not all that difficult, and it's likely something that a friend or family member can handle. If you think that your guests would like to do the standard party dances, like the Electric Slide or the Limbo, be sure that you have the music available. Plan the four hours, just like a DJ would. With a little forethought, you can put together a good series of sets.

Formal Dinner or Buffet?

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.

The Invitations:

You can call printers in your area and arrange an appointment to view their catalogs. Many printers will offer you samples, and it's a good idea to hold on to these so that you can compare them and make a good decision about which one you'll choose.

Alternately, you can search for Invitations on line. I'd highly recommend that you view our catalog at www.ipvstudio.com/sweet_16.htm We've been happily serving Sweet 16 Girls and their families since 2000.

If you're considering making your own Invitations, be sure that you're experienced in laying out artwork and printing on your home computer. It's not nearly as easy as it looks, and you don't want to invite a situation where you're going through one expensive printer cartridge after the next in the

hopes of trying to get a good quality print. On this count, I've heard too many sad stories from customers who tried to do it on their own and wound up wasting money, only to end up at a professional printer after all.

Remember, it's just an Invitation. You want it to be beautiful and to make a good impression, but this can be done without spending \$20 per piece for fussy hand made and hand assembled papers. As much as it pains me to say it, most Invitations wind up either on the floor or in the trash. Only a few close friends and relatives will be pressing them into their scrapbooks.

Photos and Video:

After you've gone to all the trouble of selecting the perfect venue, dressing your Sweet 16 Girl to the hilt, and assembling all your guests, I believe it is absolutely crucial to have photos taken at this event, and video too if you can manage it. The quality of the photos and video will be dictated by your budget. But no matter what your budget, nearly everyone on earth owns some form of digital camera these days. Encourage your guests to take pictures and to forward their files to you.

If you are going to hire a photographer, make sure that he is capable of staying in the background of the party. Posing for photos should not be the central activity of the party. A good photographer will know how to capture the moment without intruding upon it.

Let the buyer beware when choosing a photographer! Review his portfolio! You may even want to consider hiring students from a good photography school, as they're probably just as dedicated to their work, own just as much equipment and are probably willing to work for a fraction of the price.

But beware! A bargain may end up costing you in the long run. I've heard stories from more than one of my customers whose parties were dampened by flaky photographers. Some don't show up for the party at all, or some turn in a CD of horrendous photos. Just this week a customer sent me a CD of photos of a Sweet 16. She'd chosen the photographer's "economy package" without realizing that the "economy" photographer had no understanding of lighting and that he was using a cheap auto focus camera without a tripod. So the family now has an album of photos of their guests with red eye, sickly

pallor from glaring light, awkward poses, bad composition and blurred focus. Their guests could have taken better photos on their cell phones.

The Gown:

Very few teenage girls have to be instructed about how to shop, or cajoled into visiting a department store or a mall.

If your budget is an issue, visit the outlet stores first. (My daughter needed a white floor length gown to be part of her best friend's Sweet 16 "court". She found a stunning designer dress at an outlet store for \$25.) Watch out for sales in your neighborhood. A great time to look is right after prom season, when many designer party dress price tags will be slashed.

Make sure that the Sweet 16 girl LOVES the dress. If she doesn't love it in the store, and if she finds fault with any detail of it, chances are good that the fault will become magnified rather than diminished as she prepares for her party. Do not buy anything that she's not head over heel in love with.

Make sure that the dress fits today and will fit at this party. To this end, I'd recommended that you do not buy a gown more than four months in advance of the party.

If your Sweet 16 Girl is having a "court" and the budget is tight, I'd suggest that the court girls each buy a dress in the same color, rather than insisting that they cough up \$250+ to get measured for a custom "bridesmaid" dress that will coordinate with the Sweet 16 Girl's gown.

Choosing a Theme

There is no limit to the variety of themes that can be chosen for a party. Even after 8 years of designing Sweet 16 Invitations, I still receive calls from customers requesting yet another theme that never would have occurred to me on my own.

A theme will help set the mood for your party. Once the theme is chosen, it can be reflected in the venue's decor, in the Invitations, in the favors, and sometimes even in the menu or the girl's dress.

The Sweet 16 Girl can choose a theme based upon something she

loves (the ballet, Paris, Broadway, rock guitars, Harry Potter) or something to match the mood of the season (glittering snowflakes for a December affair, a beach party in August, or even a Winter-in-July theme to change things up.) If you run a Google search on “Party Themes” you will find many long lists with suggestions of motifs for parties.

