

Simple celebrations

Marking the year's major festivals presents invaluable learning opportunities, but needn't dominate your setting's schedule, says **Barbara Isaacs...**

Hevery year, early years settings prepare to celebrate the Christmas season by making all sorts of gifts and cards, and organising performances for parents. For many, the frenzy of preparation will start soon after the autumn half-term and will continue until the children leave for their Christmas break. I believe it does not have to be like that, and want to suggest a few simple ways in which we can rethink how we celebrate this festival, and others, in our settings, to better suit the 2-4-year-olds who make up the lion's share of our intake.

Traditionally Christmas is a Christian festival and can be celebrated through stories as is the case with the Diwali, Chinese New Year or Eid celebrations. You can focus on the birth of Jesus, in a way that will bring the story to life for young children, by introducing props, or a story sack, to set up a Nativity. Learning Christmas carols always proves popular, and the children in my nursery loved singing 'Jingle Bells' at every opportunity (not just at Christmas!).

You might also want to introduce a small Christmas tree, no bigger than 12-15 inches tall, and give children an opportunity to decorate it at their leisure. Tiny decorations are easy to take off, so each day many children can take a turn. This is not only a wonderfully creative activity for this age group, but also enhances their fine motor skills and language, too, as many children deliver a monologue that describes their intentions and thoughts as they proceed with their creations.

One year at my nursery we attempted to make a Christmas cake: the most fun was had weighing and mixing all the ingredients, while baking the large cake was also an adventure. However, creating individual little cakes with appropriate decoration for 20 children proved to be a real challenge, and the event was not repeated again - particularly as the nursery numbers grew and we would have needed two large cakes rather than one. On the other hand the aforementioned small Christmas tree, just one foot high, came out year after year and the decorations were always admired and enjoyed. Child after child

made a tree to his/her liking, changing the arrangements of the decorations on a regular basis and enjoying taking photos, which we then used in helping them to make their own Christmas cards.

These celebrations of Christmas also gave us an idea for designing an activity for Chinese New Year. We collected models representing all the animals symbolising the Chinese horoscope. These were then lined up in a procession according to the Chinese calendar. We made a photographic frieze of the right sequence of these animals, which helped the children to organise the animals in the correct sequence as well as memorise the animals that were relevant to them and to their families. We always made a graph of who was born under which sign and shared with them the characteristics of each animal as described in the Chinese legend. The celebrations of the Chinese New Year also meant that we could make some fried rice and practise our use of chopsticks, dress up in red brocade pyjamas and dance with the Chinese lion. Fortune cookies were favourite take-home treats at the end of the celebrations.

Similar activities were linked with the celebrations of Diwali, my nursery's children making Rangoli patterns and little divas decorated with glitter and sequins, and tasting Diwali sweets brought into the nursery by the parents, whilst we learned the story of the Festival of Light.

None of these ideas are original, of course; but I hope they will remind all practitioners that in the early years we must promote respect and understanding for all cultures, so that we sow seeds of understanding, harmony and peaceful co-existence. As I write this piece, I feel more than ever before that this ethos of Montessori's philosophy needs to be promoted -

not only because of the current strife in the world, but also because of the pressures put upon early years practitioners to promote the values of the current education policy. It is my belief that the young children in our nurseries are growing up in an ever-changing world, one in which humanistic values of respect for every living creature and the planet need to be advocated so that we can thrive in the future.



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