

OXFORD CAMBRIDGE AND RSA EXAMINATIONS
GCSE

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ENGLISH/ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Information and Ideas (Higher Tier)

READING BOOKLET INSERT

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Stretch limos for 11-year-olds – are parents round the bend?



This picture shows primary school children waving and cheering from a decorated stretch limousine. Overindulged? Parents are giving in to children's demands for extravagances like limos on the last day of primary school.

A head teacher at a primary school in Glasgow has received a pressing request from a parent. Would it be possible, on the last day of the summer term, to cordon off the playing field so a helicopter can land? It is for an 11-year-old pupil whose mother and father want to do something special to mark his last day at the school. And so they have shelled out £500 on a chopper so their child can make what they clearly believe is a fitting arrival for the school prom, which is being held that night.

South of the border, £250-an-hour stretch limousines are being hired out at such a rate that most firms are fully booked for the days on which primary schools break up.

On those days, fleets of limos will be used to ferry their precious cargo of 11-year-olds to parties. For some, it will be block bookings in pizza parlours, for others proms organised by their schools.

The trend to celebrate the end of primary school in such an ostentatious way is a new one. After all, it's only in the past five years or so that the high school prom, originally from the U.S. and intended for 18-year-olds, has caught on in this country.

But 11-year-olds? In days gone by, the end of primary school would have been marked with an autograph book or a T-shirt that friends could sign with their names and a cheeky message. So what has changed? The children's aspirations and expectations for starters. They see their older brothers and sisters celebrate in a certain way and want to do the same. Instead of telling them to wait until they are old enough, parents are far too easily persuaded that their children's whims and wishes should be honoured.

'More and more parents work, so I think there is a whole generation of mums and dads who are feeling guilty about not spending time with their children,' says Professor Cary Cooper, a psychologist at Lancaster University. 'Because of this parents are surrendering to their children's demands far more than they would have done, say, 20 years ago. It may be over Christmas presents, the latest phone or the new iPad, or it may be about going to a school prom and hiring limos. I can see there is some sense in acknowledging the end of school at the age of 16 or 18 as something special. But at primary school I think it is pathetic – we are simply turning children into adults at an earlier and earlier age. I just don't think it is healthy or right.'

Many parents agree. Websites such as Mumsnet are awash with discussions about the rights and wrongs of the primary school prom and all the expense that comes with it.

[‘Instead of telling them to wait until they are old enough, parents are far too easily persuaded that their children’s whims should be honoured.’]

One mother writes: ‘I can just about accept a 16-year-old leavers’ prom, but my ten-year-old is having one for leaving junior school. Her friends are hiring a pink limo which is costing £15 for each child, but I draw the line at an expensive dress, so I have got one for £22. No doubt she will want new shoes and accessories. It’s just another expense for us parents.’

Naturally, parents don’t want to let down their children or make them the odd one out. So when the family of one child announces they are buying a frock and hiring a limo, the bar is set at a height that everyone else feels they must match.

Susan White runs Central Limousines and over the past couple of years has seen bookings from primary school parents go through the roof. Her fleet of 11 limos can each seat between eight and 16 children. Parents are charged between £12 and £15 per child, meaning an hour-long treat can cost up to £240.

‘It has become a competitive thing between the parents to see who can get the biggest or the best,’ says Susan.

And from a limo it is only one step and a few hundred quid to a helicopter. Thankfully, the primary school in Glasgow saw sense and turned down the parent's request to land a chopper on its playing field. 'It was maybe just a wee bit over the top,' says a spokesman.

This year, maybe. But in a few years' time, who knows? The way things are going, soon even a helicopter might seem run of the mill.

TV review: My Child's Big Fat Birthday Party

[Forget the squash and chocolate fingers, Samson has got limousines and a rock band for his birthday bash]

I wish I was a kid again. It looks brilliant now, especially if you're filthy rich and spoiled rotten. The birthday parties I remember involved a few chocolate fingers, a paper cup of squash, those rolled-up things that straighten up and make a lot of noise when you blow into them, a game of pass the parcel, and a piece of cake to take home at the end of the day. Not all that brilliant, in other words.

Now check out the kids in "My Child's Big Fat Birthday Party" ([BBC1](#)). Haylee arrives at her own birthday party in a coach and horses. Her ride has been pimped too, with flashing neon lights. Waiting for her at the party venue are 100 of her best friends in the whole world, screaming at the arrival of the party princess. This is her 13th birthday.

Organising this bash is a family friend called Charlene, who made the papers last year when she spent £20,000 on her own son, Adam's, 16th. "Is this Britain's most spoilt teenager?" asked the Daily Mail, disapprovingly. Now Charlene has got Adam's younger brother Jasper's eighth birthday party to sort out. He's getting a wild west-themed bash in a barn, with bucking broncos and hog roasts and a lovely orange motorbike for a present. "It's so orange, it's orange like oranges," says mum proudly.

Poor Jasper looks embarrassed by it all, and admits it's a bit over the top. At one point he and some of his mates try to behave like normal eight-year-olds and run around in the garden, but Charlene's having none of that. "I

didn't pay all that money for you to be in the garden," she shouts. That's a lovely line, isn't it?

Another family has gone for a winter wonderland animal theme for their kids – Summer, nine and Phoenix, five. They have hired nearly 100 animals for the day, including rabbits to pet, and pythons to wear like scarves, plus meerkats, because meerkats are everyone's favourites, and even a skunk that has been deskunked because no one wants a pooey birthday. Oh, and there's a pony to ride with a spike stuck on to his forehead. Daddy, daddy, I want a unicorn and I want it now.

And finally over to Lakeside, where mum Velma loves her son Samson "more than all the stars in all the skies". Or, put another way, more than £12,000 for his seventh birthday party. Twelve grand, for a seventh! She's got superheroes and limousines, and a rock band for Samson to join in with for a few minutes before he gets bored. She's hired an entire shopping centre party venue with space for 500 people, and guess how many friends Samson's got? Thirteen! That's nearly a grand a head.

Samson gets a new mohican and earrings for the big day. And Velma is going to consult him about what to wear herself – she always does. Jasper also had an earring, and his mum Charlene gave him a fancy hip-hop-style haircut, with shapes and ziz-zags cut into it, like crop circles. Then there's the motorbike; Jasper's eight. Older brother Adam got a Vauxhall Corsa car when he was 15. And an outfit that Puff Daddy would have thought twice about.

This show is like Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, without the Charlie Bucket character. I'd love to know how they get people to take part. Possibly they are so blissfully unselfaware that they can't see their own

ridiculousness. I don't know what's going on, but it's certainly a little worrying. And absolutely fascinating, in an eye-popping, OMG kind of way.

Beats pass the parcel any day.

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