Some girls like to choose a color scheme for their attire, as well as for their guests. They may request that the guests do not wear any colors that are in the color scheme, or the Sweet 16 girl’s party dress. Other girls like black and white attire exclusively. Another asked her guests to come dressed as their favorite film characters. We even had one Sweet 16 girl who requested to have all her gifts wrapped in pink paper. While the color scheme may create a festive decor, I don’t find it necessary to be absolutely consistent throughout every detail of the party. For instance, there’s no reason for the girl’s dress color to match the color of the Invitation, since your guests probably won’t be seeing both at the same time.

It’s not mandatory to have a theme or a color scheme, but no matter what your budget or level of formality, a theme can give your party and its decor just a little extra pizzaz.



CHAPTER 3

THE GUEST LIST AND THE INVITATIONS

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The Guest List

After you've established your budget, come up with a ballpark idea of how many guests you're going to invite.

If your first draft of the list comes up much longer than for what your budget allows, I'd advise that you maintain the larger guest list, but step down the price per guest. Most of your guests will be happy just to be attending the party, and they may never even notice where you've economized. This is preferable to having a party for a few select guests who are going to be lavished with a meal and favors that they may never even appreciate.

I believe that it's best to have one big party with teens, family, guests, and children together. Middle aged and elderly guests may complain about the noise and antics of teenagers, but I'm sure that they'd be thrilled to see the Sweet 16 girl in her gown, and to see her celebrating with all of her friends, and to experience the electricity in the room. Most halls have lounges or outdoor spaces where adult guests may be able to retreat if the excitement becomes overwhelming. I believe that these are better options to offer, rather than hosting a separate subdued "adults only" party.

Make sure that the party is structured to accommodate all your guests. Because it is a party commemorating an event in a teenage life, the activities should favor the teenagers. But be courteous of the adults and elderly, who may be sensitive to loud music. And it's always a good idea to keep the youngest guests entertained with games on the dance floor, like "Steal the Bacon" or "Coke and Pepsi". They may also enjoy being given coloring books and small boxes of crayons with which they can pass the time.

The Two Tiered Guest List:

A two tiered guest list contains a top tier of "first choice" guests who will receive the first round of invitations, and a second tier of possible guests to invite should too many from the top tier decline the invitation.

Regarding having this type of a guest list, my advice is this: Don't do it. I am no etiquette expert, but based upon personal experience, I can assure you that guests who find themselves on the second tier can't help but feel insulted.

I have found myself in a situation where I was invited on the second tier only once, and it cast a pall on the relationship that I had with the host which never quite cleared up. No one wants to feel that they were your second choice. Either you invite a guest or you don't. I'd advise against creating a hierarchy on your invitation list.

The 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 eight years of speaking to Sweet 16 parents, I believe I've heard a story for every possible misunderstanding and miscommunication that can possibly take place on the wording of Invitations. As a result, I always encourage my Sweet 16 parents to be as clear and concise in their Invitation 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. 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. Much as it pains me to say it, most of the Invitations you send out will wind up either on the floor or in the trash.

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 young guests a month to reply to you. This should leave you enough time to catch them while they're still available, but not so much time that they'll commit to attending and then forget all about it.

Information needed for the Invitation:

1. **The opening sentiment.** Most Invitations open with a little salutation. Some have a small couplet of poetry or a cute jingle. Or you can say something as simple as "Please be our guest as we celebrate . . . "
2. **The Guest of Honor's name and the words "Sweet 16".**
3. **Choose a legible print font.** This is not the time to get flowery and decorative and verbose. Your goal is to present the information as clearly as possible.
4. **The day and date of the party:** I'd advise against presenting the date as "Saturday, the sixth of December, Two thousand eight" Do not give your teenage guests any cause for misreading or misunderstanding the information. "Saturday, December 6, 2008" says it all and says it clearly.
5. **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.
6. **The Dress Code:** Use your best judgement here. I've heard a wide sweep of reports from various 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 the Sweet 16 Girl 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. **This information should all go on the Invitation instead of the Response Card.** Remember, the Response Card will be returned to you, and the guest will lose any information printed on the card. All attire suggestions should go directly on the Invitation itself.

7. **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 the Sweet 16 Girl verbally, and if the Sweet 16 Girl 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 Sue 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 Sue 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.

8. **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. Do Mary and Sue really understand that they can't write the number "5" in that space and then bring along 5 uninvited guests?

9. **Reception Cards** - Are you inviting hundreds of people to a Mass or religious service to celebrate the Sweet 16, then inviting only 50 to the reception? In a case like this, you should put the church information on the Invitation, and then have separate Reception Cards printed for only the 50 who are invited to the Reception, giving them the details.

Keeping track of your replies.

