



How to host your own cookie decorating party (updated for 2010/2011)

Drop In & Decorate Cookies for Donation® events are simple: bake some cookies, invite friends or family to drop by and help decorate them, and donate your cookies (or proceeds from the sale of your cookies) to a nonprofit agency meeting basic human needs (food or shelter), right in your own community.

Your beautiful cookies will bring cheer to those in need, and you've already got the most important ingredient for a successful event right in your kitchen — yes, it's YOU!

There's no right or wrong way to do this. This guide will give you some ideas and answer some questions, but in the end, any way you make and decorate your cookies will be great, and they will be received with smiles!

This edition of our "host your own" guide incorporates suggestions from several people who've hosted Drop In & Decorate events around the country. Thanks to all who have sent feedback and advice. Also, be sure to check "Tips and Techniques" on our web site.

If you have any questions, I'm happy to help. And if you do make and donate cookies, please let me know, and share some photos.

Thank you for hosting a Drop In & Decorate® party. Now, let's get that party started!

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Drop In & Decorate™ is a tax-exempt nonprofit organization under §501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. Our mission is to make hosting a cookies-for-donation event easy and affordable for everyone. If you need advice or support, please contact us.

Quick checklist

1. Pick a day, time & location for your event.
2. Contact a nonprofit agency close to home.
3. Stock up on some supplies.
4. Bake cookies, or ask friends to do the baking.
5. Set up for the party.
6. Decorate!
7. Wrap cookies the next day.
8. Deliver the cookies (watch for the smiles!).
9. Feel really, really good.

Plan your Drop In & Decorate® party

- Pick a day and time for your decorating party. Many agencies receive donations in December, but receive far less at other times. How about a Valentine's Day or Mother's Day or Halloween cookie party? Or midsummer, for a birthday or for no particular occasion? Or a decorating event at your workplace or school? Cookies are a year-round treat, and this is a wonderful way to spend time with friends or family, doing something meaningful and fun together.
- Invite a few friends or family or classmates or co-workers to stop by and decorate cookies. Send invitations by mail or email or Facebook. Your party can be a big bash, a party for one or two, a few friends on Saturday night, or an afternoon with your kids.
- Your party can fit right into your schedule:
 - **Morning or Afternoon Drop-In:** *Spend the morning with your moms' group. It's a fantastic way to involve children in the kitchen and a fun activity the whole family can enjoy.*
 - **Drop In at Work:** *To create team building in the workplace, organize a Drop In & Decorate event at your office. Some offices might even consider arranging cookie-decorating events in lieu of the traditional holiday party.*
 - **Makeover your cookie swap:** *Instead of inviting ten friends over for a holiday cookie swap party, gather in one kitchen to decorate cookies with a cup of eggnog in hand. After decorating the cookies together, donate the cookies to a community agency and pack up a few cookies each to enjoy at home.*
- Want to use our wonderful pastry bag logo on your invitations or cookie labels? Please email to me (lydia@dropinanddecorate.org) and I'll send you a nice little JPG. (Note: your event must be a *cookies-for-donation* event. Cupcakes are great, but cookies are what we do. Please check the web site for our guidelines, or call/email and ask.)
- Plan to bake your cookies before your friends arrive. Each batch makes 16-20 large (4-5 inch) cookies. Don't try to bake and decorate at the same time; cookies must be completely cooled so the icing doesn't slide off, so you'll need to bake several hours, or up to several days, ahead. Store in an airtight container for up to a week before decorating. **TIP: If you want to bake way ahead and you have freezer space, sugar cookies can be frozen after they're baked; just defrost, and you're ready to decorate.**
- Don't like to bake, or don't have time? No problem -- share the enclosed recipe with your friends and ask each to bring one batch of baked cookies.
- Or, use a sugar cookie mix from the grocery store. Pillsbury has a Reduced-Sugar Sugar Cookie Mix; Cherrybrook Kitchen sells a sugar cookie mix that's gluten-free (also peanut-free, dairy-free, egg-free and nut-free!). And Betty Crocker has a sugar cookie mix, too. I found all three at my local supermarket.

