

Traditions Make Us, Us

by Bonnie Neugebauer and Nancy Rosenow

Hands. Celebrating traditions makes us think of hands. The transfer of objects and ideas, hand to hand. Building of community, hands together. Preservation of culture and story, one hand to another. Celebration, hands clapping. Receiving, hands open. We create traditions to remember and we celebrate traditions in recognition of who and where we are. In the lives of children, families, and staff in early childhood programs, traditions create identity and belonging. They make us feel safe, known, connected — in good hands.

Traditions Have Purpose

When life feels uncertain, traditions can provide a sense of security and connection. They ground us in history and remind us of what stays solid while the sands of change shift around us. Traditions connect past, present, and future so we can all remember the path behind us and imagine the path ahead. In her book *The Happiness Project*, Gretchen Rubin writes that traditions “mark the passage of time in a happy way. They provide a sense of anticipation, security, and continuity.... They provide connection and predictability, which people — especially children — crave.” On the other hand, Rubin cautions that because traditions often involve a fair amount of work to carry out, “they are a potential source of guilt, resentment, anger, and disappointment.”

The secret to creating traditions without guilt is to be honest about what really does feel fun to us, and what we can actually carry out without moving into over-stress or resent-



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ment. Being honest with ourselves might mean changing traditions when they no longer work well. One director of an early childhood program began a tradition of personally buying a special gift for each staff member's birthday. This worked when the staff was small, but as it grew, the financial challenge of buying so many gifts became overwhelming. Because she was honest with herself, the director changed the tradition. Now, instead of purchasing gifts, she writes a special note to mark each birthday, outlining qualities about the person she especially values. A colleague of hers, upon hearing of her tradition, told her he loved the idea of creating a special way to mark each person's birthday, but note-writing just wasn't for him. He instead created a tradition of collecting nature items during his frequent hikes and then presenting a beautiful rock or shell “chosen just for you” on each person's birthday.

■ Traditions Help Us Feel Valued

Each of us needs to feel seen for who we are as an individual. Traditions, such as creative ways to recognize birthdays, help people feel valued. We all crave respect and special moments of visibility. Early childhood programs around the world understand this universal human need and have found interesting and important ways to meet it.

Swati Popat Vats, an early childhood director from India, shares a tradition from her school that helps fathers feel seen and valued. “At Podar Jumbo Kids,” Swati says, “we have a cooking and recipe celebration where the child's father has to come to school and cook with his child, but also select a recipe of one of the grandparents. In this way we encourage community building by involving dads, who in India



are not usually involved in school activities or even in day-to-day care of the child. We insist that they use grandparents' recipes so that old cultural foods are brought back into the habits of the child and the family." The three-fold goal of the tradition is to give fathers an easy entree into the classroom, to give parent and child a special time together, and to share family culture authentically.

Another tradition that Swati Popat Vats' school in India is the "Birthday Walk" which is "a meaningful way to further children's understanding of the passage of time... a lovely ritual and it makes the birthday child feel valued and special!" This makes birthday celebrations a socio-emotional experience for kids rather than a materialistic experience. To read about the "Birthday Walk," visit: www.childcareexchange.com/issue.

■ Traditions Help Us Feel Safe

Each early childhood program, classroom, and organization is grounded in values that support everything that happens within. Traditions remind us of those unshakeable values and help us feel safe, even when many things around us change.

In Nigeria, a connection is created through rituals, with the traditional idea of collectivism. According to Margaret Akinware, "Traditionally, Nigerians in different communities and villages are their brothers' keepers, sharing belongings so that no one goes without having the necessities of life. These concepts and practices are inculcated into children, to teach them to be caring, loving, and kind. Team spirit is promoted through group activities in the centres."

Gillian McAuliffe of Australia explains, "At the beginning of each year the class meets to discuss what their class name will be. This is not a quick thing; it can take weeks as there must be whole class agreement on the name as it is their identity for the whole year. The children are encouraged to create a name based on their ideas and the way they learn. This tradition is essential to the development of a class community and shared identity."

More than one program mentioned the tradition of planting a tree each year in honor of the children who are graduating from the program. Some programs encourage the children to choose a name for their 'class tree.' Teachers talk with children about the trees planted by classes who came before them and discuss the relative sizes of the trees, in order to think together about the passage of time.

In one early childhood program, staff enjoys a tradition of meeting together at the end of each school year for a potluck supper and a chance to celebrate deeply held beliefs

about their school, each other, and how they see children. This "What We Know for Sure Night" grounds everyone in a shared sense of security as teachers remember together what really matters.

■ Traditions Have Significance

Teachers and administrators treasure traditions they have developed that reflect significant cultural ideals.

Margaret Akinware describes community-building practices that enhance and preserve the important tradition of "story-telling, folklore, proverbs, lyrics, singing, and dancing. Parents and grandparents are able to blend into the programme and simulate 'tales by moonlight' sessions. Through this medium, moral lessons are taught, positive values are reinforced, and respected norms are transmitted. Stories concerning the wisdom of the tortoise still prevail. In Nigeria, for purposes of example, different modes of dressing, behaviours, and events are introduced to children through drama and story-telling." To read more about Traditions in Nigerian ECD facilities, visit: www.childcareexchange.com/issue.

Swati Popat Vats shares, "We often heard from the parents how when a new sibling came along, the first child was very jealous and started to behave negatively towards her new sibling. So we started to think about how we as practitioners could really help ease the transition into becoming



a big brother or big sister. So we launched the 'Sibling in Training' programme.

