



## Celebrations, Festivals, Holidays — What Should We Be Doing?

by Francis Wardle

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Celebrations, rituals, and social activities are an important part of childhood. They help children learn that they belong: to history, culture, society, and community. This is clear. What is unclear is how much of this activity should occur in our early childhood programs and schools, and how schools and early childhood programs should conduct these celebrations.

My favorite memories of childhood are celebrations and festivals. Singing and dancing around the May pole, joining in colorful lantern processions, watching a Punch and Judy puppet show with peers, walking to the manger on a cold English Christmas night, and expectantly waiting to search for my Easter basket are vivid images in my mind. What's interesting to me as I recall my favorite childhood festivals is that none of these activities occurred at school.

We must think carefully about holidays and celebrations and decide which belong in the community, and which are appropriate for our early childhood programs. We must never feel all celebrations should be replicated in the program. That's not our job. And when we do celebrate in our programs, we must make sure these activities are positive experiences for all of our children.

We should encourage families to participate in community celebrations: religious activities like a Posada, Jewish holidays, a midnight Mass, and the Easter sunrise; cultural festivals such as Cinco de Mayo, Black Arts Festival, Kwanzaa, Greek festivals, and Celtic festivals; and historical holidays like Independence Day and Labor Day.

Early childhood programs should even sponsor and support some community festivals. It's important that families attend festivals together. It strengthens the connection between the child, family, and community. And families can choose the activities meaningful to their culture, religion, and traditions. A family choosing to make a celebration part of their tradition gives the event far more meaning than the same activity occurring at the center.

### **What celebrations should we include?**

Early childhood programs should be involved in celebrations that are meaningful to our children: celebrations that are magical, bigger than life, fantastical, full of hope and power and love, and that make each child feel they belong; festivals that show the brighter side of humanity: music, dance, togetherness, the importance of children, and the power of community to care for children. Harvest festivals, including fruits and vegetables grown by families, children, and the center — with singing, dancing, food made from the produce — is one such festival.

Activities that communicate hatred, segregation, superiority of certain groups, commercialism, adult fears and power trips, and the helplessness of children are not appropriate in our programs.

My children attend a bilingual/bicultural French/American school. At Christmas and the end of the school year, the children present an all French program of songs, dances, oral readings, plays, and skits. The children demonstrate to the school community what they have learned. Food is shared, and families enjoy each other, the children, and the



○ integration of two cultures. This is a unique activity that the children cannot experience elsewhere in town.

As a teacher at the Hutterian Brethren school, I taught the kindergarten students several folk dances from England, Mexico, and Germany. They performed these dances to the community of 300 people — including their parents. International folk dancing is part of the history and tradition of this community; dance is part of the culture of these children.

For Christmas, the same students, along with the preschool class, prepared a Posada. (A Posada is a ritual procession that depicts Mary and Joseph seeking shelter on Christmas Eve. It is a tradition of Hispanics in the Southwest.) We read a children's story about a Posada in Los Angeles. We learned some simple Spanish Christmas songs. Then we presented this children's Christmas pageant to the whole community.

### What made this celebration appropriate?

○ All the students in my class came from families that belong to the same Christian religious background. One of our children had recently arrived from Lake Titicaca, Bolivia. She had taught all the students some basic Spanish as they were teaching her English. My co-teacher was fluent in Spanish. And songs of all languages and cultures are an important part of the life of children in the community.

The Posada celebration would not have worked in a program serving children with diverse religious backgrounds. It would not have worked in a program where Spanish had no meaning. And it may not have worked in a community where singing is not culturally significant. However, this does not mean the Posada activity wasn't new to my students. They were exposed for the first time to a largely Hispanic activity; we used unique instruments for the procession, and the concept of celebrating the birth of Jesus with a piñata was quite novel to them.

Before an early childhood program organizes a celebration, these questions must be answered: Will the activity be meaningful to each child? How will we know this? Is this activity consistent with the overall philosophy of the program?

○ I am continually amazed how often programs with very sound early childhood philosophies that empha-

size child directed activities, positive mental health, and good nutrition consistently violate these practices for celebrations — Christmas, graduations, birthdays, and cultural holidays. It's as if they believe the need to celebrate supersedes good early childhood practices.

I have experienced early childhood graduations where children cried, staff got mad, and parents literally walked over some children to videotape their own child in cap and gown. The atmosphere was tense; the children were bored. And the entire activity was adult dominated and only for the benefit of adults. The Hutterian Brethren celebrate an interesting alternative. Rather than celebrating graduation from preschool, they follow the German custom of celebrating entrance into school. The ceremony is very short, and includes each child demonstrating, to their individual ability, writing their name.

