

# Inclusion & Holiday Planning

*How we address holidays in our program is yet another way we are able to model for children. It is an opportunity for remembering that one of our goals is to foster inclusiveness as we help children in their social & emotional development.*

## THINKING CRITICALLY

As people who care for and educate young children, childcare professionals often make choices based on the needs of children and families. We make daily plans that include active play as well as quiet play because children's bodies and minds need both exercise and rest. We must make conscious decisions on how and IF to celebrate holidays, just as we make conscious decisions on what snacks to serve or what physical activities to offer.

We have to be open to understanding not only how we remember our own childhood celebrations, but how others may have celebrated or how the holiday is viewed today. As an example, Thanksgiving may have included a happy family gathering for some of us, but Native Americans may not be "thankful" for anything on this day. Columbus Day, from the point of view of Native Americans, Italian Americans or Jewish peoples, is another day that needs critical reflection by adults before they make curriculum choices for children.

## GROUP CARE ISSUES IN HOLIDAYS

While children appear to enjoy holidays, working on holidays in a group reveals some problems. Even as early as September, stores have displays relating to the Christmas or Hanukkah holiday, three months away. Many children have difficulty with the concept of time. For example, they may not be able to understand time as it relates to when a parent will pick them up for the day, or knowing when Friday is coming. For these children, and the adults who work with them, sustaining a level of excitement in anticipation of a holiday three months away can be unbearable. As adults, we might need three months to prepare for our holiday season. Children, however, still need to meet their other developmental tasks in physical development (growing) and social/emotional development (getting along with others and understanding themselves), while still being excited about coming holidays. **Sometimes it makes sense to not include holidays in the group care situation just because of this issue.**

## DEVELOPMENTAL NEEDS OF CHILDREN

For a particular child or group of children, what is important to learn today may or may not coincide with the holiday calendar. Perhaps the children are very interested in plants and animals. Why should the curriculum stop and only focus on a particular holiday? Does it make sense to "teach" one color at a time, whatever color is associated with that holiday? How does the child's concept of time and of the world work with the teaching of this holiday? Are adults talking about things that happened 200 years ago, in a country across the globe, when those children don't know when their family is coming to pick them up, and they can't tell you how to get to their homes?

## **HOLIDAYS AS CULTURAL CONCEPTS**

As part of their social development, children learn about themselves, their families, and their community. How and what we teach in this process helps shape the values and beliefs of tomorrow's leaders.

Many people use holidays to teach children about other cultures. In her book, *\*Anti-Bias Curriculum: Tools for Empowering Young Children\** (1989), Louise Derman-Sparks talks about the problems of using this type of approach with young children and points out the dangers of using what she calls a "tourist curriculum." If holidays, with their traditions, foods, and activities, are the only things we teach children about other cultures, we aren't really communicating a true picture of that culture. Incorporate aspects of those other cultures throughout the day and the year, not just on one holiday.

Imagine what visitors from Mars would think about us if they only saw how we act and dress on October 31. Out of context, Halloween reveals little about our strengths and struggles as people! Using only holidays to teach about other cultures may be just as misleading. But child care and education professionals can build on holiday experiences to help children understand the people around them and the world they live in.

## **USING CHILDREN'S COMMENTS TO INTRODUCE DIVERSITY**

As children live and play with each other, they express ideas about each other. While different cultures may not be evident, you may hear comments about different abilities of boys and girls. The lesson that a friend celebrates different holidays, or the same holiday in a different way, and is still a friend, is the most important lesson for appreciating differences. It is the concept that difference does not mean better or worse. There may be differences in ethnicity and culture, which children will comment on too. These realities for children are a valid starting point. Responding to children's thoughts and ideas as they occur, and gently introducing new ones is a challenge to all who work with young children. It is what makes your work a profession - not just a job.

As teachers, we believe our actions have deep and lasting effects on children in their cognitive development. We must acknowledge that our actions - and perhaps unconscious messages - also have deep and lasting effects on children's social and emotional development.

Adapted from:

### **HOLIDAYS: CELEBRATING DIVERSITY AND MEETING CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENTAL NEEDS**

National Network for Child Care's Connections Newsletter  
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