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Sweet & Sassy salon caters to Magic City's under-12 set One-stop birthday centers a hit with busy parents, too

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Having trouble finding the perfect gift for that hard-to-shop-for 6-year-old princess? How about a trip to the spa, complete with a mini manicure, pedicure and facial, all for \$70? The first Alabama location of Sweet & Sassy, a Texas-based franchise, opens today in Patton Creek in Hoover, offering haircuts, spa treatments and birthday parties for the under-12 set.

Co-owners Denise Woods and Mike Shepherd - both parents of daughters themselves - say they hope the one-stop birthday center will appeal to busy moms and dads, and the controlled chaos will appeal to kids. Lime green, orange, purple and hot pink make up the palette for the store, which offers haircuts for girls up to age 12 and boys up to age 6. But the real draw is the pampering and birthday party packages, such as "A Night at the Oscars," where the girls get makeovers before posing for the paparazzi on the red carpet.

The packages range in cost from a base rate of \$189 for an "All Dressed Up and Runway to Go" party to \$450 for a "Sleepover at the Spa" party. The children's birthday party industry is lucrative, according to a recent Hallmark Cards survey.

The survey found that Americans spend about \$10 billion a year on birthday parties. Children's parties are a big part of that, accounting for 65 percent of all spending. At a time when parents are spending more money than ever on birthday parties, the all-in-one party concept is taking off.

"Parents these days are so busy, juggling careers and families," said Woods, a former insurance adjuster. "It's nice to have a one-stop place for a birthday ... with a good wholesome environment." Woods and Shepherd, who met through their daughters' involvement in sports and other activities, said they knew the Sweet & Sassy concept was right for them when they walked into the chain's Southlake, Texas, location.

"It's just very, very fun," said Shepherd, who owns an information technology consulting business. "When we walked in, the place was just packed with kids, and the kids are having a really good time," he said.

They declined to say how much they invested to open the store, which is only the fifth in the nation. Franchise Web site www.franchisegator.com says \$75,000 in liquid capital is required and the total capital investment for a Sweet & Sassy salon ranges from \$250,000 to \$375,000.

'Fun and wholesome'

Both Woods and Shepherd said they were sensitive to the fact that other princess-gear'd birthday party chains, including Club Libby Lu, which is owned by Birmingham-based Saks Inc., have been accused of turning 6-year-olds into mini Paris Hiltons, dressing them in provocative outfits and heavy makeup.

"Our makeup is not heavy and our outfits are certainly age-appropriate," said Woods. "It's just fun and wholesome because we do understand there is a perception that kids are growing up way too fast. We're not trying to turn 9-year-old girls into grown-ups."

But they do count on a girl's "need" for princess gear - from tiaras and gowns to pens with fuzzy pink tips. The duo feel like the store's location - in Patton Creek next to Edgar's Bakery and near kid magnets such as the Rave Theater and Ben and Jerry's - will also give it an edge.

But the store has competition nearby. For instance, Justice Just for Girls in Patton Creek is offering three birthday party packages and Club Libby Lu in the Riverchase Galleria also features several dress-up party packages. Woods and Shepherd say they're encouraged by the reception the store has already received. The salon started booking hair appointments and birthday parties last week and has a party scheduled for today, said Woods.