- Allow 1-2 hours for decorating, including set-up and clean-up. Decorating might go quickly, as people find their rhythm and want to decorate more and more cookies. I generally figure an average of 5-10 cookies decorated per person per hour. So, 10 people will decorate 50-100 cookies per hour, depending on the size of the cookie, complexity of design, etc.
- Stock up on supplies (optional; more about that on page 7).
- Allow 6-8 hours or overnight for cookies to harden before being packed for travel, so be sure to leave time to wrap and deliver. **TIP: If you need to deliver your cookies the same day, pack them in a single layer on disposable plastic trays with the snap-on covers. We buy trays at our local dollar store.**



Food safety

If you prepare or handle food that will be donated, you must be sure you meet the highest standards of sanitation. While these standards are especially important if you work in a food-service operation, they are just as valid in your home kitchen, especially when decorating cookies.

- Do not handle cookies if you are sick (even if you are wearing gloves)
- Tie your hair back
- Wash your hands thoroughly in hot soapy water
- Wear gloves when handling any baked cookies, decorating cookies, or wrapping cookies
- Change gloves often
- Do not reuse gloves
- Do not wear gloves to the bathroom
- Do not go outside with gloves on

How and where to donate your cookies

- Contact a local agency to make sure they will accept your cookies. There's nothing worse for an agency than to receive an unexpected gift of food they cannot use. Generally a personal contact, telephone call or visit will be all that's needed to make the connection. Don't get discouraged if your first phone call doesn't do the trick. Call another agency. You will find a match – and there are so many agencies that are thrilled to get such a wonderful gift.
- Let the agency know that your cookies are made with natural ingredients and do not contain nuts. The icing does not contain raw egg whites, but does contain artificial food coloring. Even so, some agencies cannot accept gifts of homemade food as a matter of policy. That's just the way it is.
- Food safety is a big concern for all of us these days. If the prospective recipient agency raises the issue, it often helps to let them know that you have baked and decorated your cookies in a clean environment, and that you would not donate any food that you would not feed to your own family. Again, this is where a personal contact will make all the difference; people trust people they've met.
- If your recipient agency is a large food bank or other institution, they might require that the cookies be prepared under Servsafe® supervision (<http://www.servsafe.com/>). Often the cookies can be baked and decorated at their location, so it pays to ask. For more advice, please call me at 401-567-4460.
- Be sure to ask **how many cookies** the agency will need. If the agency is large, you might offer to provide cookies for one program within the agency.
- To find a recipient agency, check with your town hall or city government (call the Director of Human Services — every city and town has one, and the director will have contacts at every agency in your area), to find out if there is a food pantry, family shelter, senior center, or other program to help neighbors in need. Ask the director or a staff member in the Human Services office to make an introduction for you.
- Local houses of worship are also a good resource. Local Boy Scout/Girl Scout troops will have connections, too.
- Check the “Where have the cookies gone?” section of our web site (www.dropinanddecorate.org) to see if there's been an event in your area.
- If you don't know of a local agency who might want your cookies, contact the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (303-839-1852; www.ncadv.org/resources/StateCoalitionList_73.html), which represents agencies in every single state in the US, and they will help you get connected.
- If you want to involve your children in the spirit of giving, contact your local Ronald McDonald House, which serves families of critically ill children. Ronald McDonald House programs welcome visitors and community involvement, so this is a particularly good match for kids who help decorate cookies. To locate your nearest Ronald McDonald House, visit www.rmhc.org/rmhc/index/search_house.html. As of October 2010, twenty Ronald McDonald Houses around the country have happily accepted our cookies!

- Ask your recipient agency when they'd like to have delivery. The cookies will stay fresh for two weeks after they're decorated, if packed in a tightly sealed container (plastic or foil, with a see-through lid, available at supermarkets or big-box stores like Costco or BJ's), or individual food-safe cellophane or ziploc bags.
- If you cannot find an agency that will accept your cookies, how about having a **bake sale**? Decorate and wrap your cookies, and donate the proceeds of the bake sale to a community agency meeting the basic human needs of food or shelter.
- For more assistance in identifying or contacting an agency in your area, call Lydia Walshin, founder of Drop In & Decorate, at 401-567-4460, or email lydia@dropinanddecorate.org.

