

to ensure you find a good one is by word-of-mouth. But what should you look for? A good entertainer needs endless patience, should be constantly upbeat and really know how to engage children. I once took my eldest daughter to a children's party where the entertainer was a rather bad-tempered magician who didn't like being interrupted during his show. With a room full of under-fives? Forget it! Part of the pleasure for children is being able to get involved and heckle the entertainer with lots of impertinent questions.

Another alternative is to choose an arts-and-crafts expert. For Maddie's party, we hired a company called Creative Play, run by photography and art teacher Margaret Bolger who came to the house armed with dressing-up clothes, make-up, paints, decorative bits and digital camera. She got the children to dress up, helped them take pictures of each other, and got them to decorate their own photo frame. By the end of the party, she had developed the photographs

Other craft ideas include a jewellery-making party, where each child can assemble their own bespoke bracelet. Pacific Jewels will come to your home, or you can buy party kits by mail order.

Events will also tailor-make your party if your child and friends fancy strutting their stuff down the catwalk, or singing for a *Fame Academy*-style party. Other choices include sports parties, cinema trips and even a giant picnic in the park. Depending on your own talents, you could always mastermind the event yourself, but you'll need to be super-organised and have a run-through dress rehearsal before the big event to ensure it goes without a hitch.

For a little extravagance

A very popular fixture at a number of 'professional' parties we've attended lately is the giant chocolate fountain, where you dip strawberries and marshmallows into a flowing mass of warm melted chocolate. You can hire a chocolate fountain or buy a smaller version in department stores. Use lolly sticks or kebab sticks to spear the strawberries and marshmallows, as they are a sturdier option for young children than fiddly toothpicks. I'd also recommend placing some plastic sheeting around the venue to avoid any spillages. My most recent foray with a chocolate fountain resulted in one rather overzealous little boy managing to prod his kebab stick too far into the fountain and jam the whole mechanism. This caused the machine to spray chocolate all over our kitchen and anyone standing nearby,



A party is the perfect opportunity to indulge your child's imagination, whether it's turning a cardboard box into a castle, watching a magic show, or designing invitations

before someone bravely scrambled though the chocolate shower to hit the off button. And the moral of this tale? The children thoroughly enjoyed every second of the chaos, so even when things go wrong, your child's party can still be memorable!

Some golden oldies

And finally, don't dismiss the old traditional party games of our childhood – even if you do have to put a prize in every layer of pass-the-parcel these days. Try musical statues, musical chairs and pinning the tail on the donkey. Make sure there are plenty of prizes to go round and try to ensure that every child goes home with something. And as a final wind-down for all the excitable guests, I'd thoroughly recommend a relaxing game of sleeping lions ■

RESOURCES

FURTHER READING

- *How To Party* by Yasmin Mills, Rooftop, £12.99.
- *Annabel Karmel's Complete Party Planner* by Annabel Karmel, Ebury Press, £12.99. Over 120 recipe ideas, suggestions for venues and games, and a built-in party planner.

ENTERTAINMENT

- Creative Play, tel: 07909 996725. Provides art and photography parties.
- Riea's Events, tel: 01707 324990. The entire party package tailor-made for you. Riea will organise everything.
- Pacific Jewels, tel: 020 8997 7619; www.pacificjewels.co.uk. For charm bracelet parties and online shopping.

USEFUL WEBSITES

- www.partybox.co.uk Hundreds of themes, costumes and ideas on offer.
- www.partysuppliesdirect.co.uk Fast service, straight to your door.
- www.birthdayexpress.com Offers 100 party themes with advice on games, birthday cakes, and things to do.
- www.celebrations-party.co.uk Themed partyware plus mirror balls and bubble machines, strobes and disco lights.
- www.charliecrow.co.uk Imaginative children's costumes.
- www.partydomain.co.uk Fancy dress and party suppliers.
- www.nonstopparty.co.uk One of the biggest and best known party suppliers in the south east. Party themes, balloons, fancy-dress costumes, wigs and masks.