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# Planning holiday celebrations

## An ethical approach to developing policy and practices

by Katie Campbell, Mary Jamsek, and P.D. Jolley

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*"I really want to change how I plan for holidays in my classroom. What I'm doing now doesn't feel right, but the parents aren't going to like it and my coworkers think I'm crazy."*

*"What is happening to my child? He's never behaved like this before!"*

*"Why don't you have your skeletons out? We have them up at our house."*

Comments like these can arise in the struggle to incorporate cultural, religious, and individual beliefs into early childhood programs. One person's real and sincere holiday "spirit" offends another. Children's emotions may range from wild enthusiasm to increased stress, even depression. And celebrations and decorations associated with "traditional" holidays are so pervasive that we may not recognize that there are alternatives.

In this article, we propose that programs develop a policy for celebrating holidays based on core values and ethical principles.

A holiday policy can lead to teaching practices that enhance our understanding of, and respect for, the different cultures and beliefs of children, families, staff, and community.

### Re-thinking dominant-culture holidays

Many teachers use holiday-theme activity books to plan their school-year curriculum. Some examples of holiday-based monthly themes include Halloween in October, Thanksgiving in November, and Christmas in December—and maybe Kwanzaa or Hanukkah in a nod toward multiculturalism.

The themes mentioned above represent holidays of the dominant culture. For the purposes of this article, we define *dominant culture* as the "ruling or prevailing culture exercising authority or influence" (York 1991). Dominant-culture holidays, then, are

the holidays celebrated most widely by a large segment of a population.

In the United States, the holidays most commonly celebrated in both elementary schools and early childhood programs are religious in origin. The celebrations themselves, however, are generally secular in nature. While a great number of people celebrate the dominant-culture holidays—Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Valentine's Day and Easter—many do not. Of those people who do, not all celebrate in the commercialized manner popular in our society.

*While getting trikes from the shed during the week of Halloween, Chad asked his teacher, "Where are your skeletons? You need to put them up. We have them up at our house." The teacher replied, "So, you celebrate Halloween by putting up skeletons at your house?" Chad said, "Yeah, and we should have them here too!"*

Some early childhood programs have begun moving away from dominant-culture holidays in an effort to respect the diversity of their children, families, and communities. Results range from celebrating no holidays to celebrating every holiday on the calendar. Other options include celebrating the major American holidays, celebrating unique program or classroom celebrations, and celebrating only those holidays observed by the families and staff in the program.

Regardless of which holidays you choose to celebrate, the key is to make a conscious choice. We propose that programs write a holiday policy, using a process of careful planning that involves teachers and parents.

*At a recent meeting of educators and parents, the topic turned to creating a holiday policy. "What's a holiday policy?" someone asked. A teacher responded by describing how the current practice of celebrating dominant-culture*

holidays had left children and teachers feeling overwhelmed and out of control the previous year. “We need a written policy that spells out which holidays we celebrate, if any, and why.” Others in the meeting began offering suggestions about what they wanted to see happen at their program over the next year. Finally, several teachers and one parent expressed interest in forming a committee to write a holiday policy. Though hesitant to bring up the issue at first, they felt relieved that the topic was out in the open and action on it had begun.

A holiday policy, like other program policies, requires a basis in knowledge and ethics. One source of this knowledge and ethics is the National Association for the Education of Young Children. In particular, we can look to NAEYC’s standards of developmentally appropriate practice. These standards describe interactions, curricula, and environments that reflect knowledge about how children develop and learn both individually and in groups as well as the social and cultural contexts of that learning (Bredekamp and Copple 1997). In other words, we propose that the needs of children be the most important curricular consideration—not the calendar.

In addition, we can look for guidance to NAEYC’s Code of Ethical Conduct and the principles behind an anti-bias curriculum.

## Definitions

*Developmentally appropriate practice* describes professional decision-making that applies child development knowledge to

- making thoughtful and informed predictions about safe, healthy, interesting, and achievable activities, materials, interactions, and experiences for children within a particular age range;
- using what is known about the strengths, interests, and needs of a particular child for planning; and
- responding to social and cultural contexts to ensure meaningful, relevant, and respectful learning experiences for children and their families (Bredekamp and Copple 1997).

