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HOW CAN I PLAN INCLUSIVE HOLIDAY CELEBRATIONS?

From the ADL's Miller Early Childhood Initiative Question Corner

Most people love a celebration! Adults flutter around busily preparing for the festivities. Children are abuzz with excitement. Special foods are eaten, special heirlooms brought down from the shelf. Traditions are passed down from generation to generation.

While children should have an opportunity to learn about and share information about the important holidays and celebrations in their lives, celebrating specific holidays in a school or childcare environment may exclude someone. Some people, based on religious or personal beliefs, do not celebrate holidays or birthdays. That doesn't mean that holidays have to be forbidden. But make sure that whether children are learning about how Chinese people celebrate Lunar New Year, or how Muslims celebrate Eid al Adha, they also have opportunities to learn about the everyday lives and culture of these people.

Here are some other things to keep in mind as you include young children in holidays and celebrations:



BE ACCURATE AND SENSITIVE.

- Avoid asking children to be the experts on their religion or holiday celebrations. Children may be embarrassed to share information about their own religious practices or family traditions, and in addition, they may not have accurate information to share.
- Provide children with "expert" information by providing books and other media on the topic, or asking a member from the community to come and visit.

- Also, make sure that whatever the celebration, children have the option to not participate and have a reasonable/suitable alternative.

AVOID STEREOTYPING.

- Keep in mind that everyone celebrates holidays differently, even members of the group.
- Be aware that some holiday customs contain stereotypes. Point out these stereotypes to children and work together to come up with ideas for sensitively counteracting these stereotypes.
- Avoid treating certain holidays as “regular” ones, and others as “special” ones. Some cultures have been reduced to being “brought out” only on holidays, which presents a one-sided and “exotic” view of the culture.

LOOK FOR THEMES.

- By connecting holiday themes, you show children that holidays are an expression of cultural and religious pride, and help them understand the commonality of certain human feelings, celebrations, etc.
- You might look at the way lights are used in the holidays of Christmas, Chanukah, Kwanzaa, Santa Lucia Day and Diwali (for a sample activity on this theme, [click here](#)).
- Liberation is the theme of holidays such as the Fourth of July, Passover, Cinco de Mayo, Juneteenth and Martin Luther King, Jr. Day.
- You can find many ways to celebrate that don't have to focus on particular holidays. The seasons have changed! We've been together for 100 days! It's Name Day and we're going to learn about everyone's name! It's Family Day and we're all going to share something about our families!

BE CONSTITUTIONALLY APPROPRIATE.

- Keep in mind that religious holiday observances, if held under public school auspices, violate the First Amendment's separation-of-church-and-state mandate. Bringing religious leaders into a public setting is not appropriate.

- While recognizing a diverse group of holidays validates children and their families, schools must be careful not to favor one religion over another—or religion over non-religion.
- The use of religious symbols such as a cross, menorah, crescent, Star of David, crèche, symbols of Native American religions, the Buddha, among others, that are part of a religious tradition is permitted as a teaching aid, provided such symbols are displayed only as an educational example of the culture and religious heritage of the holiday and are temporary in nature. They may not be used as decorations.

For more information, please see [December Holiday Guidelines](#) and [Religion in the Public Schools](#).

Excerpted from *Bias-Free Foundations: Early Childhood Guidebook for Educators* (2005, 16 &17) and *Youth Service Activity Guide* (1999, 37).