No matter how you choose to go about this, I'd suggest that you organize a list or a spread sheet. List the name of each recipient of an Invitation, and assign a number to them. For instance:

1. The Jones Family
2. The Carter Family
3. John Public
4. Mary Smith etc.,

Then, when you receive a reply from the Jones Family or from Mary Smith, you mark down whether they're attending or declining.

Save this list, and when you return from the party, enter the gift that was given by the guest. This way, when your daughter writes her Thank You Cards, she can personalize each one, knowing clearly what the guest gave her. Don't trust that she'll remember who gave her what out of one hundred guests.

If you are using Response Cards, before sending, turn over each one and write the guest's corresponding number in the lower right hand corner on the back of the card. Make it small and inconspicuous. Then, as the replies are returned, it will be easy for you to order them to correspond with your list. If you wind up with stragglers who don't reply by the RSVP deadline (and you will) it will be easy for you to figure out who didn't reply, so that you can call them and double check.



CHAPTER 4

STRUCTURING THE PARTY - SWEET 16 RITUALS

CHAPTER FOUR - STRUCTURING THE PARTY - SWEET 16 RITUALS

The following suggestions are based upon a four hour party. Do not assume that the party will take care of itself. It's a good idea to set up some loosely structured timetable of events that will happen during the course of the night. Do not feel that you have to stick to this rigid schedule. You don't want to risk ruining spontaneous moments, or slowing your guests down if they're busy enjoying themselves. These guidelines are offered only as a suggestion.

Most Sweet 16 parties are planned as pure entertainment for the Guest of Honor, her family and her friends. However, it becomes more a meaningful event if rituals are incorporated into the party during the evening. If you're planning to observe any of these rituals, remember to keep one eye on the clock. Your guests may be very affected by a speech or a presentation that lasts for five minutes, but they may start yawning and talking amongst themselves if too much time is taken.

Standard Sweet 16 Party Elements:

The Sign In Board - Place Cards

Outside of the main entrance to the hall, many people place an easel which displays an enlarged photo of the Sweet 16 girl when she was a little child. This is the image that greets your guests as they arrive. Pens are left at the easel so that guests may sign the poster and send along their good wishes to the Sweet 16 Girl. Be sure that your poster is backed on a firm board, so that the paper won't tear when it's written on, and that the board is anchored to the easel, so that it won't fall off as a result of people touching it. Make sure that your easel is sturdy. Be sure to provide plenty of pens, as pens have a way of "disappearing". Check with your hall to see if they have easels on hand that you may use for your party.

You will also have a table displaying your guests' Place Cards. They will collect their card and find their table assignment. (Often, the hall will provide these. Alternately, you can order them from a printer or you can craft your own.)

For the first hour of the party, your guests will be arriving, greeting one another, and settling in. It's a good idea to have small appetizers and soft drinks available from the beginning.

The Introduction of the Guest of Honor and her Court (Usually at about the 45 minute mark)

In Latino Quinceanera traditions, the guests who are invited to sit on the dais are referred to as the girl's court. In America, the Sweet 16 Girl may choose to have a court made up of several of her closest friends. These boys and girls will be presented with her at the beginning of the party. Traditionally, the friends are presented first, two at a time. They make an entrance from outside the hall, their names are announced, they pause for a moment to be photographed, and then they take their seats on the dais while the next two friends make their entrance. The second to last entrance should be made by the Sweet 16 Girl's parents or immediate family. The final entrance is made by the Sweet 16 girl herself. This is one of the biggest moments of the party. The Sweet 16 girl, about to become a woman, dressed like a fantasy princess, is presented to her family and guests.

The Sweet 16 girl's first dance with her father or a significant man in her life. (Immediately after her introduction)

Ideally, she should be alone on the dance floor with her father or partner for the first verse or two of a song that has special meaning to them. This should be a relatively slow dance. After the first verse, the DJ or host can cue the rest of the guests to join the couple on the dance floor.

After the first dance, it's time to get the party started. Most Sweet 16s will follow this up with nearly an hour of music and dancing. There can be a few breaks for games, but the idea is to get the energy of the party up and running. Ideally, you want your guests to be mingling and dancing. A speech or two can be given if the DJ wants to take a short break, but remember to keep it brief. Be sure to have something for all of your guests to do, no matter what their age.

Dinner is Served (usually at the 2 hour mark)

Now that your guests have had the opportunity to party, dance, meet

new people and catch up with old friends, they can settle in for the better part of the third hour. It's time to serve the dinner. While your guests are waiting to be served, this is the perfect moment to offer a toast to your Sweet 16 Girl, or to have a close family member make a speech.