*Anti-bias curriculum* describes a deliberate, activist approach to challenging prejudice, stereotype, and bias in early care and education programs (Derman-Sparks 1989).

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For the purposes of this article, we have identified several sections of the ethics code that can be used to evaluate and inform particular aspects of typical holiday celebrations. You may choose other sections that more closely fit your program’s goals and vision.

### **Identify core values**

The NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct describes standards of ethical behavior based on core values deeply rooted in the history of our field. We have committed ourselves to these principles and values.

- We appreciate childhood as a unique and valuable stage of the human life cycle.
- We base our work with children on knowledge of child development.
- We appreciate and support the close ties between the child and family.
- We recognize that children are best understood and supported in the context of family, culture, community, and society.
- We respect the dignity, worth, and uniqueness of each individual (child, family member, and colleague).
- We help children and adults achieve their full potential in the context of relationships that are based on trust, respect, and positive regard.

These ethical considerations are the basis of all program policies. We use them to examine all aspects of our interactions with children and adults, health and safety practices, environments, curriculum, and other services, including holiday celebrations.

You can thoughtfully approach the development of a holiday policy from many directions. Make sure, however, that any policy reflects your ethical principles.

### **Ethical responsibilities to children**

**Ideal 1.1:** To be familiar with the knowledge base of early childhood care and education and to keep current through continuing education and in-service training.

**Ideal 1.2:** To base program practices upon current knowledge in the field of child development and related disciplines and upon particular knowledge of each child.

*In December Mari approached the teacher with concerns about her 4-year-old son. "He's not himself," she said. The more they talked about the family's December schedule, it became clear that her family had overdosed on all the shopping, cooking, singing, cleaning, and decorating of the season. After the winter break, Mari arrived at school the first morning with news that her son was back to normal. He was back to his regular routine and his behavior reflected this at home.*

One reason teachers and directors often dread the holiday season is the disruption it brings. In many settings where traditional fall holidays are celebrated, disruptions in routines occur non-stop from October until January. This pace is exhausting for teachers and even more so for children. The continuous disruption in routine can cause children to feel

#### **Steps for creating an anti-bias holiday policy**

If you are developing a holiday policy, we strongly recommend Julie Bisson's book *Celebrate! An Anti-bias Guide to Enjoying Holidays in Early Childhood Programs* as a starting point. Bisson offers these recommendations:

- Include everyone who wants to be included.
- Choose a model of collaboration—facilitator or committee.
- Set ground rules.
- Review your past holiday practices.
- Develop agreed-upon goals to guide you in changing or improving practices.
- Determine the process you will use to decide which holidays to celebrate.
- Allow time to work out implementation issues.

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unsure of their environment. When children are off balance, they tend to react erratically. This unpredictable behavior can frustrate teachers, and an unhealthy cycle begins.

The holiday pace can be stressful for young children, particularly since similar changes may also be happening at home. Family members that children rarely see come to stay at their home and may take over their own beds and bedrooms. Stores, streets and homes are decorated profusely with Santas, greenery, and toys. Well-meaning friends and relatives ask: "Have you told Santa what you want?" and "Are you being good?"

Parents stressed by extra shopping, cooking, and gift wrapping often act tired and irritable.

All of this can overwhelm young children, as well as confuse them about a holiday's true intent. Often the very things that we are doing for children are the things that are contributing to their stress. Regardless of which holiday is being celebrated, the activities pull children out of their routine.

Holiday activities often involve the creation of decorations and gifts. These craft activities are often product—rather than process—oriented. When children make teacher-directed holiday crafts, they lose valuable time that could be devoted to more open-ended, creative art activities. In assessing the appropriateness of holiday activities, consider what we know about young children's motor skills and their need to explore and experiment with materials.