Supply List & Suggestions

In addition to the cookie ingredients (see the recipes on pages 12-14), you might choose to stock up on a few supplies that will make your baking, decorating and packaging easier. I've made a list of the things I use for the large cookies-for-donation events I host in my own kitchen, but these are just suggestions -- do it *your* way.

You do *not* need any fancy equipment! Really, you don't.

Borrow cookie sheets and cookie cutters from friends. Ask people to bring whatever ribbon they have at home; almost everyone has some curling ribbon left from holiday presents.

You absolutely *can* host a Drop In & Decorate® party without most of the supplies listed here, which will make your baking and decorating easier but are *not* required.

I've accumulated lots of supplies in the past seven years of hosting Drop In & Decorate parties; I treat myself to one or two new cookie cutters each year. But I could make and decorate cookies without these things, and you can, too.



We have supplies to lend, including squeeze bottles for icing. Please contact us if you'd like to borrow some things for your event. And we have coupons and other freebies, so please let us know if you're planning a party.

FOR THE BAKING:

- **Silpat** or other silicone baking sheet liners, one for each baking sheet, will make quick work of clean-up. We use jelly-roll pans (called *half sheet pans*), or unrimmed cookie sheets. One half-sheet pan holds 6-8 large cookies. Buy Silpat or Exopat or any other silicone baking sheet liners (same product, different brand names) on www.amazon.com. You can reuse a Silpat thousands of times, and not just for baking.
- King Arthur Flour sells packages of 100 sheets of **parchment paper**, precut to fit a standard 11 x 16 inch, half sheet (jelly roll) pan. A *huge* time saver if you're baking lots of cookies! King Arthur also sells unbleached flour, meringue powder, baking powder, food coloring, and some decorating items. (www.kingarthurfour.com)
- I'm in love with **Wilton Comfort-Grip cookie cutters**, which have a rubber rim that cushions your hand. Available at craft stores and online (www.wilton.com). Great shapes (circle, flower, star, heart, butterfly, square, leaf, tree, rubber ducky, etc.), and the perfect size, approximately 4 inches in diameter. They sell for \$2.99 and last forever.

FOR THE DECORATING:

- **Squeeze bottles!** We switched to plastic squeeze bottles this year, and we're never going back to pastry bags. Squeeze bottles are reusable, and you can make icing ahead of time and store it in the bottles in the refrigerator. A one-time investment, and a small investment at that (6-ounce reusable food-safe squeeze bottles are \$1.50 each). Available at craft stores like Michael's, or wherever Wilton (www.wilton.com) products are sold, individually or in sets of 18 bottles (the set in the photo, 18 4-ounce bottles, retails for \$12.99). Also available at restaurant supply stores. Make sure the bottles you buy are translucent or transparent, so you can see what color icing is inside, and that they're food-safe. Great for kids and adults!
- **Ziploc bags are a great alternative.** Simply put your icing in, seal the bag, and then snip a small bit off one corner. Presto – instant pastry bag! One host recommends quart-size freezer bags.
- Have **toothpicks** for dragging icing. Colored or white nonpareils are nice additions. Please do not use silver dragees, as too many on a cookie can be hard on the teeth. Available at craft stores or supermarkets everywhere.
- **Food coloring gel** comes in small sets of mixable colors, so you have all the hues of the rainbow at your disposal. Our new favorite is Americolor gel paste; a “student” set of 12 basic (mixable) colors is \$13.95 from SugarCraft (<http://www.sugarcraft.com/catalog/coloring/coloring.htm>). Ateco makes a 12-color set; www.amazon.com, or check at your local craft store. Gel coloring works much better than powder, for brighter colors. Remember to buy **white food coloring**, too; otherwise, your icing will be a bit less bright. You'll have to buy white separately, as it's not included in the color sets. A little coloring gel goes a long way; you can do hundreds of cookies with these small sets of color.
- **Gloves! Hats! Hair rubber bands!** We strongly recommend that you wear gloves and tie back your hair (men and women) while decorating your cookies. Boxes of 50 non-latex vinyl gloves are available in the supermarket or at your local pharmacy for just a few dollars. Ask people with long hair to wear hats or tie back their hair with rubber bands.



