

# Considerations for Inclusive Holidays and Observances



Bigstock

Holiday celebrations are an excellent opportunity to provide a window into a culture or understand more about a group of people, as well as reinforce the diversity of all people’s experiences. Students can engage in rich educational experiences by reading about, researching and experiencing holidays.

In order to ensure that holidays and observances are truly educational, they also need to be inclusive and respectful. Below are some important considerations when planning holiday observances in your classroom or school.

## Consider *Your* Students

Consider the composition of your classroom and who celebrates which holidays. You might think differently about how you approach a holiday if no one in your class observes that day, only a few do or the majority of students do. Do not assume all students of a certain background know about and are interested in talking about a particular holiday and be careful not to place students in the position of being the “authority” or main possessor of knowledge about a holiday’s history and customs. For example, you can’t assume that an Asian American student is familiar with the origins of Lunar New Year or that every one of the Jewish faith recognizes Passover in the same way.

Some students (or families) may want to share knowledge around a holiday, and you may want to let them take the lead. Remember, they are speaking from their own experience and it can be helpful

to introduce any student presentations with the explanation that there is diversity in the ways people within a group observe different holidays and that this student will be sharing his/her unique way of observing it. Add to their presentation by conducting your own research to present the “bigger picture” about the holiday and supplement with additional information.

Be aware of the socio-economic implications of celebrating holidays. Do not assume that every child has the financial resources to bring elaborate decorations, buy gifts or wear a store bought costume. Consider how you can structure holidays so that all students can participate in the classroom without the need for purchased resources.

## **Stereotypes and Assumptions**

Be careful that holiday celebrations don't reinforce stereotypes about a group of people. When celebrating a cultural observance related to an ethnic group or heritage, don't focus only on the three Fs: festivals, fashion and foods. By focusing just on these items, schools can risk trivializing the culture's rich history and people's experiences, and reinforcing stereotypes that tends to exoticize or make “foreign” instead of showing the diversity within the culture and its place within the community.

Similarly, avoid using images, often found on worksheets or clip art, which reinforce one-dimensional portrayals of groups of people (e.g., Cinco de Mayo celebration images only featuring “sombreros” and other stereotypical elements of Mexican culture).

Other holidays which focus on “dress-up” can also bring stereotypes into the classroom. For example, Halloween and Purim both involve costumes. If students or adults wear clothing that portray stereotypes or denigrate another culture, be sure to address your concerns. Be proactive by addressing issues of stereotyping before the holiday, using it as an educational opportunity to discuss issues of stereotyping and discrimination or cultural appropriation. Examples might include discussing black face, Native American “costumes,” and the difference between dressing like an occupation (e.g. police officer) and a cultural group (Native American).

## **Rethink Restrictive Gender Norms around Family, Gender and Sexual Orientation**

Be aware of how some holidays can reinforce restrictive social norms around gender and sexual orientation. For example, as students get older and Valentine's Day becomes more focused on romantic relationships and not friendships, celebrations may reinforce heterosexist notions that all relationships are between a boy and a girl and marginalize LGBT or questioning youth, or youth who simply are interested in romantic relationships yet.

Other ways that gender norms can be reinforced are through dress up, costumes and performances, e.g. girls are princesses and boys are super heroes at Halloween or girls must wear dresses for cultural performances. If conducting a play or cultural performance related to a holiday, consider reinterpreting gender.

When talking about holidays and how students celebrate, don't make assumptions about family structures and family celebrations. For example children come from a vast variety of family structures, and Mother's Day and Father's Day celebrations can be difficult for children who do not have a father or mother (e.g., students who live in foster care, with grandparents, have a single parent, two moms or two dads).

## **Consider the Role of Religion**

School-sponsored activities should also focus on more than one religion and religious holiday. Depicting a diversity of beliefs and customs is important when teaching students about religion and culture. It also helps to ensure that public schools remain neutral and do not endorse, promote or denigrate any particular denomination or custom. Remember that schools may teach about religious holidays and festivals but should not engage students in activities that are akin to religious observance. For more information on this topic, see ADL's publication [Religion in the Public Schools](#).

Consider religious implications around holidays and that not all people may celebrate holidays because of their religious or personal beliefs. It is also important to provide students the opportunity to choose not to participate in activities they find offensive to their religious sensibilities in a way that is not marginalizing. A student's grades or school records must not be affected by a decision not to participate.

## **Go Beyond "The Norm"**

Are you representing holidays celebrated by the students in your class as well as exposing them to other cultural observances? Use our [Calendar of Observances](#) to discover observances and holidays which may add a new level of richness and exploration to children's knowledge. It can be an educational experience for your students to learn about many holidays, even and especially those of religions that are not represented in your class.

## **Connect to a Pedagogical Focus**

Use a specific holiday to explicitly talk and teach about bias, injustice and other social issues. For example, Labor Day provides an opportunity to talk about the issues and injustices towards working people throughout history. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day is a great time to discuss racism and the civil rights issues of those days and today. Columbus Day provides an opportunity to talk about the experience of indigenous populations and the effects of colonization.

With thoughtful consideration and planning, holiday classroom observances and celebrations can be inclusive, respectful, educational and fun.

---

Additional Resources:

Calendar of Observances, [www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/calendar-of-observances](http://www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/calendar-of-observances)

Religion in Public Schools, [www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/religion-in-public-schools](http://www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/religion-in-public-schools)

The December Dilemma: Navigating Religious Holidays in the Public Schools (webinar), [www.adl.org/education/resources/webinars/the-december-dilemma-navigating-religious-holidays-public-school](http://www.adl.org/education/resources/webinars/the-december-dilemma-navigating-religious-holidays-public-school)

Winter Holidays: December Dilemma or Teaching Opportunity?, [www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/winter-holidays](http://www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/winter-holidays)