Another area to evaluate is children's holiday performances for parents. These performances pressure children to memorize spoken lines, move on cue, and perform before a crowd of family members and

strangers. These activities do not take into account the children's stage of memory development, level of social-emotional development, and individual differences in temperament.

All holiday activities need to be re-examined for bias or historical inaccuracy. Consider the inappropriateness of dressing African-American, Hispanic and Asian-American children in paper-bag vests and construction-paper feathers and teaching them about "our forefathers" and the first Thanksgiving. Reviewed from a developmental perspective, these common Thanksgiving activities are incompatible with preoperational children's inability to understand history. These practices negate the children's (and their families') own rich and varied cultural histories.

### **Ethical responsibilities to families**

**Ideal 2.3:** To respect the dignity of each family and its culture, language, customs, and beliefs.

**Ideal 2.4:** To respect families' childrearing values and their right to make decisions for their children.

*As Abraham dropped his daughter off at school, he reminded her, "We don't have a tree. We don't celebrate Christmas, and I don't want you to make an ornament at school." After he leaves, the teacher tells her, "Oh, you can make one anyway." Later Abraham complained to the director. The director, in turn, confronted the teacher. Her explanation: "He's just trying to spoil everyone's Christmas fun!"*

A respectful way to include families in our programs is to have a policy that is inclusive of their customs and cultures. Parents are often invited to provide food, decorations, and activities for holiday

#### **So if it isn't the sugar...what is it?**

"The results have consistently shown that sugar intake does not negatively affect behavior in a majority of children. In reality, these studies suggested that sugars tend to calm both children and adults, but this effect could go unnoticed due to other influences. Examples of this include the excitement of a birthday party or Halloween trick or treating. These events could override the calming effects of sugar."

*The Recurring Myth of Sugar and Hyperactivity*

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celebrations. This does involve families in school life, but it can have a drawback. Providing food or activities can be a financial hardship and potentially an additional burden on top of holiday preparations at home. Some parents feel embarrassed to let anyone know this, so they may remove their child from school on the day of the party.

Making gifts or cards for Father's Day and Mother's Day assumes that children have a father or mother at home. A well-meaning teacher may suggest that a child make a card for another family member instead. This suggestion can make the child feel singled out.

Some families' religious or cultural beliefs preclude celebration of dominant-culture holidays. There are a few solutions to this dilemma that do not single out particular children and make them feel less a part of the classroom. One solution is to invite parents to share their family celebrations and traditions—with classmates in the role of guests. In this way, children are exposed to a wider view in a manner appropriate to their developmental level.

Through reflection and experience, we have learned to respect each and every family's traditions and beliefs. We believe program personnel have no right to impose personal holiday customs and traditions, religious or otherwise, on children and families. Common classroom situations include the following:

- children who are Jehovah's Witnesses and are unable to celebrate any holidays at school,
- children whose allergies disallow wheat or dairy foods (common ingredients in holiday treats),

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- children whose parents do not support the promulgation of myths such as the Easter Bunny and Tooth Fairy.

When evaluating program policy, engage parents in respectful negotiation. In the give-and-take, a policy may emerge that both honors the ethical foundation as well as the families' beliefs. The resulting policy can be truly satisfying to both parents and staff.

### **Ethical responsibilities to colleagues**

**Ideal 3A.1:** To establish and maintain relationships of respect, trust, and cooperation with co-workers.

**Ideal 3C.1:** To promote policies and working conditions that foster mutual respect, competence, well-being, and positive self-esteem in staff members.

*A teacher struggled with her decision whether to attend the annual holiday party. The party would include a gift exchange, mainstream holiday food, caroling, and festive holiday attire. At the next staff meeting, the teacher informed her director and colleagues that she would not attend.*

Some caregivers love holidays and want to share their excitement with the children by providing holiday experiences. They may do this by bringing in decorations, preparing traditional holiday foods, planning parties, or exchanging gifts. Caregivers may plan activities, particularly crafts, around the current holiday. Every day it may feel as though the new and different is replacing the comforting and familiar in the classroom.

