Holidays: Celebrating Diversity And Meeting Children's Developmental Needs

Talking and thinking about holidays in early childhood programs today is a "hot topic." There is an increasing diversity of children, families, and staff who make up our programs. Each may have different ideas of how to celebrate holidays. As educators, we also have the responsibility to meet both the intellectual and social needs of the children we work with. How we meet those needs also applies to how we include holidays in our curriculum. Finally, even for us as adults, the concept of holidays may not be as simple as it seemed when we were young. Particularly, Columbus Day, Thanksgiving, and Halloween seem to challenge our actions in our work and leisure lives. Working through these issues is important, for ourselves, the children, families, and communities we live and work in.

Thinking Critically About The Curriculum

As people who care for and educate young children, child care professionals often make choices based on the needs of children and families. We serve nutritious meals because we know that children's growing bodies need a well balanced diet. We make daily plans that include active play as well as quiet play because children's bodies and minds need both exercise and rest.

Child care professionals must make conscious decisions on how to celebrate holidays, just as they make conscious decisions on what snacks to serve or what physical activities to offer.

Group Care Issues In Holidays

While children appear to enjoy holidays, working with them 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 preschool-aged 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 the Friday special walk 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

Remember that a child's world is not as neatly divided as curriculum manuals would have us believe. A teacher's job is difficult because s/he has to prepare for each child, based on what that child knows and doesn't know.

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?

Holiday Art: Product And Process
Often our attempt at celebrating holidays with young children includes making crafts or art work. Evaluating these materials for appropriateness in celebrating a holiday is not much different from evaluating them for "developmental appropriateness." Who really does the art work? Are the crafts too hard for the children to complete themselves? Do they all look the same? When selecting art materials for a holiday celebration, look carefully at what the children are doing in making the item.

More importantly, evaluate whether you should eliminate all the wonderful art materials you have available every other day of the year! Do the holiday crafts help children's creativity and use of materials or do they reflect an adult's idea of holiday decorations?

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.

Holiday As A Way To Learn About "Different" People

Consider experiences from the point of view of children in your program. If the children do celebrate holidays differently, perhaps because they are of different religions or cultures, you can build on their knowledge of each other. 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.

If, on the other hand, all the children in your program celebrate holidays in similar ways, give careful consideration to how you introduce holidays from other cultures. You don't want to teach incorrect information (historically or currently inaccurate), or misinterpret a culture or religion you are unfamiliar with. Educate yourself about other cultures. Ask for assistance from your local library. You might look for children's books on another culture, as well as books geared to adults. Examine your own understanding and knowledge of the culture.

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. There may 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.
Thinking about how to celebrate holidays in our child care and education programs can be challenging to adults. 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. Our task as adults is to work through these issues for ourselves, with our co-workers, and with the families and communities we live and work in. It isn't always easy, but if we are to be good teachers, we must do it.

Some aspects of holiday celebrations may seem innocent or harmless at first, but it is vital that early child care professionals think about the curriculum and how it affects children. Halloween colors, for example, include orange and black. Black is generally not presented in a positive way, but a scary and dark way. What does teaching the color black in this way do to children whose skin is dark, and who are sometimes called black? What does it do to children whose skin is not dark? The effect on the self-concept of all children, whether the teacher's intent is "only Halloween fun" can be intense for children of all ethnicities and colors.

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.

Getting together with other adults may help you sort out your thoughts and feelings about holidays in the curriculum. Other child care and education professionals, family specialists, and family members can help contribute to these discussions about appropriate choices for celebrating holidays in your child care program.

Peggy Riehl, M.Ed.
Family Life Educator
Human Development and Family Studies
University of Illinois Cooperative Extension Service