

Holidays and Anti-bias Education

Being Thoughtful and Creative

by Julie Bisson and Louise Derman-Sparks

*“If we use an anti-bias approach,
are we allowed to do holidays?”*

*“If I celebrate one holiday,
do I have to celebrate them all?”*

*“How do we include holidays
without offending anyone?”*

These questions, heard frequently from early childhood educators, spurred Julie to research and write *Celebrate! An Anti-Bias Guide to Enjoying Holidays in*



Julie has been working in the field of early learning for more than 30 years. She has been a teacher, director, college instructor, parent educator, consultant and trainer, and workshop presenter. Julie is the author of

Celebrate! An Anti-Bias Guide to Including Holidays in Early Childhood Programs. She is currently a director in the Seattle area and living her dream of leading with a vision and a core set of values, one of the most important of which is a commitment to social justice.



A Faculty Emeritus of Pacific Oaks College after 33 years of college teaching, Ms. Derman-Sparks previously worked with young children and families as a teacher and director.

Co-author of several books, she does keynote presentations, conducts workshops, and consults throughout the United States and internationally. She served on the Governing Board of NAEYC, has been a justice activist for 50 years, and has two grown children, who are human service professionals.

Early Childhood Programs (1998). Eighteen years later, while some anti-bias educators have made real progress integrating holidays into their curriculum, many early childhood practitioners still search for answers to these questions.

If We Use an Anti-bias Approach, are We Allowed to Celebrate Holidays?

Yes! Both the original and revised books about anti-bias education are clear about this point. For example, “Learning about holidays in school can broaden children’s awareness of their own and other’s cultural experiences, if they are *thoughtfully used as part of a more inclusive curriculum about cultural diversity* (Derman-Sparks et al., ABC Task Force, 1989, p. 86). Furthermore, “The topic of this [holidays] chapter is not deciding ‘Do I or don’t I include holidays in my curriculum?’ It is how to ground whatever holiday activities you do in the principles of anti-bias education” (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, pp. 135-136).

However, both editions of the ABE books *do* argue for critical thinking about using holidays effectively and fairly. This means recognizing that not everyone in a program celebrates the same holidays.

It requires understanding how national holidays reflect specific historic and cultural perspectives, and carry certain biases. An anti-bias approach also needs a thoughtful holiday policy, which addresses the complexities holidays pose, and integrates the four core goals.

Engaging in critical thinking to design a holiday policy takes ongoing discussions among staff and families. This work may spark disagreements and may become contentious. However, a ‘no-holiday’ policy does not avoid conflict, either. Some staff and families will likely disagree with that as well. By eliminating all holidays from the curriculum, we lose out on opportunities to understand cultural values and feelings and search for solutions congruent with a culture practicing diversity and fairness”

If I Celebrate One Holiday, Do I have to Celebrate All of Them?

Depends on what the questioner means by ‘all of them.’ An anti-bias program does not have to recognize every holiday in the United States or elsewhere. It does need to recognize those holidays celebrated by the families and staff, because “invisibility erases identity and experience; visibility affirms reality” (Derman-

Sparks & Edwards, 2010, p. 32). However, this principle does not mean *every* holiday each family and staff member observes. It *does* mean including at least one holiday that is important to each family — as well as the diverse ways families and staff celebrates the same holiday. It also means making a distinction between asking children to participate in celebrating a holiday versus inviting them to learn about someone else's holiday.

How Do We include Holidays without Offending Anyone?

The 'anyone' in this question usually encompasses the various adults who make up an early childhood program: teachers, families, other staff, and administrators. Realistically, it is not always possible to avoid doing exactly what everyone in your program wants. The goal is for staff and families to keep working together to create holiday activities that reflect the people in the program and that help foster the four core anti-bias education goals. Anti-bias solutions require everyone engaging in respectful dialogue, being open to fresh understandings that go beyond their individual perspectives, and flexibility to go beyond their own ways of doing holidays. When staff engage with each other and families in these ways, they are more likely to have ownership in the program's holiday policy and activities.

Digging Deeper

Including holidays as part of an anti-bias program is very doable, but not simple. As children, we first learn about the meaning and traditions of holidays from our families. This socialization comes with multi-layered emotional experiences, which cause both positive and negative feelings. Additionally, holidays have connections to the ethnic or national identity, values, and history of our family's cultural community. A critical or even a differing perspective about a specific holiday may feel like it undercuts

a person's ethnic or national identity and values.

Let us consider Mother's Day and Father's Day. On the surface they seem easy to do. However, the traditional approach to these holidays only recognizes one type of family, when acknowledging and respecting the diversity of family forms and parental roles is a fundamental anti-bias issue. One-parent; heterosexual two-parent; same-sex parents; grandparents as parents; blended, adoptive, foster, and extended families together make up a varied landscape. So, how do you consider this reality if you choose to do Mother's Day and Father's Day in your program? Do you continue to do traditional "make one card or gift for one mother and one father," like the teacher who told a child with two mothers that it was too expensive for her to make two paper plate handprints? Or do you call on your creativity to generate new activities that support all the families in your program and promote the understanding and appreciation that many kinds of families love and take care of their children?

Let us also apply anti-bias thinking to the holiday honoring Martin Luther King, Jr. What lessons do we hope children will gain from it? Do you talk about his being a 'man of peace,' or talk about his active resistance to injustices, albeit at a child's developmental ability? Do you portray Rosa Parks as spontaneously sitting down in the front of the bus, or as a long-time activist, and part of a community activism organization, who sat down as a part of a community strategy?

