



Mark Dineley

Managing Director of
Shamrock Catering Services and
father of Shania Rosabella aged 8
and Sasha Bella aged 9 months



How did you get into catering for children's parties?

Shamrock has had to diversify and evolve since 1994 when we first set it up as a sandwich company that delivered to offices. It occurred to me that there was a gap in the market for a one-stop shop for children's parties and that led to us setting up the Kidz Catering and Party Company four months ago. I realised how stressful it was for busy parents to find a venue, book an entertainer, source a caterer and so on. I thought it would be great if parents could just put in one phone call to us and then relax and enjoy the party! So we tried out some of the menus on Shania and took it from there.



What do you think makes a good children's party?

In Hong Kong there's a constant pressure to compete with your peers and put on a good show. Parents always come to us and ask for something different, something that the kids haven't done before. I've even been asked if we hire out elephants! I had to say not at this present time, but if anyone out there knows where I can get one, let me know! So the ultimate children's party would have something innovative and all the works: great food, a brilliant entertainer, maybe a candyfloss machine or a chocolate fountain, and so on. The key is the interaction between the parents and the children; everyone should be involved. That's why it's so important that the parents aren't running around till the last minute; if the parents aren't at ease, the children won't be either.



What are the highs and lows of working with children?

Kids in Hong Kong are usually pretty well behaved, so we don't have too much trouble with them. I don't attend the parties myself but, when I have seen the kids get stuck into the chocolate fountains, their faces all smeared with the chocolate, that's a real highlight. I like it when the parents get involved too. Most adults are just big kids at heart. I'm the same, if there's a bouncy castle, I'll always be the first one on it!



Does your company try to make healthy food for children? Or do you focus on fun? Do you have any tips for other parents on how to get their children eating healthily?

One of our set menus is called Healthy Focus, but I have to say that it only gets picked about 20 per cent of the time. It includes grilled mini burgers, fresh fruit kebabs and plenty of vegetarian options. However, most parents think that a birthday party is an excuse to indulge and let the kids have some treats. All our food is preservative- and MSG-free, and our breads are wholewheat. As regards tips for other parents, I'd say it's important to lead by example and to try to make healthy food creative and fun.



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things Mark loves about being a dad:

- Watching my kids develop from being a newborn to a mini-adult
- Feeling proud on sports days or at school productions
- Knowing that all my hard work has made them financially secure and that one day they'll have access to university
- Knowing that they're growing up in the safe environment that Hong Kong offers
- Being woken up by Sasha every morning and seeing her little arms windmill around in excitement when I walk into the room



Do you do the cooking at home?

No! It's a bit of a standing joke, but my wife's a good cook and I let her get on with it. I get more involved with taking decisions on schooling and the like.



Are you in charge of organising your own children's parties?

Well this is something I'm a bit embarrassed by but, when it came to Shania's birthday in June, we just didn't have the time to pull something together. We'll have to make it up to her with a big effort next year. I don't get to spend as much time with the girls as I'd like. I'm sure plenty of busy fathers say the same thing. I get phone calls from Shania in the afternoon asking when I'll be home, and that's very difficult. But I try to be with them as much as possible at weekends and on holiday. The problem with the catering business is that you're working when other people are off. Back home in Northern Ireland fathers have more traditional nine to five jobs.



Do you think the role of the father has changed since you were a child? If so, how?

I think the average father's goals have changed. When I was growing up in Northern Ireland my father didn't have the same drive to do well so we could go on holidays or go to smart schools. It was a different world then. We used to go out to play at gam and not return for 12 hours. We'd be swimming in lakes and playing in the woods. Now, as a parent, you'd never let your children be unsupervised. The biggest challenge for parents these days is that kids get smarter with every generation – as they get older it's harder than it was to keep them away from vices.



So would you say discipline was the hardest thing about being a dad?

I'd say in Hong Kong the hardest thing is not spoiling your children. I grew up doing chores around the house and later, as a teenager, earning my pocket money with part-time jobs. Expat kids over here don't do much of that. My two girls are far apart in age and my experience of fatherhood has been different with both of them. When Shania was born it was a difficult time for the business; I was working very hard and I might not have appreciated her early childhood as much as I do now with Sasha. I'm a little more mature now and I try to be more patient. Being a dad is hard and I'm definitely a work in progress!