The Memory Reel (as dinner is ending)

After your guests have been given at least a half hour to 45 minutes to finish off their main course, it's the perfect time to present the Memory Reel. These collections of photos and videos have become de riguer at Sweet 16 parties. Most of your guests will be thrilled to have this opportunity to, in effect, browse your photo albums with you. Not only will they see photos and video clips of the Sweet 16 Girl as a baby and a young child, but they will also see her family and friends alongside her, in old homes and familiar surroundings, as they were ten or fifteen years earlier.

Be sure that your screen is arranged so that all of your guests can view it. To make sure that you don't wind up with technical problems during the presentation, you might want to run a small "tech rehearsal" off to the side before you actually make the presentation.

I know that I've already said it a dozen times, but it bears repeating. Keep this reel as brief as possible. I'd suggest keeping the running time under ten minutes. At the ten minute mark, some of your guests may start tuning out and possibly talking amongst themselves, which will make it harder to hear any sound accompanying the video. Be ruthless when you're editing the reel and go for as wide a variety of images as you can. Avoid showing fifteen photos that were shot on the same day. Instead, pick out the most important photos from the collection, the photos that tell the story the best.

Rather than hiring someone to compose your reel for you, which could easily run you a small fortune, see if your daughter or one of her friends can find her way around a scanner and Power Point software or something similar. Most PCs come with standard software and most teenagers are versatile enough to manipulate digital photos and video into a compelling presentation, and this won't cost you a dime. If you can burn it on to a DVD, perhaps the hall will have a video screen available where you can present it at the party. Check with the DJ too.

The Candle Lighting Ceremony (immediately following)

This is a beautiful ritual in which the girl is presented either with a candelabra holding 16 unlit candles, or her cake with 16 unlit candles. Latino families tend to hold this ritual at the beginning of the party, but most hosts hold it toward the end, between the dinner and dessert courses, when your guests may be resting for a few moments after a big meal.

The Sweet 16 Girl will recite a short dedication to each of 16 special guests, and then she will honor each one by inviting them up individually to light a candle. It is lovely to have the Sweet 16 Girl express her gratitude toward others and “give back” to them in this small way.

It’s best to have the Sweet 16 girl write some kind of loose script ahead of time, so she knows who she’s calling them, and has a few words prepared to say to them. A few sentences for each guest is plenty. Remember that if she spends three minutes on each guest, times 16 candles, she’s consumed more than 3/4 of an hour. It will take a minute or so for the guest to approach the cake or candelabra, smile for the camera, and return to their seat.

Dessert Is Served

Finish Off the Last Hour with Dancing - Good-Byes

Some of your guests will begin leaving right after dessert is served. The host and Sweet 16 Girl should be available to say good-bye to them, and to thank them for coming.

A Word About Party Favors

My children and I have attended dozens of Sweet 16s. We left each one with some sort of party favor. I understand that these favors are given to the guest as a gesture of love and gratitude, but if a child is on the “Sweet 16 circuit” attending a Sweet 16 once a month or maybe even once a week, the collection of favors will soon take on a life of its own.

I’m sorry to say that almost all of the favors that my children ever brought home wound up either collecting dust behind their beds or thrown in the garbage. It makes me sad to think of all the money and care that the

hosts of the party must have spent on those little gifts, only to have them so quickly rejected or passed along.

There was one favor that my daughter received at several Sweet 16s which not only stayed with her but won prominent display in her bedroom. That would be small picture frames. Girls this age absolutely love to collect photos of themselves with their friends, especially when they're all dressed up for a party. You can get a lot of mileage out of an inexpensive 5 x 7 photo frame, and if the teenager chooses not to keep it, chances are that someone else in the household can put it to good use. I highly recommend these favors.

Donations to charity in lieu of paying money for party favors is also a very good idea, because this is a way for the Sweet 16 Girl to assume some mantle of responsibility within the community as a young woman. If you choose to do this, you can have a decorative note stationed at each table, explaining the Sweet 16 Girl's decision, and announcing the name of the charity to which she's donated.



CHAPTER 5

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.

I've stated it earlier, but it bears repeating. A Sweet 16 marks a girl's transition into womanhood, and even though most Sweet 16 girls are ill equipped to step into the world alone at this point, still it's vitally important that they begin to learn about how to manage money and how to come up with creative solutions. If a family has been assailed by a financial problem, do not allow that problem to take down your spirit and put an end to your party. Just demonstrate for your daughter that you can work around it.

Our family had thrown a big party 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. Our daughter 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 the party was over and 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 that the teenagers understand that they can't bring along anyone else unless you've decided otherwise.

