

Bar and Bas Mitzvah Guide

FOR YOUR

Child with Special Needs

Mazel tov upon your child reaching this joyous milestone! While planning a simcha for your child with special needs can be a challenge, with some creativity and planning this שמחה can be a fantastic opportunity for your child to shine.

CATERING TO YOUR CHILD'S UNIQUE NEEDS AND GIFTS

Don't worry about what is "usually" done. Think about what will work for your child and celebrate in a way that he or she can shine and enjoy.

LOCATION

Some children get excited by having a large noisy hall crowded with people. If your child does better in smaller and familiar venues, hosting the simchah at home, in a park, in a school classroom, or the neighborhood shul may be helpful in having your child feel calmer and more comfortable.

WHO TO INVITE:

There are many people who love your child, but they do not all have to be invited at the same time. Keep your child in mind: how many guests will he or she enjoy having?

For a child who needs a quieter simchah, splitting the simchah into a few parts allows groups of people who love your child to celebrate at different times. For example, you can have the close family come for the seudah, the neighbors come on Shabbos, a small party with his or her class in school, his or her volunteers at melaveh malka, etc.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Tips for successful photo shoots: Do a dress rehearsal a few days before the simchah and do your photos then. Use a photographer who knows children with special needs. Schedule the photos for your child's calmest time of day. Have your child join the picture when the rest of the family is already in position. At the actual simchah, you may want to appoint one friend or family member to be the official "picture taker" on their camera so that you can enjoy without trying to "capture



the moment.”

SEUDA

Tips for the seuda: A buffet-style event can be helpful for the child who has a hard time sitting. If there is a sit-down seudah, you may want to have a table or podium just for your child so that they can have their own space. You may also want to arrange in advance one person who can take him or her out for a break during the simchah if needed. Bring games and toys that your child enjoys so that he or she can stay happily occupied, and prepare a side room where he or she can have some down time if he or she gets overwhelmed.

SPEECHES

Remember that there is no need for formal speeches if your child won't enjoy it!

If your child can and is able to speak live, this can be a wonderful opportunity to and thank his or her friends and family. Some families have found that pre-recording the speech on video (spoken/signed/tapped out on a talker/adding subtitles to the video) helps the child express himself or herself without the pressure of speaking live. Play a video at the simchah with short clips of people in your child's life each wishing him or her mazel tov and expressing their love for them.

ENTERTAINMENT

Choose entertainment that will make your child smile! Some ideas: Your child’s favorite performer, music and dancing, hiring an ice cream truck, showing a slideshow with pictures of your child’s milestones from birth to simcha, a bubble show, moon jump shoes, arts ‘n crafts, wheelchair relay races.

SIBLINGS

Having a special needs sibling can be challenging, and you may want to take this opportunity to thank your other children for their love and patience. Whether having the bar/bas mitzvah give a thank you gift to their siblings, taking a special family trip, featuring the siblings in a slideshow, or mentioning their dedication publicly, there are many ways to include the brothers and sisters in the simcha as well.

PREPARING YOUR CHILD FOR THE SIMCHA

Your child will enjoy the simcha most if he or she knows what is happening in advance. Make sure to discuss where it will be, who will be coming, what will be taking place, and where they can go if they are feeling overwhelmed. Work with your child’s teachers/Rebbeim to make a picture schedule or a social story to prepare him or her for the simchah.

TEFILLIN

Because there are many halachic factors related to the level of understanding and body control needed in order to put on tefillin, buying tefillin for your son with special needs should be discussed with your Rav.

If your son is verbal, ask your Rav if your son with special needs should be getting an aliyah in shul. Having the aliyah done on Monday

or Thursday, instead of on Shabbos, means that there will be a smaller crowd and it may be easier for your son.

A less verbal child can come to the bimah while his father says the brachah, and then have singing and candies for him afterwards.

UPLIFTING THE SIMCHAH:

Whatever your child’s cognitive level, there are many ways to make your child’s simcha into a *טענדט מצוה*. Family members can make a siyum in your child’s honor or dedicate something in the child’s zchus. Some families choose to take on a specific mitzvah on their child’s behalf, such as washing negel vasser with them, helping him keep on his yarmulke, getting involved in a chessed project, having him wear tzitzis, etc.

MIXED EMOTIONS

Mixed in with the joy of planning your child’s simchah may be some sadness about this milestone looking different than what was dreamed of. You may be struggling with your child’s unique role in serving Hashem and feelings about your child not being able to take part in certain mitzvos. Feeling mixed emotions is normal and healthy, and accepting that your feelings are valid is the first step to honestly assessing how to make this simchah beautiful for you and your family.

Most of all, enjoy this opportunity to show your child how precious they are to you and the world!

Do you want to speak with another family who has made a simcha for their child with special needs?

Reach out to your local Yahalom office for a parent match.

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