



Going One Step Further — No Traditional Holidays

by Bonnie Neugebauer

Consider, for a moment, the possibility that a child care program is an inappropriate place to celebrate holidays — period. Having thought about this issue at length in working with Francis Wardle, editing **Alike and Different**, and in life in and out of programs, I am coming to feel that this is so.

Bear in mind that in my own program several years ago we put on a spectacular Thanksgiving feast complete with roasted chicken and Pilgrim hats. One of my children attended a program that had a holiday-based curriculum (as soon as the refrigerated turkey started to fray, there would be a Christmas tree to take its place). I love holidays, having been known to invent one now and then when the calendar proved inadequate.

So this isn't a frivolous consideration — children love anticipation and planning and all the excitement that goes with festivity, and I love sharing all this with them.

There are at least three major problems with concentrating our time and energies on holiday celebrations:

- 1. It's extremely difficult to give holidays meaning that is developmentally appropriate for very young children.** Most holidays are based on abstract concepts that are beyond their comprehension.
- 2. It's difficult to be inclusive.** Are we going to celebrate holidays based on cultures represented in our program? What if there is little diversity? What if there is a great deal? What if some parents object to all holidays? Do we have the time and resources to do justice to them all? How much of our curriculum

do we want to devote to holidays? What important activities are being displaced?

3. Many holidays are overdone anyway. Children see signs of the major commercialized holidays everywhere, so they'll be asking questions and their families will be making choices. (Suddenly I feel a pang of envy for people whose important religious and cultural holidays have not been discovered by Hallmark). If families are celebrating, why do we need to celebrate too? Again, it's an issue of time, energy, resources, and educational objectives.

I'd like to suggest an alternative:

Let's use our creative gifts and celebratory spirit to mark occasions that are the most developmentally appropriate for young children.

- **Let's celebrate milestones** — the first tooth, learning to whistle, printing their name, moving from one age group to another, tying shoelaces, telling a story, making a friend.
- **Let's celebrate points of learning** — the number 3, worms, the color red, a favorite story, Thursday.
- **Let's celebrate children and families** — the birth of a sibling, a grandparent visit, moving to a new house. Children need this reinforcement that what happens at home is important at the center and vice versa.
- **Let's celebrate events in the world** (natural and unnatural) — a shuttle launch, the first snowflake, puddles, a thunderstorm, a presidential visit. Let's celebrate wonder.



When we make choices about what to celebrate, let us be very conscious of who we are doing it for. If we are doing it for ourselves, it is very easy to choose a holiday curriculum — the resources are everywhere and excitement is built in. If we are doing it for the families, we must choose carefully what to celebrate so that we are inclusive. If we are doing it for the children, let us be conscious of all the subtle messages

inherent in what we do and choose things to celebrate that are meaningful, developmentally appropriate, and healthy for them.

*This article is reprinted from **Child Care Information Exchange**, August 1990.*

A Questionnaire for Families about Celebrations

1. What special days do you celebrate in your family?
2. How would you like our program to be involved in your celebrations?
3. How do you think we could celebrate everyone's special days, in a center as diverse as ours?
4. What are some of the myths/stereotypes about your culture that you would like us to understand so as not to perpetuate them?
5. How do you feel about celebrations at the center that are not part of your family's tradition?
6. What kinds of things can we do to celebrate our center as an inclusive "human" community?
7. Would you have time to:
 - Read a favorite story in your native language?
 - Share a favorite family recipe?
 - Donate articles of clothing that you no longer use for our "dress-up" corner?

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