

Little Celebrations

Cultural and Holiday Celebrations in the Young Child Community

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TODDLER COMMUNITY GUIDE

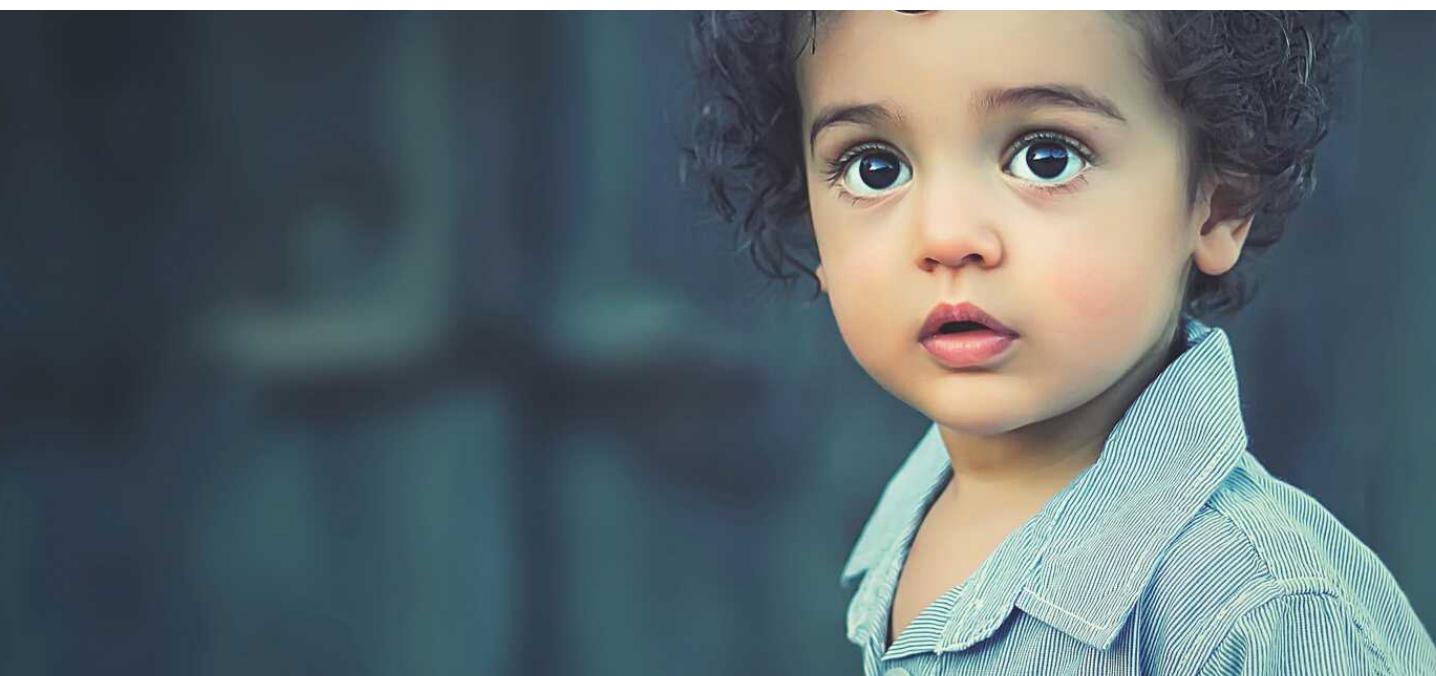
The child under three lives in a world that is entirely grounded in the reality of the present moment. There is very little past or future, only now. Many children will not recall the holidays, cultural celebrations and events of their first year when they join a toddler community, so when those dates and seasons roll around a second time the child is really experiencing it for the first time. A cultural celebration or tradition has meaning because you do it every year. For the child, it doesn't have meaning yet, so they won't miss it!

Holidays can be a confusing time for young children when the routines of daily life are interrupted and fantastical stories are shared. Why do we get candy on this night? Why do we get presents today? Who is this strange man coming down my chimney? Many families have important traditions around holidays and our traditions are often what connects us to loved ones far away so it is still important to honor them, but we must also be mindful of the young minds in our lives. In the classroom we are able to slow down and adjust to the pace of the child and discuss holidays and cultural celebrations in a way that the child can understand.

Halloween can be a scary time for a young child. When asked what he was going to be for Halloween one year a 2-year-old in my class looked at me inquisitively and replied enthusiastically 'I'm going to be me!'

Some children enjoy dressing up in costumes, and others find the strange outfits confusing and scary. Children in the toddler community are not yet using imaginative play, so pretending to be a character or animal doesn't make sense to them. In some classrooms Halloween is not addressed directly. We read books about pumpkins and apples, and sing songs that may include jack-o'-lanterns or costumes, but we do not talk about the holiday itself unless a child brings it up. If it comes up, we will answer with true and brief factual statements in response to the information the child provides. Other classrooms use this as an opportunity for Grace and Courtesy, offering the children a chance to practice knocking on a door and saying "trick or treat" and "thank you."

Thanksgiving is a holiday with a very complex history that is too much for a young child to understand. We share seasonal foods with the children in the weeks leading up to this day, and offer songs, books and stories about being thankful, coming together with loved ones, and cooking for our loved ones. I invite the children in my community to join me in preparing a pie that we share with their families on the last day before the holiday. We all discuss things that we are thankful for, or things that make us happy.



Winter holidays vary by community, but all involve light and changing light. This is a great thing for a young child to notice and honor. The decorations, stories, art supplies and other things in the classroom may change to involve themes of light. We do not introduce Santa or other mystical characters to the children. The young child needs information that is grounded in reality. If a child brings this information from home we address their statements with true and brief acknowledgements. We share songs such as "The Holly and the Ivy" or "Over the River and through the Woods" or "A Chubby Little Snowman." Some classrooms provide activities such as hanging ornaments on a felt Christmas tree or playing with dreidels, but this depends on the cultural makeup of your community. Again, this is a concrete Practical Life or Grace and Courtesy-based component of the holiday, not an imaginative story.

Birthdays are another event that holds meaning for the adults in a child's life, but very little meaning for the newly 2-year-old.

We ask students to bring a gift of a new book to our classroom and share it in a gathering. We sometimes sing a happy birthday song but do not have a formal birthday celebration. The young child does not mark the passage of time this way. When they wake up from a nap it is a brand new day, much less a whole trip around the sun!

Throughout all cultural celebrations and holidays we must consider the mind and needs of the young child. We can help them to acknowledge and appreciate the changing seasons and the changing natural world. We can provide a stable and consistent routine in the classroom during a potentially chaotic and stressful time at home. Of course, we do not deny the existence of holidays or tell the child not to discuss it at school. By providing a consistent environment and routine, we give the child space to process what they are experiencing at home, and share their observations and understanding of their families' culture in their own time. The gift of time is the most important thing we offer to children.