

Genuine celebrations: Including cultural experiences in the program

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The *Belonging, Being and Becoming Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) for Australia* (2009) affirms children's cultural and linguistic heritages and rights. Many child care services undertake cultural celebrations and experiences throughout the year as part of the children's program. These experiences should reflect the interests of children and families in their service and/or the local community.

Cultural celebrations are an important element in acknowledging these rights and traditions. However, child care professionals can sometimes find it challenging to include cultural experiences in the program in genuine ways that avoid stereotyping individuals and groups or seem tokenistic.

The value of cultural celebrations and experiences

Incorporating relevant, culturally-based experiences and celebrations in children's programs presents many different learning opportunities, including:

- Fostering a sense of belonging and inclusion for every child, family and staff member (EYLF, p.7)
- Increasing children's understanding of, and respect for, diversity and differences (EYLF, p.13)
- Raising children's self-awareness and confidence
- Providing for children's holistic development (mind, body and spirit)
- Supporting a positive cultural identity for every child and family (EYLF, p.2).

Challenges in planning cultural celebrations and experiences

Child care professionals bring their particular cultural heritages and understandings to their work with children and families. An individual's personal and cultural backgrounds can make it difficult for them to understand culturally-based ways of being which are different from their own experiences. Cultural ways of being can influence diversity in child rearing practices, family celebrations and rituals and in community traditions.

Keeping up to date with the professional

This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 1.1, 1.4, 1.5 and 2.1 – 2.3

OSHCQA Principles: 1.1 – 1.3 and 3.1 – 3.3

QIAS Principles: 1.3 – 1.5 and 2.2

knowledge and skills that support planning for and engaging in culturally inclusive and meaningful programs is important in a culturally diverse society such as Australia. Unless child care programs are based on values of respect and inclusiveness there is a risk that cultural celebrations or experiences can be tokenistic or reinforce cultural stereotypes and foster prejudice.

Cultural tokenism. Tokenism occurs when cultural diversity and differences are not affirmed and embedded in every day practices in the program. It is tokenistic, for example, to focus on differences by having displays of cultural artifacts from other countries if you don't ensure that cultural artifacts or resources are evident in everyday practice and used by children in their regular play experiences. Cultural tokenism is also evident when programs use visitors or excursions as the key experiences for developing children's learning about cultural diversity and difference. These 'one off' events or activities can enrich children's learning about cultural diversity, but on their own, they are not a substitute for acknowledging diversity and differences in everyday practices.

Cultural stereotyping. Cultural stereotypes are reinforced when programs focus on culturally exotic or distant events or practices rather than on the everyday diverse ways that children and adults live in local communities. One way to think about stereotyping is to reflect on the question: 'What is a typical Australian way of living?' The many answers to this question show that it is not possible to define 'typical' in a broad context and trying to do so would stereotype the people of a very diverse nation.

Cultural similarities and differences

Another challenge when planning for culturally-based experiences is achieving a balance between a focus on similarities and differences across and within different cultures.



Acknowledging similarities across cultures can help children develop an understanding about issues that matter for many different groups of people such as valuing family, respect for elders, showing empathy for others who are hurt, or taking action when someone is treated unfairly.

However, a focus on similarities which ignores cultural differences is not a balanced and fair approach to programming. Ignoring cultural differences and diversity in child care programs sends a message to children that some differences are not valued or acceptable.

Practical strategies

The challenge of providing genuine and relevant cultural celebrations in programs can be met by using a range of strategies which have been identified in research and in practice-based evidence:

- Consult regularly with families, children, staff and community members to ensure that you know about and can respond appropriately to their cultural traditions
- Seek information from parents about family cultural celebrations or traditions via the service enrolment form and/or during enrolment interviews, as well as in daily conversations with families
- Develop service-based policies which underpin pedagogical decision making and ethical responsibilities. For example, a policy can state that the children's program will reflect the service's commitment to reconciliation
- Consult with children when planning celebrations as this helps to develop their sense of ownership, agency and belonging. The *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 12*

(1989), promotes children's right to be consulted on matters of importance to them

- Undertake regular cultural competence professional learning either individually or as a whole team
- Utilise resource agencies with expertise in cultural diversity and difference. Websites such as FKA's multicultural resource centre in Victoria (www.fka.com.au) are a good place to start
- Identify the celebrations that occur in your local community during the year. Collaborate with others to identify the ways children and families can be contributors to, and participants in, these community celebrations
- Involve children in all stages of planning and evaluation of cultural celebrations. For example, older children can write invitations or younger children can use drawing or painting as part of their response to these events
- Become familiar with children's literature which supports children's learning about and respect for cultural diversity
- Undertake an environmental and resources audit of your service to identify the aspects of cultural diversity which are visible to adults and/or available for children to use for play
- Be prepared to commit the time and the energy required to develop cultural competence for consulting, reflecting, planning, documenting and evaluating cultural celebrations and experiences.

Practical examples

There are many cultural celebrations which occur every year on specific dates which can be acknowledged within child care programs and adapted to local needs or interests. It is important to select festival or religious celebrations which are relevant for the children and families in your program as well as events which can raise awareness of other ways of being and belonging. For example:

- New Year traditions for different cultures such as Chinese, Greek or Vietnamese
- National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) week and National Aboriginal and Islander Children's Day celebrations
- Religious celebrations such as Eid ul Fitr at the end of Ramadan or Diwali, the Hindu Festival of Lights
- State or territory based cultural festivals
- Children's Week and Universal Children's Day

- Australia Day and National Day celebrations of other countries if relevant to children or adults at the service.

It is also important that child care professionals are inclusive of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. Regardless of whether there are children or adults involved in the service from these backgrounds, these cultures are key aspects of Australia's heritage, and a good place to start helping children to learn about, and be respectful toward, cultural diversity.

There are other types of cultural experiences which can be designed or adapted to meet the needs and interests of children, families and the local community and which can help to embed the celebration of cultural diversity and difference into everyday practice:

- Culturally-based naming or birthday traditions
 - Sharing Dreamtime stories from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures
 - Exploring the idea of 'home', 'family' or 'community' using stories, poetry, drama, puppets, songs, drawing, painting, photographs or writing for older children
 - Children's games which are linked to cultural celebrations such as Dreydl, a game played during the Jewish Hanukkah Festival of Lights (FKA Resource 2005, no.125, p.4)
 - Ensuring where possible, that everyday routines such as meal times, sleep and rest times and dressing reflect and respect local family cultural practices
- Exploring cultural diversity and differences through art and music. For example, colours, or media techniques have different meaning or are used in different ways for different purposes across cultures.

Conclusion

Educators honour the histories, cultures, languages, traditions, child rearing practices and lifestyle choices of families (EYLF, p.13).

Honouring the diversity of cultural ways of being through celebrations and other experiences requires professional commitment and practices based on:

- Deep respect for others and different ways of being and belonging in the world
- Recognition of the need to consult with children, families, staff and community members
- Cultural competence and leadership which supports reflection and action for renewal or change to ensure culturally relevant and meaningful practices ■

This article relates to EYLF Learning Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world

References and further reading

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