Staff and families in anti-bias education programs have to take into account multiple and sometimes emotion-fraught factors as they figure out how to teach about and celebrate holidays. Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays often spark the need to address emotions as well as issues. In any

program, some people will welcome opening up these anti-bias issues while others will be upset, and a few may feel it is an attack on who they are. Most will likely experience some cognitive and emotional disequilibrium. However, unless staff name and work through the issues and emotions connected to many holidays, doing them with an anti-bias perspective is not likely to happen.

What to Do?

What does a successful approach to holidays look like, and how do we get there? With so much to consider, it can be difficult to know where to begin.

The first step is to reflect critically on your current approach to holidays. This includes uncovering your own beliefs and feelings about specific holidays, identifying the messages your activities convey, considering concerns raised by families or staff, and reflecting on potential challenges to change in yourself, your classroom, and program. Also, ask yourself if you are open to changing your perspective, if you are willing to listen more than you talk, and if you are open to new and different practices. If the answer to those questions is yes, then familiarize yourself with anti-bias thinking about holidays in the curriculum (see Bisson, 2016; Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Ramsey, 2015). Now you are ready to begin new practices.

If you are a program leader, the next step is to initiate and facilitate a collaborative process for creating a holiday policy. Engage all teachers and staff in an initial meeting about shaping a new approach to holidays. Either in this initial meeting or soon afterwards, also invite families to help shape a new approach to holidays. Explain your commitment to ensuring that holidays reflect all the children and families and embrace the four anti-bias education goals. Ask for everyone's essential input and collaboration in the process

of change. One way to open conversation is to brainstorm a list of holiday benefits and challenges, while carefully attending to everyone's perspective, stories, and indicators of worries, anger, or agreement with change. Early meetings should develop understanding of each other's perspectives and begin to build a shared vision for holiday practices.

More conversations and planning sessions will necessarily follow. Your ultimate task is to create a holiday policy to guide your program's practices. This policy will include objectives for holiday activities, the process for deciding which holidays to include, guidelines for addressing the religious aspects of holidays, and meeting different family holiday requirements (see Bisson, 2016, for further discussion of issues and facilitation strategies).

Anti-bias Goals and Holidays

As a teacher, start using the four anti-bias education goals as a framework for constructing holiday activities (see box for goal descriptions). It is best to do this work in the context of a program anti-bias holiday policy. If this is not possible in your program, you can still use the anti-bias framework in your own classroom. Look for numerous further strategies and activities in *Celebrate: An Anti-bias Guide to Including Holidays in Early Childhood Programs* (Bisson, 2016), and in *Anti-bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves* (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010).

Anti-bias Education Goal One is about self and social group identity. Every child deserves to see herself in the classroom and evidence that her teachers understand what is important to her family. Holidays are one strategy for doing this, provided teachers also integrate other aspects of children's lives in all their diversity into daily practice. Use a variety of methods to learn what



Anti-bias Education Goals

- **Goal #1 — Identity**
Each child will demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social/group identities.
- **Goal #2 — Diversity**
Each child will express comfort and joy with human diversity, accurate language for human differences, and deep, caring human connections.
- **Goal #3 — Justice**
Each child will increasingly recognize unfairness (injustice), have language to describe unfairness, and understand that unfairness hurts.
- **Goal #4 — Activism**
Each child will demonstrate a sense of empowerment and the skills to act, with others or alone, against prejudice and/or discriminatory actions.

Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010



and how each family celebrates. With the families' support and, hopefully, direct involvement, bring at least one of each family's holidays into your curriculum. Invite families to come in to share about their special holidays, use persona dolls to tell stories about these important holidays, read children's books or make your own books with families and children.

Anti-bias Education Goal Two focuses on developing awareness, empathy, and enjoyment of diversity. It *builds* on identity development. For example, you can follow up discussions about children's

various favorite holidays by exploring how these are both similar and different. Children can also compare differing traditions when they all celebrate the same holiday. Learning about each other's holidays and traditions expands children's understanding of what is normal and valid. Immediately address any expressions of children's discomfort (laughing, making comments) as teachable moments.

Anti-bias Education Goal Three

addresses learning to identify and question misinformation and unfairness. Along with their positive messages, hurtful messages also exist in national holidays. The traditional Thanksgiving story presents U.S. history from only one perspective. Commercial interests equate celebrating with buying, especially during Christmas and Easter. Children whose families do not celebrate Christmas are invisible during that period. Children whose families celebrate Muslim holidays may be targets of hurtful comments. Without putting down any family's holidays, we can help children learn to recognize and reject unfair, hurtful images and messages while learning about accurate ones. For example, during the October/November period of Halloween and Thanksgiving, you can engage children in comparing the differences between true images and ideas about American Indians with stereotypical ones. We must protect the positive identity of children threatened by these messages, while also helping all children gain accurate information about each other.

Anti-bias Education Goal Four activities help children develop the disposition and skills to take action when facing unfairness. They work in tandem with Goal Three learning. You can:

- provide new ways to learn about or celebrate specific holidays.

- make your own accurate books with children and families about specific holidays.
- engage children in activities that make your program or school fairer for everyone during Martin Luther King Day and International Women's Day celebrations.
- invite children to dictate a letter to a card company requesting more diverse and accurate images on their holiday cards.

When program leaders, teachers, and families commit themselves to respectful, thoughtful exchanges of ideas and work together to create a holiday program that is respectful of everyone, we create something truly remarkable. It takes lots of conversations and practice listening to, learning from, and give-and-take negotiating with people in your program. What better modeling can we offer our children?

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