We know what's meaningful to children. They love singing, dancing, playing games, hands-on activities, bright colors, gorgeous musical sounds, and pleasing adults — especially their parents. They also like anything new, different, and challenging. They hate passively watching, doing nothing or the same old thing, being quiet, and doing adult things.

The reason the festivals of my childhood were good is because there was always an important part for children. At Christmas we were given our own candle to light and then protect from the winter wind. The May festival included children's songs and dances, games, and family activities. And in the lantern procession, we proudly carried child-made lanterns with the adults.

We must ask: Is the celebration for parents? The teachers? The administration? Or the person who insists we have a cultural celebration? Is it for politicians or board members? Is it because the greater society dictates it (Christmas, Halloween, commercial holidays)? If it is not principally for the children, then it probably shouldn't be celebrated.

### What should programs do?

- Don't celebrate all the commercial holidays. These are designed to get people to spend money. Be as selective about celebrations as you are with television programs in the classroom, books you buy, and equipment you select. Also, find creative, child

centered ways to celebrate these holidays. Several programs I know visit senior centers on Valentine's Day.

- Only celebrate activities where children can be directly involved. Every year, Adams County Head Start organizes a children's festival. This event includes a children's parade — where children participate on bikes, trikes, and skates — a petting zoo, performances by local children's groups, and hands-on activities from mural painting to computers.

- Make sure the way you celebrate is primarily for the benefit of the children, not the adults. Most graduation activities are designed for parents and teachers.

- Make sure your celebrations are consistent with your overall philosophy. At a small school where I taught, a Native American group celebrated Thanksgiving with us. They played their drum, danced social dances in their native dress, and talked to the children about the meaning of Thanksgiving from their perspective.

- Make sure your celebrations are ones that can be supported by every family in your program. Don't eliminate anyone! In many programs, Jehovah's Witness children either leave during celebrations or cannot receive gifts. In some programs, the families with less money don't participate in gift giving and providing birthday cakes because they cannot afford them.

- Encourage families to become involved in festivals in their own communities; but don't feel the program needs to be involved in all holidays. Some programs have Santa visit during the day or take a field trip to the mall to see Santa. It would be more appropriate to have an evening at the center where families could safely visit with Santa.

- Try to include families and community members in your celebrations. One year, a child's mother came to our Head Start class and made a piñata for our Cinco de Mayo celebration; other parents cooked and brought ethnic foods. At another program, the staff themselves learned Mexican dances which they performed for the parents and children and then taught to the children.

- Any decorations used as part of a celebration need to follow overall guidelines about what goes on the classroom wall: child created, unique, of high

quality, and non-commercial. These decorations must also be developmentally appropriate. This is often lost when early childhood programs celebrate cultural and ethnic holidays. Maps, historical events, and historical people are inappropriate for young children.

### What is developmentally appropriate?

Festivals for children must be developmentally appropriate. Just like any other activity, they must meet these criteria:

- Are there choices available? Can children choose games, different foods, different activities, and different levels of involvement?

- Can children choose not to participate? Graduation is an example of a celebration that all children must be involved in.

- Is the climate low key and supportive of everyone's needs? A petting zoo (local 4 H club, animal shelter) is a good low key activity — children can sit and look, pet the animals, stay with one, or move around.

- Does the activity support every child in the program; does everyone feel welcome; or does it make the child whose parents are poor or have chosen a different religion or lifestyle feel left out? Adapting to meet every child's needs is truly a multicultural experience!

- Do children appear engaged? Are they enjoying the activity?

- Does the celebration support basic early childhood values of health and safety, good nutrition, sound mental health, multicultural inclusiveness, and individual differences? All year we tell children to be wary of strangers, not to take candy from strangers, and not to go out at night. Then at Halloween we take our children out into the neighborhood to take candy from strangers. A more appropriate Halloween activity would be for the center to sponsor a Halloween party.

- Does the celebration teach positive values to children? I'm not sure the traditional Thanksgiving activity teaches positive values about Native Americans.

- Is the activity new, challenging, unusual, and broadening? We have so much to teach children! Let's not waste this precious time. When they

○ studied about blacks in the west, my children's school invited a representative from the Black Cowboy Museum to demonstrate roping techniques and talk about the life of black cowboys.

- Does the celebration fit into the overall curriculum unit — either to stimulate the children's interest, to wrap up the whole unit, or to reward successful completion of tasks or effort?

Early childhood and school programs have the responsibility to provide developmentally appropriate activities, support each child's unique cultural and family heritage, and allow children to experience the power, magic, joy, and importance of festivals and celebrations. It takes a balancing act to do this correctly!

## References

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