

Birthday Celebrations Around the World

The tradition of birthday parties started in Europe a long time ago. It was feared that evil spirits were particularly attracted to people on their birthdays. To protect them from harm, friends and family would come to be with the birthday person and bring good thoughts and wishes. Giving gifts brought even more good cheer to ward off the evil spirits. This is how birthday parties began.

At first it was only kings who were recognized as important enough to have a birthday celebration (maybe this is how the tradition of birthday crowns began?). As time went by, children became included in birthday celebrations. The first children's birthday parties occurred in Germany and were called Kinderfeste.

Birthday Traditions in Different Countries

Some traditions are quite similar in many parts of the world; birthday candles which carry wishes up to God, birthday games which gauge how much more a child can do versus last year, and birthday pinches or taps which ensure good luck for the coming year. Some traditions are more specific to certain countries.

Africa - *Initiation Ceremonies*. In various African nations they hold initiation ceremonies for groups of children instead of birthdays. When children reach a certain designated age, they learn the laws, beliefs, customs, songs and dances of their tribes.

Argentina - *Pulls on the earlobe*. The birthday child receives a pull on the earlobe for each year they have been alive.

China - *Noodles for Lunch*. The birthday child pays respect to his/her parents and receives a gift of money. Friends and relatives are invited to lunch and noodles are served to wish the birthday child a long life.

Denmark - *Flying Flags*. A flag is flown outside a window to designate that someone who lives in that house is having a birthday. Presents are placed around the child's bed while they are sleeping so they will see them immediately upon awakening.

Ecuador - *Pink Dress*. When a girl turns 15 there is a great celebration and the girl wears a pink dress. The father puts the birthday girl's first pair of high heels on his daughter and dances the waltz with her while 14 maids and 14 boys also dance the waltz.

England - *Fortune Telling Cakes*. Certain symbolic objects are mixed into the birthday cake as it being prepared. If your piece of cake has a coin in it, then you will be rich.

Holland - *Crown Years*. Even birthday years are called "crown" years. The birthday child receives an especially large gift on a crown year birthday. The family also decorates the birthday child's chair at the dining room table with seasonal flowers or paper streamers, paper flowers and balloons.

India - *Colored dress and chocolates*. At school the birthday child wears a colored dress and passes out chocolates to the entire class, with the help of a trusted friend.

Ireland - *Birthday Bumps*. The birthday child is lifted upside down and "bumped" on the floor for good luck. The number of bumps given is the age of the child plus one for extra good luck.

Israel - *Chair Raising*. A small child sits in a chair while grown-ups raise and lower it a number of times corresponding to the child's age, plus one for good luck.

Japan - *New Clothes*. The birthday child wears entirely new clothes to mark the occasion. Certain birthdays are more important than others and these are celebrated with a visit to the local shrine.

Mexico - *Piñatas*. The piñata, usually made out of paper mache and in the form of an animal, is filled with goodies and hung from the ceiling. The birthday child is blindfolded and hits the piñata until it is cracked open. All the children share the goodies. Also, when a daughter is 15, the birthday is celebrated with a special mass in her honor. A party is then given to introduce her to everyone as a young woman. The father dances a waltz with her.

Nepal - *Mark on the forehead*. A certain mixture of rice yogurt and color is placed on the birthday child's forehead for good luck.

New Zealand - *Birthday claps*. After the birthday cake is lit, the happy birthday song is sung loudly and often out of tune and then the birthday person receives a clap for each year they have been alive and then one for good luck.

Norway - *Birthday day*. The birthday child stands out in front of their class and chooses a friend to share a little dance while the rest of the class sings a happy birthday song.

Philippines - *Mixture of East and West*. Birthday cakes are baked in various sizes and shapes. The celebration includes noodles representing long life, balloon decorations and piñatas. Earlier in the day the family goes to hear Mass and to thank God.

Russia - *Birthday Pies*. Instead of a birthday cake, many Russian children receive a birthday pie with a birthday greeting carved into the crust.

United States - *Cake, candles and song*. A cake is made, and candles are put on top based on how old the person is. Then everyone sings the "happy birthday" song. At the end of the song, the birthday child is told to make a wish and blow out the candles. If the candles are blown out with one blow, they are told their birthday wish will come true.



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