Holidays and Celebrations

The Research

Our mission is to provide an environment where every child and family feel welcomed and respected and where children learn on a daily basis to value the diversity of the world in which we live. Celebrating holidays can be an appropriate part of learning when handled with careful thought.

Our specific approach to holidays, first and foremost, complements our overall philosophy regarding the developmentally appropriate teaching of equity and diversity; celebrations may also emerge from the interests and needs of the families in each center. If children only learn about various cultures through holiday celebrations, though, they develop a superficial understanding of the world around them. Instead, concepts of diversity and equity are integrated into the curriculum and environment. Children need experiences that are reflective of themselves, their families, and their culture (mirrors). They also need opportunities to consider others' thoughts, feelings, and perspectives (windows). We believe that such an approach is essential for creating a broader, richer view of humanity and the world.

Global awareness and empathy are two critical 21st-century competencies. Children must be able to consider multiple perspectives with empathy and respect if they are to participate as workers, leaders, and community members in a global environment.

Guiding Principles

- Holiday celebrations often give a limited view of our world and should not be allowed to dominate or drive our curriculum. Curricula that focus predominantly on seasonal and holiday themes, — apples, pumpkins, and turkeys in the fall, Christmas trees in the winter, and bunnies in the spring — shortchange children. There is so much more to learn and explore. Children need opportunities for rich, meaningful learning that builds true understanding of seasons and holidays, and fosters critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration. Additionally, we do not celebrate the religious aspects of any holidays. We recognize that these traditions often have great meaning for teachers and families; however, those beliefs may not be universally shared. Our desire is to offer a space where everyone feels welcome to practice their own religious beliefs privately. While we may observe the traditions of a religious holiday, such as making latkes at Hanukkah, we don’t teach the religious aspects of that holiday.*

- We understand that to survive and thrive, all humans have basic needs of companionship, creativity, productive work, safety, and food and shelter. How we meet these needs is what creates culture, including our clothing, food, jewelry, music, dance, language, toys, family roles, rites of passage, spirituality, and celebrations/holidays.
Culture plays a powerful role in our lives. From our values and beliefs to our daily routines and rituals, culture forms and defines us. When we disregard, ignore, or misrepresent another’s culture, we minimize the essence of that person, causing a feeling of “being less.” These experiences profoundly influence a child’s social-emotional development and sense of self.

Holidays, traditions, and celebrations should be intentional, meaningful opportunities to create community. They should reflect the real lives and experiences of the teachers, families, and children in our centers (mirrors).

Holidays can also offer a look at other cultures when approached in a developmentally appropriate and respectful manner. We invite members of a given culture to share their experiences and lives with us. In this way, we avoid perpetuating stereotypes or misrepresenting others (windows).

Practical Application

We practice developmentally appropriate anti-bias curriculum that is culturally responsive and seek to understand the culture, needs, and experiences of families. We choose activities, materials, and books that reflect our community’s myriad values.

We understand that holidays are a special addition to our normal routine. Celebrations do not supplant or replace our rich World at Their Fingertips curriculum or incorporate superficial activities, but instead complement our discovery-driven learning and exploration. For example, a celebration of winter could become a weeks-long project that focuses on universal themes and questions, such as giving, relationships, light and darkness, cold, seasonal changes, and animal adaptations.

We review potential materials and children’s books with a critical eye. Are they historically and culturally accurate? Do they consider multiple perspectives? Do they avoid biases and generalizations?

We are thoughtful about holidays, asking ourselves, “How would this tradition or practice make each child feel?” For example, Mother’s Day and Father’s Day can be poignant for a child who does not have a mother/father. Some families opt not to celebrate birthdays or other holidays, such as Halloween. As much as we might enjoy these holidays, we value people’s feelings more. We never want one child or family to feel singled out or excluded.

We know that to celebrate holidays well involves planning, reflection, and deep discussion. This work can feel uncomfortable, but we believe children and families are worthy of the effort.

We avoid commercialism and stereotypes, knowing that we can offer better. Our approach to holiday celebrations is not meant to limit teachers’ and children’s enjoyment but to actually enlarge our vision and understanding of what can be experienced.
We consider the meaning behind a holiday. Is the holiday developmentally appropriate? Does it have any negative or scary connotations? What are we’re hoping to achieve? How will it benefit the children and families in our center? Will it build relationships, spark the imagination, and forge understanding and learning? Is it in line with our values? Some traditions might be appropriate in a private family celebration but not within an educational setting.

We talk with families to understand their cultural backgrounds and traditions, seeking to create celebrations that feel good for all. We invite families to share their traditions with us.

We explore other cultures with respect and authenticity. Rather than taking a “tourist approach,” in which we superficially explore cultures, we attempt to really understand cultures through research and dialogue. We invite members of a specific culture to share their experiences, always avoiding generalizations and stereotypes. How do people live each day in a specific culture? What is their history? What is most meaningful to them? What is hard? What is pleasurable? We remember that one person’s cultural experience might not represent an entire group.

We follow the children’s interests and think creatively and flexibly about how to approach holidays. For example, a friendship day might be more appropriate than Valentine’s Day celebrations during which all children make cut-out heart decorations. A harvest celebration might feel more inclusive than Halloween, which is sometimes associated with death and darkness. Asking all children to make the same decorative craft is not developmentally appropriate or respectful of children’s interests and abilities. This practice also takes time and resources from projects that might offer deeper inquiry and learning.

We believe life is meant to be embraced and celebrated. We look for spontaneous opportunities to share joy, e.g., classroom achievements, special family moments such as a baby’s birth or adoption, a garden harvest, or a book party to celebrate a beloved book. We celebrate the passage of time and the changing of the seasons, incorporating universal values and messages in our efforts. These celebrations and traditions often have more meaning and weight than traditional holidays.

We ensure that holidays do not use excessive resources or prep time. We follow the children’s lead, encouraging them to participate fully in the planning and execution of any celebration. Before we plan activities, we consider their purpose. Any experience we offer should first and foremost offer learning opportunities, but may also be a time to commemorate and celebrate.

We believe this approach can offer great value to center communities. The holidays are often a time of busyness. As we focus on simple, meaningful traditions, we create a place of respite.
References


Derman-Sparks, L. and Olsen Edwards, J. 2009. “Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves.” NAEYC.


Please see the following related position statements:

How Children Learn Best

Executive Function

Environments

Social-Emotional Development

And the following resource:

Family Partnership Foundations Guide

*Some centers are affiliated with a religious entity and approach this differently.