"The programme consists of an eight-week 'training' where the older child spends a little time each day in our baby room. We help them get used to being around babies as well as to the amount of noise babies make! Once they feel more comfortable around babies, we start showing them how to touch babies gently and play carefully together with them. The final stage of the programme sees the older children being shown how they can help out, for example helping during nappy changes and feeding times. We feel that this programme has brought a lot of value to the children, and our parents report to us that it really helped at home, too!"

■ Traditions Hold Stories

Traditions help preserve the history (the story) of the school and/or classroom, and help children see themselves within this history. Traditions are sometimes created to support entry of new families, welcome children into classrooms, honor staff, celebrate milestones, or just to have grand times. Since early childhood programs are different from each

other, as are their communities of children, families, and staff, traditions and rituals will hold stories that are unique to each program.

At Bold Park Community School in Australia, a tradition has grown from a World Forum experience. Gillian McAuliffe from Australia and Bishnu Bhatta from Nepal were involved in a conversation about children getting dirty playing outdoors. "Children in Nepal cannot get dirty," Bishnu shared, "because they have only one set of clothes." This enlightening comment inspired action. The World Forum Foundation, with Bishnu and Gillian and the Nature Action Collaborative for Children, created International Mud Day, which is celebrated around the world on June 29 every year (worldforumfoundation.org/mudday).

Gillian's school "identifies a class group who is responsible each year for the planning of International Mud Day and the raising of funds for the orphanage in Nepal. All the children and families then celebrate International Mud Day on the 29th of June by immersing themselves in mud and celebrating nature and the children of the world." Every program that celebrates Mud Day does it differently; but some mixture of mud and water (depending on natural resources) and certainly exuberant fun are always part of it.

■ Traditions Have a Life Span

Some traditions that may have been special once may not always remain so. In the life of a classroom, rituals of storytelling dramatically mark and preserve the history of a particular group of children ("The day we found the dead bird on our walk... The day the rabbit escaped"), but will give way to the new stories of future groups.

As grandmothers, we both tell stories with our grandchildren. Bonnie's stories always begin with, "Once upon a time" and end with gusto, "The End!" In between, there were the stories of the truck that blew a tire or the day Gramby found a mouse in the garbage can. Time has passed and these stories are seldom requested. But the tradition was great for its time and now there are other things to share and celebrate.

It's important that traditions don't become routines with rituals performed by rote without enthusiasm or meaning. Changing rituals, while preserving the meaning of the tradition, is important.



Photograph by Rusty Keeler



Photograph by Terry Bussey

■ Traditions Hold Opportunity

Each classroom, program, family owns its own traditions. We are deciding what is important to us in choosing what to celebrate and remember. This is an opportunity to be creative and have fun together.

Creating individual school traditions can help address the issue of how — or even whether — to ‘celebrate’ religious holidays together in an early childhood program, if children are from various faiths. One school developed the idea of holding a “What Do You Do? Week” to learn about each other’s holiday traditions. Fathers, mothers, grandparents, and other family members are invited to visit the school throughout the week to talk with the class about what holidays (if any) that particular family celebrates and how. Teachers describe how bonds of mutual respect and appreciation for the diversity of the world develop between children in lovely, authentic ways because of this tradition.

Choosing a way to mark ‘graduation’ is another opportunity for schools to develop their own unique traditions. Transitioning from one classroom to another or from an early childhood program to kindergarten is a rite of passage observed in many programs. There are many goals:

- Celebrating individual children who are making the transition, make them feel special, and tell their personal story in some way.
- Creating turnovers in which older children ‘teach’ younger children about the roles and responsibilities that are coming to them.
- Connecting these children and their transition to all the children who have already made this passage.
- Affirming the importance of this particular place in the life of each particular child.

Some programs have ceremonies with caps and gowns. Others create books that are the story of a particular child’s life in the program. A special “Pencil Ceremony” marks the graduation of children from nursery to kindergarten at Podar Jumbo Kids. According to Swati Popat Vats this ceremony marks a rite of passage and makes each child feel special, while also sending messages about valuing resources and

caring for valued tools. Swati explains that their school has adopted a practice steeped in Indian culture in which every child is gifted a pencil, with great fanfare, as a symbol representing lifelong knowledge.

■ Traditions Use Symbols

The idea of a symbol, like the pencil, is great fun to work with and holds a great deal of potential in creating a tradition. It becomes a special messaging like a secret language.



Kay Albrecht shares, “We used the heart logo quite extensively in our teacher appreciation and recognition system at HeartsHome Early Learning Center in Houston, Texas. By collaborating with a local jeweler, we selected anniversary recognition gifts for teaching tenure that were wildly popular and safely wearable in our setting. They served as a recognition, retention, and communication tool that coworkers really liked. As their tenure increased, they got to select their own recognition gift, individualizing the selections quite widely. Then, we used the ‘wearable’ recognition jewelry in our induction of new employees, guaranteeing that new employees would become known

by all of their tenured colleagues and new employees would become known by their new colleagues.”

Selena Fox, New Zealand Tertiary College, has created an organizational culture around the gifting of chocolate fish, a traditional reward in New Zealand for a job well done. The green fish is highly prized, and the higher the honor, the bigger the fish. The iconic fish is brought forward in many playful ways to effectively build community and to provide recognition and appreciation, as well as fun and a snack.

As the two of us write this together, we are celebrating “Great Horned Owl Day,” a holiday our organization has created to mark a day of big decisions on which we viewed this spectacular bird, certainly a good omen. He reminds us that remembering moments of great importance gives us a way of charting our lives. And most often, these moments are not experiences in isolation, but they happen in community, hand in hand with others. And so we are valued and safe.