

Considerations for Inclusive Holidays and Observances

Holiday celebrations are an excellent opportunity to provide a window into a culture or understand more about a group of people, as well as reinforce the diversity of all people's experiences. Students can engage in rich educational experiences by reading about, researching and experiencing holidays.

In order to ensure that holidays and observances are truly educational, they also need to be inclusive and respectful. Below is an abbreviated version of some important considerations when planning holiday observances in your classroom or school. [\[Download full article\]](#)

Consider *Your* Students

Consider the composition of your classroom and who celebrates which holidays. You might think differently about how you approach a holiday if no one in your class observes that day, only a few do or the majority of students do. Do not assume all students of a certain background know about and are interested in talking about a particular holiday and do not place students in the position of being the "authority" or main possessor of knowledge about a holiday's history and customs. Further, students of the same faith or culture do not necessarily celebrate the same holiday or in the same way.

Stereotypes and Assumptions

Be careful that holiday celebrations don't reinforce stereotypes about a group of people. When celebrating a cultural observance related to an ethnic group or

heritage, don't focus only on the three Fs: festivals, fashion and foods. By focusing just on these items, schools can risk trivializing the culture's rich history and people's experiences, and reinforcing stereotypes that tends to exoticize or make "foreign" instead of showing the diversity within the culture and its place within the community.

Similarly, avoid using images, often found on worksheets or clip art, which reinforce one-dimensional portrayals of groups of people (e.g., Cinco de Mayo celebration images only featuring "sombreros" and other stereotypical elements of Mexican culture).

Rethink Restrictive Gender Norms Around Family, Gender and Sexual Orientation

Be aware of how some holidays can reinforce restrictive social norms around gender identity and sexual orientation. For example, as students get older and Valentine's Day becomes more focused on romantic relationships and not friendships, celebrations may reinforce heterosexist notions that all relationships are between a boy and a girl and marginalize LGBTQ youth, or youth who simply are not interested in romantic relationships. Another example is Mother's Day and Father's Day. Be mindful not to make assumptions about children's family structure and their parents' gender identity.

Consider the Role of Religion

School-sponsored activities should also focus on more than one religion and religious holiday. Depicting a diversity of beliefs and customs is important when teaching students about religion and culture. It also helps to ensure that public schools remain neutral and do not endorse, promote or disparage any particular denomination or custom. Remember that schools may teach about religious holidays and festivals but should not engage students in activities that are akin to religious observance. For more information on this topic, see ADL's publication [Religion in the Public Schools](#).

Go Beyond "the Norm"

Are you representing holidays celebrated by the students in your class as well as exposing them to other cultural observances? Use our [Calendar of Observances](#) to learn about observances and holidays which may add a new level of richness and exploration to children's knowledge. It can be an educational experience for your students to learn about many holidays, even and especially those of religions that are not represented in your class, but are represented in other communities and around the world.

Connect to a Pedagogical Focus

Use a specific holiday to explicitly talk and teach about bias, injustice and other social issues. For example, Labor Day provides an opportunity to talk about the issues and injustices towards working people throughout history. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day is a good time to discuss racism and the civil rights issues of those days and today. Columbus Day provides an opportunity to talk about the experience of Indigenous people and the effects of colonization.

With thoughtful consideration and planning, holiday classroom observances and celebrations can be inclusive, respectful, educational and fun.