If you still want to use a paper Invitation, consider purchasing the type that you fill in by hand. These are sold at most stationery stores, pharmacies, and gift shops, usually for about ten dollars for a pack of ten.

Another option can involve turning 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, construction paper, glitter and glue, are cheap and they can transform the dullest 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 coming out and saying that there won't be a formal sit down dinner). Alternately, you can put 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 and Games:

Go on line and run searches on the keywords "party games" and you will come up with dozens of results. Tailor your keywords and choices to the Sweet 16 Girl's preferences.

Music:

An I-pod and a docking station should do the trick. So will a music station on the radio.

Memory Reel: 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.

Dedications: 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, when each guest stood and shared a story about a memorable event with my daughter, or expressed their love for her. It went so far beyond what any material gift could mean to her. 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 friendships are, and that was something that all the money in the world could never buy.

Favors: As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the lion's share of party favors are forgotten by the day following the party. I would not invest a lot of money in favors. You can fill a tiny gift bag with candies, offer them with your good-byes at the end of the night, and most of your guests will be thrilled

If you have a digital camera and a printer in your home, you can take group photos of your daughter with her guests during the party. You can purchase picture frames for as little as \$1 per piece. Then, while your guests are busy with an activity, or while they're eating, you can download your photos, print out the best ones, crop them and slip them into photo frames. Give these as favors and your bound to get a great response. Your average Sweet 16 guest is going to be more focused on the subject of the photo than whether it was taken by a highly trained art school graduate or a parent with a point and shoot camera. Chances are that this type of favor will not be discarded.

If this seems like too much work, you can just purchase the photo frames (nothing bigger than a 5" x 7" frame). Before the party, 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 6

ALTERNATIVES TO THE BIG PARTY

CHAPTER 6 - ALTERNATIVES TO THE BIG PARTY

A huge expensive lavish Sweet 16 Party may not be for everyone. Some families, when faced with the prospect of spending \$3,000 to \$5,000 (or even more!) on one evening's entertainment may think twice and consider other options.

If you live in a big city with live theatre, consider splurging on tickets to a show for the Sweet 16 Girl and a few of her closest friends. Here in New York City, an orchestra ticket can cost hundreds of dollars. But for one night, you might consider escorting 4 young girls to the theatre and taking them out for dinner either before or after. You can create a very luxurious and memorable evening for a fraction of the price of a big party.

Or you can skip the show and take a small group of friends out to a fancy local restaurant that always seemed just a little too luxurious.

I've had family members who eschewed the expensive party for a trip overseas for the family. It can be every bit as meaningful for the Sweet 16 Girl to see Paris for the first time. An experience like that will create just as many wonderful memories to treasure.



CHAPTER 7

THE SWEET 16 GIRL GIVES BACK - PARTING THOUGHTS

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After the party winds down and the Sweet 16 Girl looks ahead to her future with great excitement, she'll feel even better about herself if she takes on some mantle of responsibility at this moment, no matter how humble.

Thank You Cards

These are a must. They must be sent out; the sooner the better. The Sweet 16 Girl must express her gratitude to her guests for attending her party and giving her gifts. There is no excuse for overlooking this.

You can hire a printer to customize your cards, you can purchase pack cards from a stationery store, or you can make your own at home. Just be sure that you send them out.

A printer can offer a printed sentiment inside your Thank You Card, but the Sweet 16 Girl must sign it by hand. Ideally, she should write the entire sentiment by hand too.

Donations

Some Sweet 16 Girls return home on the night of their parties with thousands of dollars in gifts. Now that this huge windfall has come her way, it may be a good idea for her to consider those who are less fortunate, or to stand up for a cause in which she believes. A small percentage of this money could be given to a worthy cause.

Parting Thoughts

A girl's 16th Birthday is a very exciting moment in her life that will never come around again. I'd suggest that the girl, her family and her friends treasure it for everything that it's worth.

Too often, I speak to parents who are at their wits' end from the stress of planning the party and sticking to the timetable of preparation. Because I am a stranger to them, a disembodied voice on the telephone taking their order, they feel comfortable using me as a confessor. They speak of

financial hardships, impossible teenagers, pressure from ex-spouses and the problems of being over scheduled and overwhelmed.

I will never diminish the toll that these problems take on people. I understand that it's real. But I'd urge everyone involved with a Sweet 16 to focus on the best of what it will bring. It's a milestone, a life transition, the experience of a young girl finding her own voice and making her first contributions to society. The party gives you the opportunity to come together with those you love for a very happy occasion.

If you lose sight of happy occasions, life becomes just a little bit drearier.

I'd advise you to seize this moment of happiness and enjoy it completely.



