



TEACHING TOLERANCE

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Avoiding the Holiday 'Balance Traps'

How educators can avoid the holiday "balance traps."

The following selection was excerpted from Celebrate!: An Anti-Bias Guide to Enjoying Holidays in Early Childhood Programs. Adapted by permission, ©Julie Bisson (Redleaf Press [1], St. Paul, Minnesota).

There are three common pitfalls to avoid when trying to create a fair balance among different holidays. In each case, teachers believe they are doing a good job of treating holidays equally, but there are still problems, usually arising from lack of awareness or information. The following are descriptions of the pitfalls and how to avoid them.

Surface-level changes

One trap in balancing holidays is to say that you are doing an inclusive approach when your practices are no different from what you have always done. This often happens in December. A teacher may say that she includes Hanukkah, Christmas, Solstice and Kwanzaa in her program, and she may be trying hard to do just that.

However, a closer look shows that Christmas continues to be the pervasive, most-emphasized holiday. This is what is happening, for example, when a large bulletin board says "Happy Holidays," but the decorations on it include red and green stockings, a cutout paper Santa Claus, decorated paper Christmas trees and a few snowflakes.

Another example is a program that holds its first annual "Holiday Party" instead of the usual "Christmas Party." But the only decorations are a live Christmas tree and a few cut-out dreidels, painted blue and hung on the walls.

For entertainment, one of the parents dresses up like Santa and the children sing four songs: "Jingle Bells," "Rudolph," "Silent Night," and "The Dreidel Song."

Do you see the problem? What messages are being sent about the importance of these two holidays? What about the other December holidays that aren't mentioned?

To help avoid this trap, examine what you are doing and ask others to help you critique your practices. Then work to equal out imbalances you see and to do a better job presenting holidays equally.

December-only Emphasis

A second balance-related trap in early childhood programs comes from the great emphasis placed on holidays during December. It's true that quite a few holidays fall during this month, and of course Christmas is valued by many people.

However, many holidays that are significant to people of other religious or cultural groups happen at other times of the year. Rosh Hashanah and Passover, for example, are two of the most important holidays for many Jewish families.

Yet these are often ignored or briefly touched on. Instead, a great emphasis is put on Hanukkah, which usually falls in December, but is not among the most important Jewish holidays.

A solution to this problem is to find out how important a particular holiday is to the people who celebrate it, relative to their other holidays. Then take care to put as much emphasis and excitement into the important holidays you celebrate from January to November as to those you do in December.

Exotic Versus "Regular" Holidays

Even when holidays are given equal time, sometimes one day is treated as "exotic" and another as part of "regular" life. This happens often in the "tourist" approach.

Here's an example of the differences between exotic and regular holidays activities. In the classroom where Rosa teaches, many of the children celebrate the American New Year. Don and Cheryl's parents brought in plastic cups, paper plates that said "Happy New Year" on them, balloons and noisemakers.

At circle time, all of the children talked about their wishes for the next year, such as "to be five," "to get a new puppy," "for my daddy to find a job," "to move to a house with a pool," "to get bigger," and "to sleep over at Marissa's house." Afterward, some of the children played "Happy New Year Party" in the dramatic play area.

The next week, because Chinese New Year was approaching, Rosa decided to invite some dancers to come in and do a Lion Dance for the children outside on the playground. Although she didn't have any resources for talking about it with the children, she wanted to expose her children to another kind of New Year celebration.

If you have ever seen a Lion Dance you know that it is very colorful, fast paced and exciting. The children enjoyed the dance and the dancers who were dressed in traditional costumes, although some were afraid of the large, colorful lion's head with the big tongue.

But what might they have been learning about Chinese New Year and how it compares to the American New Year they discussed before? As the activities were presented, they might have learned that the American New Year is "regular," an extension of everyday home and classroom life.

The Chinese New Year activities, however, although fun and interesting, seemed to portray a message of excitement and difference, a performance by exotic people of their Lion Dance.

What could this activity have taught the children in Rosa's class about the Chinese children in their neighborhood, who they are and what that do at home?

Making some holidays seem exotic is most likely to happen when you are trying to include holidays you have less information about or holidays that no one in the group celebrates.

The issue of presenting holidays equally is one of the tallest hurdles when trying to implement an inclusive, representative approach. It takes perseverance and commitment on your part to create and maintain balance; however, your time is well-spent when your efforts lead to a more equitable and balanced holiday curriculum.

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