FOR THE PACKAGING:

- You can package each cookie individually in a **food-safe cellophane bag**, tied with festive ribbon (see the photo on page 7). Order food-safe cellophane bags (item #EG41, 4x2-3/4x10-3/4 inches, packages of 100 for \$7.15) from www.bagsplus.com. I like to use the cellophane bags, so each cookie looks like a special gift.
- Small ziploc bags, with a nice label, also work for packing the cookies, and it's much faster than wrapping individually. When one agency asked us for "family packs" of 4 cookies, the quart-size ziploc bags were perfect. It doesn't hurt to ask your local supermarket to donate a few boxes of bags.
- You can also package your cookies in tins or boxes or anything else that will keep them fresh. Try discount stores (dollar stores or Job Lot, here in Rhode Island) for \$1.00 plastic catering trays with snap-on covers, or recycle the trays from events at work.
- Add a small tag or **label**, if you wish. I'm not terribly creative in the label-making department, so I print Avery Ink-Jet #8293 round adhesive labels on the computer. The labels are fairly small, but there's room for a tiny Drop In & Decorate logo, and the words: Made specially for you, with natural ingredients and love. (www.avery.com)



Set up your space

You don't need a banquet hall, commercial kitchen, or any elaborate space to host a Drop In & Decorate® party. Your own kitchen or dining table will be great.

Take a minute to think through the set-up of your space. You'll need a place to decorate the cookies, and a place for the finished cookies to rest while you admire them – and while they dry for several hours. Make sure you have:

- A table or other work surface, covered with a tablecloth that you don't mind sacrificing. I use inexpensive (\$1.00) plastic party cloths or shower curtain liners, whichever is cheaper at the local discount store.
- A table or counter space for the finished cookies.
- Many hosts have found that their decorators prefer to stand while decorating; that's how we do it in my kitchen, too. Provide chairs if you're using a low table, or let people stand if you're working at a kitchen counter. It's nice to have options!
- Set out small bowls of decorations and toothpicks in several places around the work table. Paper towels always come in handy, too.
- Use cookie sheets, trays or plates to set the cookies on while the icing hardens (6-8 hours, or overnight).
Tip: the finished cookies can dry on rimmed cookie sheets stacked at 90° angles. The rims will be high enough to keep the cookies from touching. Cover the whole pile of stacked cookie sheets with a clean sheet.



Tips for decorating cookies with kids

Special thanks to Gudrun, who hosted a Drop In & Decorate® event in California and shared these tips:

Make sure all of the kids can work comfortably; for us, this meant covering the dining table with a huge holiday cloth and having the kids sit down. For younger kids, booster seats would make them more comfortable.

If you have sprinkles and decorations in big containers, consider putting them into small dishes, so kids can pinch just what they need. That ought to avoid over-sprinkled cookies.

Use cookie sheets (or paper plates) as individual decorating areas for each kid. It will help contain rogue sprinkles and help with clean-up.

Count on about 5-8 cookies per kid, depending on their attention span. We had 6-to-8-year-olds, and this number was good for them.

Make sure you have good snacks or lunch for the kids, otherwise you might find them snacking on the frosting and decorations (well, they might do that anyway!).



Another suggestion from Joan, who hosted an event for her Sunday School class in New Brunswick, Canada:

Let each child decorate one cookie to set aside and take home (or eat!) at the end.

DROP IN & DECORATE SUGAR COOKIES

(makes 16-20 large cookies; see note below for making multiple batches)

3-1/4 cups unbleached all-purpose flour
1-1/2 tsp baking powder
1/2 tsp salt
1-1/4 cups best quality unsalted butter, softened
1 cup sugar
1 large egg
1 Tbsp milk (we use 2% milk)
2-1/2 tsp best quality pure vanilla extract



Preheat oven to 375°F. Line a couple of baking sheets with a Silpat or parchment paper.

In a large bowl, stir together flour, baking powder and salt. In another large bowl or the bowl of a heavy-duty KitchenAid-type stand mixer, beat together the butter and sugar, until fluffy. Add egg, milk and vanilla, and continue to beat until well blended and smooth. Beat flour mixture into the butter mixture until smooth.

Divide dough in half. Place one half on a sheet of parchment paper or wax paper; cover with another sheet and roll to 1/4 inch. Repeat with second half of dough. Place sheets of dough on a cookie sheet. Refrigerate dough for at least 30 minutes, or up to a couple of days (or, if making far in advance, you can freeze at this point. Wrap sheets tightly in plastic wrap).

