



Children at Your Auction: A Good Idea?

Many of the organizations that hold auctions are faced with the quandary of what to do with the kids. Sometimes it's because the event is held in support of child-oriented services, such as a school, day care center or booster club. Sometimes it's because parents of young children are a key part of the organization's demographics.

Many groups deal with this by saying "Get a sitter!" And it's true that auction bidding is not enhanced by children vying for bidders' attention. But might you want to include children in your planning? Might it actually enhance the auction and its proceeds?

A number of years ago, my church's auction committee was faced with the fact that most of the bidders at the auction were 50 and above—younger families just weren't participating. At the same time, the church had a goal to encourage new members, especially those with children. Although we had child care available during the auction, it was basic babysitting, and those families that did attend left early at the insistence of their progeny.

It took a few years and some experimentation, but we now have a children's program that is a valuable part of the evening. Children beg their parents to go to the auction so they can participate in the fun activities, and few go home early. We have found that the cost of providing a great children's experience is outweighed by the extra funds earned from their parents' bids. Add to that the intangible but very real benefit of providing a sense of community to a larger audience.

Here are some ideas for adding a child-friendly experience to your auction:

Separate the Kids from the Adults

Make sure that the location of children's activities is physically apart from the main auction. If your auction has energy (which we hope it does) children can get trampled—plus they're a distraction from the business at hand: bidding on items. Also, arrange with the child care workers that if a child needs a parent, the parent is asked to come to the children's area rather than bringing the child out to the parent.

Have Plenty of Help

Use child care standards when deciding how many helpers to provide (this may vary by state). If you can get a sufficient number of volunteers, great; if not, pay them, and charge an admission fee for children to cover the cost. If your organization has a supply of responsible teens, they are an excellent source of free or low-cost labor; just make sure there are sufficient adults to supervise them.

Provide Child-Appropriate Food

Giving the children the same food as the adults has two problems: the food is probably more expensive than it needs to be, and the children may not like the more sophisticated food provided the adults. Make this a time that children can eat what they love: pizza, hot dogs/hamburgers, sloppy joes. Of course, you can provide healthy options too, such as veggies and dip and whole grain pizza crust or buns. A fun dessert can add to the excitement: try a sundae bar or cookie pizza. Depending on how you're set up, you might provide simple sugar cookies and let the kids decorate them.

Arrange a Children's Auction

Several weeks before the auction, advertise that you're going to have a children's auction. Ask children to donate gently used and outgrown toys, games, videos, etc. Then auction these items to the children for either money or play money. A few hints on how to run the auction:

- This should be a live (oral) auction rather than one that uses bid sheets. You want to include children too young to read or write!
- Hold the children's auction early in the evening—as soon as all the children have checked into the child care area. This gives children the fun of playing with their new toys during the evening.
- Select an auctioneer who can be fun but can also keep track of who wins what. You must assure that each child “wins” only one item until all children have had a successful bid, and keep to the bidding limits.
- Both real and play money work well. If real money is used, make sure parents have authorized this, and that all children have some assets. Be sure you limit the maximum bid to \$10 or less. It's best for this auction to be on a cash basis, but you can have someone keep track and collect proceeds later. If you use “pretend” money, make sure each child has the same amount of “cash” in appropriate denominations.

After the Auction

Depending on your budget (which will be affected by your choice to collect a fee for childcare), you may want to provide additional entertainment. You may be able to use an organization member: We were lucky enough to have a teen who knew how to juggle, and performed for the children for a number of years. We have also hired magicians and “science guys” for auction night. Check in your area for children's performers. Again, the cost can be covered by an admission fee or absorbed into the auction budget.

After the entertainment is done, a lot of the children will be getting sleepy, or at least ready to wind down. This is a good time to separate the children into groups, and provide nap areas and low-key activities like videos and/or quiet games. Our church divides the children and shows age-appropriate movies in different rooms, with sleeping bags for those who want to nap.

Timeline

Of course your timeline will depend on the activities you have planned for the adult auction, but here's one option:

- 5:30 Parents bring children to the kid's area and check them in.
- 6:00 Children's Auction
- 6:30 Dinner
- 7:15 Cleanup
- 7:30 Additional entertainment
- 8:00 Separate children into age groups. Provide nap space and quiet activities.
- 9:00 Children are picked up by parents.

As with the rest of your auction, incorporating a children's program into the evening takes some planning and resources, but you may find it's worth it in encouraging young families to participate.