

Culture & Traditions

Anti-Bias Curriculum Goals for Early Care & Education Family Excerpts from An Anti-Bias Guide to Enjoying Holidays in Early Childhood Programs by Julie Bisson (1997)

The Early Care & Education Lab embraces an anti-bias curriculum and philosophy in our program. It is our hope that after reading this information and completing this form that you'll better understand a very important part of our program's philosophy. For us, the teaching team, the children become our "school family." We can't even begin to imagine ever intentionally excluding a member of our family as we carefully select our curriculum. We strive to present curriculum in a manner that is inclusive of our entire school family rather than presenting curriculum that only the majority of our children and families would feel comfortable exploring. My experience is that regardless of the each family's belief system around culture and traditions, when we plan and present curriculum in a manner that is sensitive and respectful to everyone, we all have the opportunity to learn about our world.

In summary, here are the goals of an anti-bias philosophy:

1. To foster a positive self-identify within the context of a group identity.
2. To facilitate knowledgeable, empathic interactions with people who are different from oneself.
3. To foster critical thinking about bias.
4. To help children stand up for themselves and others in the face of bias.

This approach reminds us to address first and foremost how we treat one another in our classroom. At our Early Care & Education site, we embrace all families including those who may need extra encouragement and support from all of us. We would never think of asking a family to leave our school because they didn't "fit in" or because their child was "causing problems" in the classroom. It is quite the opposite. Instead we would look at how all of us can help each family feel successful, valued, and respected in our setting.

I can remember with awe the day a parent came to me concerned about the interactions of one particular child in our classroom. She started out, "I come to you as an ally of this child . . ." I knew that she was committed to this child and our entire team as we worked to problem solve and not place blame on the family or the school. It is only when we stand truly united and not divisive that we work toward peace in our classroom, community, and eventually the world. Is it hard work? Yes! Can we feel extremely frustrated, powerless, and inadequate at times? Yes! Is every child worth the extra effort and time! A resounding YES!!

Holidays:

This is one of our more emotional parts of an anti-bias philosophy. More often than not, families report feeling incredibly excited and proud about their traditions. They also report cultural pressure that can possibly lead to fatigue due to the hurried rush of purchases, decorating the home, attending parties, and even financial stress during the "holiday" season. Traditionally in the educational setting, holidays have revolved around art activities, song, food, and fun resulting in finding that the underlying meaning of holidays is sometimes missing.

Over the last several years because I've been concerned that the reason for celebrating may be overlooked, I've asked adults what they liked about celebrating the holidays in the elementary school classroom here in the U.S. Here is what I hear most consistently from the adults: anticipation of the celebration; yummy foods; break from the daily routine of school; singing; dressing up in costumes; making arts and crafts; and family/friend connectedness. What I hear much less often are memories that include a connection to cultural roots, spirituality, religion, and values, and an understanding of the history. When asked more specific questions about why we engage in some of the rituals during the holidays, students have consistently reported that they aren't sure of the reasons and

don't remember their teachers sharing the history of the holidays. For example, why do some families carve jack-o-lanterns on October 31st or choose to celebrate and honor some of the saints?

In the educational setting, holidays sometimes are presented in a "tourist" approach leaving the children with a very limited view and understanding of the celebration. The "tourist" approach may inadvertently trivialize and stereotype a cultural group by implying that the only important thing about the group is a specific holiday and way the people in this group dress up, sing, dance, and eat special foods on this one holiday.

We can determine what children know and understand about their family's culture and tradition by asking them open-ended questions. For example, if you ask your child what s/he knows about Native American, what types of responses do you receive? Does the child report, "They kill people. They don't wear shoes or underwear. They dance a round a fire and go 'woo woo woo woo.'" If yes, then we know they are picking up negative stereotypes and we, in the classroom and at home, have some work to undo.

We would like to address the more profound meaning of holidays that bring us together and touch who we are in terms of our family, friends, values, and religion/spirituality. When you "celebrate" with us at our school, we are hoping that you will be feel connected by feelings of warmth, respect, validation, and community. Some of our established traditions in the classroom include our Stone Soup Luncheon, and end of semester picture show where we see pictures of all of the children and families. But . . . we are just waiting for a family to help us expand and add to our traditions in the Early Care & Education classroom.

Some things we probably won't do at our site include putting an emphasis on materialism (i.e. presents or goody bags) and desserts such as cupcakes. We do want to acknowledge the importance of these rituals and honor with respect and sensitivity the choices that families make outside of the educational setting.

To give you some ideas, one of the celebrations that is fairly consistent in our classroom is acknowledging the child's birth in our center on the day s/he was born. We encourage families to give the present of "time" to their child in the classroom by participating in the classroom for either a day or partial day. A family member can eat snack with their child, cook one of their child's favorite healthy foods, and bring in items that help to explore the "history" of the child's birth including information such as birth pictures, the child's height, weight, who was present at the birth and what did they say, how did the child receive his/her name, etc. Families have brought in two pieces of yarn, one representing the child's height at birth and a second piece representing the child's current height. Also, families have brought in a pumpkin, bag of oranges, bag of potatoes, and even a weight, representing the child's weight at birth. The pictures of the children as babies are amazing to view and we've seen our very healthy children start out life weighing anywhere from two to ten pounds. It would be fantastic to read the story of your child's birth and the naming of your child to the teachers, families, and children.

It is our hope that we don't lose culture and traditions that are important to the families enrolled in the Early Care & Education Family Lab. Families are invited and encouraged to be an active part of our classroom in planning and facilitating developmentally appropriate curriculum that places emphasis on family, values, and the history of the traditions that are an important part of your child's life.

Please fill out the attached form and submit with your enrollment forms.

Thank you,

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Culture and Traditions

Child's name: _____

1. List the names of the rituals, customs, traditions, holidays/celebrations that your family participates:

2. List some of the names of rituals, customs, traditions, holidays/celebrations that your family chooses not to participate:

3. Of the information listed in number 1, is there one you would you like to help the school present in the classroom utilizing developmentally appropriate curriculum?

4. Provide a short history of the topic that you selected in number three focusing on what would be important for children in your child's classroom to learn about the history.

5. Share one or two curriculum ideas related to your topic in number three that you might want to present in the classroom (i.e. teach a song, read a book, prepare a healthy food, present an art project):

6. When your child sneezes, how does your family respond?

7. Is there any other information that you would like us to know our your family's culture and traditions?