Teachers are a part of the classroom community, and their interests should play a part in forming

policy. But as ethical professionals, we need to consider the backgrounds, experiences, and developmental levels of children in our classrooms before adding, or changing, any activities and experiences.

Our ethical standards also guide us to respect and support the well-being and positive self-esteem of our peers. Teachers working in settings that appear similar to the culture in which they grew up may assume that the children and families will celebrate the same holidays in the same ways. A way to explore the backgrounds and traditions of both the individual classroom and the larger program community is to conduct a family and staff survey. Ask whether the holidays being celebrated reflect the lives of all children and families. Ask whether families celebrate different holidays and if parents would be willing to share those with the classroom.

While a holiday policy ideally incorporates the views of all stakeholders—children, families, and staff—it does not guarantee that everyone will participate. As in all conflicts, listen to what the parent or teacher wants, and ask why this is important to them. Refer to the values the program has adopted and try to help the parent or teacher figure out a way to celebrate within the framework of the policy.

For parents who do not wish to follow school policies, consider planning a party outside of school. Your role could include attending as a guest or facilitating communication between families. Private, off-campus celebrations are not subject to school policies.

### **Ethical responsibilities to community and society**

**Ideal 4.1:** To provide the community with high-quality (age and individually appropriate, and culturally and socially sensitive) education/care programs and services.

*In a recent workshop on developing an anti-bias curriculum, a participant from Mexico shared the cultural differences she experienced upon moving to Texas. She said that in her community and family Christmas celebrations, children received only one gift. When she moved here, after marrying a man from Texas, she was surprised to see the huge number of gifts bought and exchanged. She noted that it felt much more commercialized and more “about the presents” here than it did in her country, where the celebration had more of a religious and family focus.*

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As with everything else that happens in the classroom, values are being transmitted through all that we do and say. As we develop holiday policies, we need to consider what values will be passed on to the children during holiday activities and celebrations.

The United States as a capitalist country is based on commercial enterprise. The celebration of dominant-culture holidays reflects this. When we buy and exchange gifts, we may be passing on the value of generosity along with an emphasis on things. When we accumulate decorations and trinkets associated with holidays, we may be passing on the values of creativity and beauty as well as consumerism. We need to think about which values we want to emphasize.

Positive values that typically accompany holiday celebrations are togetherness, family, sharing, friendship, giving to others, and tradition. Negative values include consumerism, greed, competition, and commercialism. Many holiday activities have been done for so long that we're not really sure why we do them anymore. We get so caught up in the planning and decorating that we can't defend the message our celebrations give children.

The tradition and continuity of holiday celebrations are important. In writing a holiday policy, state how you will evaluate it. A yearly examination of holiday activities can ensure that the values you want to send are the messages actually being sent.

## **Religious celebrations in public institutions**

Beyond the ethical considerations of holiday celebrations, you need to be aware of First Amendment rights under the U.S. Constitution if you are teaching in a public school or a publicly funded program, such as Head Start.

Religious holiday observances, if held under public school auspices, violate the First Amendment's mandate for separation of church and state.

Joint celebrations (Christmas-Hanukkah, for example) do not solve the problem, because they only serve to introduce religious observances into the schools. They also tend to put holidays in competition with each other and distort the significance of each.

Look carefully at traditional icons used for holiday crafts and be certain that they are not religious symbols. Recognizing a diverse group of holidays—Easter and Passover in March; and Christmas, Hanukkah, and Kwanzaa in December—might validate the beliefs of children and their families. But bringing religious observances into a public setting is not appropriate.

Plan carefully before using religious symbols such as a cross, menorah, crescent, Star of David, crèche, Native-American talismans, the Buddha, and other symbols that form part of a religious tradition. Use of such symbols is permitted as a teaching aid, provided they are displayed only as an educational example of the culture and religious heritage of the holiday, and are temporary in nature. It's inappropriate to use these symbols as decorations.

Consider the religious symbols you have seen displayed in early childhood programs. To guide your use of religious symbols, consider the following questions:

- How were the symbols handled?
- Were they discussed or merely displayed?
- How do you feel about displaying religious symbols in your classroom?
- Would you display different symbols for different age groups?
- How would you explain the display of religious symbols to a non-religious parent?

