

INTO AFRICA



With Black History Month on the horizon, **Karen Hart** recalls an educational celebration that took place last year at one setting in Greenwich, and suggests ideas for those hoping to plan their own...

Black History Month (blackhistorymonth.org.uk), which takes place each year in October, is marked by preschool settings and schools throughout the country. It's a great opportunity for staff to involve children and families of all ethnicities in celebrating a range of different cultures in all sorts of ways. I know from personal experience: last October I was lucky enough to receive an invite to a Black History Month event at Charlton Family Centre, Greenwich – and what a great day we had. There were activities, games and dancing for everyone to enjoy, with the whole day feeling like a real celebration of the cultural diversity within the preschool group and wider community. A marquee had been erected next to the centre (as African weather seemed unlikely), the walls of which were decorated with beautiful Africa-inspired fabrics. Activity tables had been prepared ready for the preschoolers' arrival, with those on offer including mask- and musical instrument-making, dressing-up in African clothes and headgear tying for both children and adults. There were also truly delicious foods from a wide range of cultures to try.

When the children arrived, it was lovely to see so many had dressed in traditional cultural outfits; it meant they were well prepared to get stuck-in with the interactive African drumming and singing performance provided by Global Fusion Music and Arts (globalfusionarts.co.uk). You couldn't help but join in with the drumming and dancing; there were beats to copy, African songs to learn and sing along to, and lessons in creating percussion music – making swishy rain sounds by softly scratching a drum, beating fast and slow rhythms, and

using flats of hands and fists to change the sounds produced.

The African weaving activity proved very popular. Staff had created mini looms from wool and shallow boxes, and provided lots of brightly coloured paper strips for the weaving – children were very impressed with their results. My favourite activity, however, was found on the 'dream clouds' table. Here, children each took a little card cloud shape and decorated it before adding their own personal dream – in honour of civil rights activist Martin Luther King's famous 'I have a dream...' speech. Of course, their writing was only scribble writing, but that somehow made them all the better!

The day finished with a big buffet of amazing foods from a range of black cultures, all made and donated by parents and carers from the group. I was amazed to see such young children willing to try so many new foods – and clearly enjoying them.

The whole event was one big, noisy, fun-filled celebration, with everyone getting into the spirit of celebrating not just cultural diversity but, ultimately, the fun of singing, dancing and eating together with friends.

Getting involved

Perhaps you already have plans for this year's Black History Month, or perhaps you are looking for some inspiration. For those in either camp, here are some Africa-inspired ideas that can supplement your own or form the basis of an exciting and educational celebration in their own right. I've chosen the following activities because they all require minimal resources and are really easy to set up. They're also all tried and tested and deliver good results and fun!

Children each took a little card **cloud shape** and added their own **personal dream** – in honour of Martin Luther King's famous 'I have a **dream...**' speech



African masks

Children love finding new ways to paint and I found that using cotton buds with this activity worked really well. Have some pictures of real African masks available for children to have a look at for inspiration (you'll find lots online).

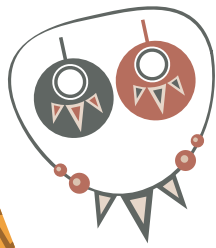
You will need:

- 1 paper plate per mask
- Brown and yellow paints in shallow dishes
- 1 short stick per mask (for holding it up)
- String, wool or feathers for decoration
- PVA glue
- Sticky tape
- Scissors



Method:

Pre-draw very simple African-style features on each paper plate, cutting out eye-holes. Show your children how to decorate their masks by dipping a cotton bud into the brown and yellow paints and making dot designs. Next add some hair made from feathers, lengths of string, or wool. Finish off by using sticky tape to fix a short stick to the back of each mask for holding on to.



Bead threading

Bead jewellery plays a big part in the lives of many men, women and children right across Africa, with the Kwanzaa necklace being particularly significant. Kwanzaa is a celebration of family, community and culture. Annual, week-long (26 December to 1 January) celebrations, which take place across America, are held in honour of African heritage and culture.

Kwanzaa bead necklaces are worn in celebration of all things African, and are made with beads in the traditional holiday colours: black - to symbolise the people of Africa; red - to remind people of the African people's struggles for freedom; and green - to symbolise growth.

You will need:

- Coloured drinking straws
- Dried pasta tubes
- Coloured poster paint
- String or elastic for threading
- Play-dough (optional)

Method:

You can make painting the pasta a fun activity in itself by threading the pasta tubes onto drinking straws and standing them upright in play-dough, making them easy to paint as they spin round. Once the pasta pieces are dry, help the children thread the coloured pasta onto lengths of string or elastic, long enough to fit over the head as a necklace. Alternatively, cut lengths of coloured or stripy straws and thread these to make your necklace.

This activity can be used to demonstrate pattern building. Show children how to make a repeating pattern by threading a sequence of different colours. To make the traditional Kwanzaa necklace, you will need to paint pasta tubes red, green and black, threading the colours alternately.



Khamsa hands

Traditional North African khamsa amulets are made of leather, brass or silver and are decorated with beads, coins and little pieces of coral. The name 'khamsa' means 'five', and these five-fingered amulets are popular good luck charms right across North Africa.

You will need:

- Coloured paper card
- Sequins, stickers, felt-tipped pens and little collage scraps
- Glue
- Thin ribbon or string

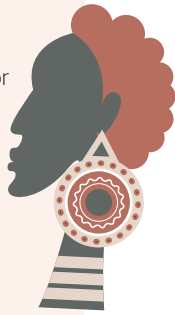
Method:

Fold the paper in half and help children trace around their hands. Cut them out to create two hand shapes. You can decorate the outside surfaces of hand shapes with, for example, sequins, stickers and scrap box decorations. Finally, glue the hand shapes together with a little loop of ribbon or string between them for hanging.



Collar necklaces

I first saw these made at a Black History Month library craft event for young children. They are inspired by both the beaded necklaces of the Samburu Tribe and the traditional ornate collar necklaces of ancient Egypt. They're so easy to make, and children enjoy making their individual.



You will need:

- 1 pre-cut paper plate per necklace.
- Brightly coloured felt-tipped pens (alternatively, use little squares of coloured gummed paper)

Method:

Simply cut the middle from the paper plates to create a collar shape, leaving just a slit for putting round the neck. Leave the ribbed section intact. Next, let children decorate their collars as they wish. It might be nice to have a couple of pre-made examples decorated in an authentic style (have a look at some examples on the Internet) for children to look at, but this age group can just have fun using their imaginations.

Cotton bowls

Native African tribes are well known for their beautiful, colourful hand-woven baskets - these bowls are much easier to make but still look great, and proved very popular when I made them with a group of nursery children.

You will need:

- 1 paper-card bowl per child (the disposable type you use at parties)
- Lots of pre-cut squares of scrap fabric, the more colourful and interesting the better
- Glue
- Spreaders or old paintbrushes for gluing (paintbrushes are easier to use here)



Method:

This is a good activity for letting children just 'have a go' with the glue on their own, as they can't go far wrong. The fabric squares can be used to decorate both the inside and outside of bowls. Put a couple of little sweets in each bowl at the end of the day as a special treat!

about the author

Karen Hart is a freelance writer and reviewer, a teacher of speech and drama education (LSDE) and a qualified preschool practitioner.