



Celebrating Holidays In Early Childhood Programs

Holiday celebrations can be wonderful opportunities for children to learn about the traditions and values that are cherished parts of people's lives. But many early childhood professionals wonder what holidays to celebrate in the program or classroom and how to respect the cultures represented by all children. Many parents, too, wonder why programs celebrate specific holidays or why they discourage any celebration at all.

NAEYC believes that decisions about what holidays to celebrate are best made together by teachers, parents, and children. Families and staff are more comfortable when both have expressed their views and understand how a decision has been reached. The important thing for all to remember is that when planning holiday activities, the rules of good practice continue to apply: Are the activities meaningful to the children? Are their needs and interests being met? Is the activity a valuable use of children's time?

Teachers may survey families at the beginning of the year to determine what holidays to celebrate. They may even ask the children to create their own holiday to help them learn the concepts that underlie such valued traditions. In any case, holiday celebrations are just one way for programs and families to work together to create developmentally and culturally appropriate learning experiences.

Here are some signs of good practice in celebrating holidays:

- Parents and teachers ask themselves why children should learn about this holiday. Is it developmentally appropriate for those in the group? Why is it important to specific children and families?
- Activities are connected to specific children and families in the group. This helps children understand holiday activities in the context of people's daily lives. Children should have the chance to explore the meaning and significance of each holiday.
- Children are encouraged to share feelings and information about the holidays they celebrate. This will help them make the distinction between learning about another person's holiday rituals and celebrating one's own holidays. Children may participate as "guests" in holiday activities that are not part of their own cultures.
- Every group represented in the classroom is honored (both children and staff). This does not mean that every holiday of every group must be celebrated classrooms would be celebrating all the time! It does mean that once families and programs have decided on what holidays to celebrate, none should be treated as if they are "unusual." Children should recognize that everyone's holidays are culturally significant and meaningful.
- Activities demonstrate the fact that not everyone in the same ethnic group celebrates holidays in the same way. Families may provide examples of their own unique traditions.
- Curriculum demonstrates respect for everyone's customs. If children are observing different holidays at the same time, the values and traditions of each

child's culture should be acknowledged.

- Parents and teachers work together to plan strategies for children whose families' beliefs do not permit participation in holiday celebrations. Families should take part in creating satisfactory alternatives for the child within the classroom.
- Focus is on meaningful ways to celebrate holidays without spending money. Families may find certain holidays stressful due to the amount of commercialization and the media pressure to buy gifts. Teachers can help by showing children that homemade costumes and gifts are very special, and celebrating can be joyful without gifts.

Additional Resources:

Hunt, M. 1995. Let there be light! Lighting up the holidays for young children. *Young Children* 51(5): 79-81.

McCracken, J.B. 1993. Valuing diversity: The primary years. Washington, DC:NAEYC. #238/\$7.