## Tips for ethical holiday practices

Celebration is important to a well-rounded life. One way to transmit this value is to encourage children in a class or in all classes to create their own reasons to celebrate. Some classroom ideas that have been successful in other programs include beach day, snow day, pajama day, stuffed animal picnic, fall festival, starry night, and first spring leaf celebrations.

When children, families and staff develop and plan celebrations, we take into account family and cultural considerations and develop a celebration that includes everyone. Use these suggestions.

- Provide holiday activities as a free-choice activity, rather than as all-class activities.
- Think of providing opportunities for children to give back to the community rather than the children or program “taking from” or being passive recipients of the community’s goodwill.
- Instead of observing Mother’s Day and Father’s Day, create a separate holiday at a different calendar time. Encourage all children to choose either a family member to celebrate and appreciate—a favorite brother, sister, grandparent, aunt, uncle, or godparent.
- Focus on seasonal changes instead of dominant-culture holidays.
- Move from holiday-theme-based curriculum planning to emergent planning based on children’s needs and interests.
- Plan inclusive celebrations. For example, substitute a family spring picnic for an Easter egg hunt.

In *Reflecting Children’s Lives* (Carter and Curtis, 1996) two October curriculum plans are compared and contrasted. One “centers around the traditional practice of using commercialized, European-American holidays as the focus for planning.” The other “reflects the concrete and sensory aspects of children’s daily experiences” and provides “ways for them to explore and learn more about what they can see, hear, and smell all around them.” The first contradicts and the second supports the tenets of developmentally appropriate practice and conforms to clear, ethical standards and program policy.

By developing and using a holiday policy, you will have a guide for choosing, implementing, and evaluating holiday activities (Bisson 1997).

Remember, there is no universal model for celebrating holidays. Make your program’s holiday policy vital—not static. Revisit it every year and make sure it reflects the diversity of your program’s families and staff.

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## When the world slips into a classroom

As we know from other areas of early childhood care and education, the world outside our door slips easily into our classrooms. Children will be exposed to a nearly non-stop onslaught of holiday hype for much of the fall and winter with one holiday being introduced before the previous one has even occurred.

The media will focus heavily on the few well-known, dominant-culture holidays. Acknowledge the children’s awareness of, and experiences with, the saturation of holiday hoopla.

In developing your holiday policy, decide what the focus will be in your program and how to counter-balance or integrate the wider media world into it.

Sometimes segments of the community, in an attempt to be helpful, will provide materials like packets of green and red construction paper that do not support your policy. How do you encourage participation in your program in a way that’s true to the policy without rejecting community interest and support. When community organizations offer their involvement, welcome the help and thank them for it. Share your holiday policy and the philosophy behind it. Then together determine an effort that will meet both your needs.

*A teacher in an established center said, “Thirteen years ago I started to implement an anti-bias approach in my classroom and I am still not finished. I know it will be different every year because each year brings a new group of children and families, and I keep learning more.”*

Change is rarely easy. Often when changes need to be made, the implicit message is that what was being done before was wrong all along, or worse, harmful. It may be helpful to remember that prior to the change, the staff or parents were doing the best they could with the information at hand. Now there is new information, so new decisions can be made. This cycle is continuous: new information will become available, new decisions will be made based on the most current information, and then change will happen again.

Respectfully listening to differing viewpoints is part of the process. But it may or may not guarantee full participation by everyone. Not all adults will fully buy in to every modification of policy and philosophy. Authentic change cannot be forced, so the process usually takes time.

A dynamic holiday policy is an opportunity to share perspectives and bond with all partners in the care and education of children. A written policy ensures that staff and teachers can explain why they celebrate the holidays they do. While nothing is guaranteed, creating a holiday policy will lessen the possibility of children and families being left out of celebrations. The construction of a holiday policy can help an early childhood setting examine values and beliefs and perhaps form a stronger community relationship.

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