Remove one sheet from the refrigerator; peel off the top sheet of parchment paper, then replace paper and invert dough (this releases the dough from the parchment paper). Peel off and discard what is now the top sheet of paper, and cut out the cookies. (Cookies will spread, so do not place too close together on the baking sheet; 6-8 max.). Reroll scraps, refrigerating if necessary to firm the dough.

Bake for 6-9 minutes, or until just lightly colored on top and slightly darker at the edges. Rotate sheets halfway through for even browning. Remove pans from oven and let cookies cool 2-3 minutes on the baking sheet. Then remove cookies to a rack and let cool completely. (At this point, the cookies can be stored in an airtight container for up to two weeks, in layers separated by parchment or wax paper. They can also be frozen.)

After the cookies are completely cooled, decorate with Royal Icing. Place the decorated cookies on a tray and leave out overnight, uncovered, to harden. The next morning, package in food-safe cellophane bags or cookie tins.



*Note: to make multiple batches, do NOT double the recipe. It's hard to control proportions. Instead, make multiples of the original recipe, one batch at a time, for guaranteed success!

*Another note: Rolled sheets of cookie dough can be made ahead and frozen (or, if you're going to use them within a day or two, you can stack the rolled sheets of dough on a cookie sheet in the refrigerator). Let defrost until dough is pliable enough to be cut without breaking cookies, but not necessarily completely defrosted.

*And another note: Baked cookies can be frozen; defrost thoroughly before applying the icing.

*And yet another note: If you have enough, make one batch of very small cookies for practice. We use a small half-moon cookie cutter and can make at least 40 from one batch of dough. People love to do warm-up icing on a small cookie – which, of course, they can eat afterwards!



DROP IN & DECORATE ROYAL ICING

(makes 2-1/2 cups, enough for one batch of cookies***)

Icing can be made up to two weeks ahead. Store it carefully (instructions below)!

1 lb + scant 1/4 cup confectioners sugar
5 Tbsp meringue powder
1/2 cup cool water (add more, a drop at a time, if needed for desired consistency)
Gel food coloring

In the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with the paddle attachment, or in a large bowl with a hand mixer, combine first three ingredients and mix on low speed until glossy and fluffy, 7-8 minutes. To color, place some icing in a small bowl or plastic cup, and stir in a few drops of food coloring until desired shade is reached. Royal Icing hardens quickly when exposed to air, so use immediately, or transfer to a large container; store it in the fridge, with a piece of plastic pressed onto the surface inside an airtight container. Stir well before using; if necessary, add a drop or two of water to achieve a good consistency.

*Production note: If you're doing multiple batches of dough, you'll need more icing. An easy way to do this efficiently is to make the icing, one batch at a time, and pour into an airtight container. Make several batches of icing, mixing the whole thoroughly each time you add another batch to the container to equalize the consistency. **Tip: You can make the icing up to 2 weeks ahead.**

To make your colors, use a ladle or 1/2 cup measure to place a small bit of the icing in a plastic cup. Mix in food coloring to desired shade, and fill a squeeze bottle (you can put the icing into a ziploc bag; cut a small hole in one corner of the bag, and squeeze it into the bottle). Repeat until you have all the colors you need. To keep the icing from hardening, be sure the squeeze bottles have their caps securely fastened. The bottles can be stored in the fridge until you're ready to use them. (To make a larger batch, add the food coloring directly to the icing in the mixer bowl.)

**Remember, place the decorated cookies on a tray and leave out overnight, uncovered, to harden. The next morning, package in food-safe cellophane bags (tightly tied with ribbon to keep the cookies fresh), or cookie tins.

*** You might need extra icing if you want to offer lots of color options for decorating or set up more than one "icing station". For 5 batches of cookies, make 5-6 batches of icing. If you're making one-color or two-color cookies, you'll probably use 4 batches of icing. Keep an extra 1-lb box of confectioners sugar and some meringue powder in reserve, just in case.

For cookie design inspiration, watch our short video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GbyYIJl4wi4>.

And see more photos of beautiful cookies here:
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/73533498@N00/sets/72157605007318806>.