

## Resource Sheet

# CELEBRATIONS, HOLIDAYS AND SPECIAL OCCASIONS

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*As of 1 January 2013, Gowrie Victoria commenced as the Professional Support Coordinator (PSC) for Victoria. Gowrie Victoria is committed to ensuring continuity of quality support to services and has commenced a planned transition to ensure this occurs. As part of this transition, and in partnership CCC, services can access a number of resources as developed by CCC.*

# CELEBRATIONS, HOLIDAYS AND SPECIAL OCCASIONS

*By Anne Stonehouse*

Rituals or traditions, experiences shared regularly, contribute to a sense of community and belonging, as do celebrations that are handled sensitively. These can be valuable for children, families and educators. Both the planning and preparation, and the events themselves, can be satisfying and pleasurable experiences.

## Holidays

While it is important to acknowledge holidays in a children's service, there are a number of issues to be aware of. Not everyone celebrates the same holidays. Christmas and Easter, for example, have their origins in Christianity and are not universally observed. Some families may acknowledge the secular aspects of Christmas, and are happy for their child to participate in the celebrations in the service.

It is crucial to know families' views, respect them and avoid either a child participating in something the family objects to, or creating a situation in which a child is singled out or left out. Discussing holidays and celebrations with families and allowing them to influence what happens is important. Among people who celebrate the same holidays there is usually variation in how they celebrate. Avoid stereotypes that assume conformity where it does not exist. Exploring different ways families celebrate holidays and their rituals can be a very interesting and meaningful way for children to learn about similarities and differences. They are likely to be fascinated by differences in how people live.

There are other potential risks from celebrating holidays from various cultures. Too much attention to festivals and holidays in cultures other than their own can leave children with the impression that people from those cultures spend all their time celebrating holidays!

It is important for children to learn to respect differences of many kinds, but emphasising the exotic often does not achieve this, as it stresses the unusual. Too much emphasis on holidays and festivals in other cultures can be tokenistic. Treating aspects of cultures as curious and unusual, or

approaching some holidays as 'normal' and others as 'different', can decrease understanding and acceptance, which is the opposite to what we would want to happen.

*'Special occasions are celebrated in ways that recognise, respect and strengthen children's appreciation of diversity and difference'* (DEEWR, 2009, p. 72).

Being sensitive to other issues such as family composition is crucial. Acknowledging Mothers' Day and Fathers' Day needs to be done with care, with sensitivity to the composition of each child's families. Again, dealing with that in a way that doesn't single a child out as different is important. Many holidays and celebrations have a strong materialistic component – typically a focus on gifts. When discussing holidays such as Christmas or celebrations such as birthdays or name days, avoid emphasising gifts and talking about what children received or hope for. In fact, an appropriate emphasis is the opposite – that is, viewing a holiday as time to think about doing something kind for others, giving instead of receiving. Keep in mind that, particularly with major holidays such as Christmas, there may be a lot of focus on the celebration with preparations being made at school, at home and in the community. If this is the case, treating it in a low-key way in the children's service would be desirable. The excitement and anticipation can wear thin with some children, who may be grateful for some respite!

### **Celebrating special occasions**

In general, it is probably more valuable for the service; children, families and educators – to create their own celebrations rather than focusing a great deal of attention on holidays. A special occasion worth celebrating can include a new child in the service, an achievement such as learning to swim or being able to read a whole book without help, farewelling an educator (or auxiliary staff member) or welcoming a new one, an educator getting married or graduating from university, the return of a child who has been away for an extended time, a confirmation, or a baby born into the family of one of the children. Focus on milestones in children's and educators' lives and the life of the children's service.

*'... give equal consideration to the 'distance-travelled' by individual children and recognise and celebrate not only the giant leaps that children take in their learning but the small steps as well'* (DEECD, 2009, p. 17).

Events in the community can be the focus of celebrations. The changing of the seasons lends itself to celebrations, as can the build up to the AFL Grand Final. These kinds of celebrations can help children tune in to the world around them. Encourage children to suggest causes for celebration. Involve them in planning and preparing for them. Keep in mind that low-key celebrations are good – the feelings and spirit that characterise them matter much more than how lavish the celebrations are. Think of ways to involve children with different skills and talents in preparations for a celebration.

Take care with celebrating birthdays, as not all families do this. Again, find out from families what they celebrate, and ensure that no child is left out or singled out in a way that causes discomfort. Think also about rituals – perhaps once a month acknowledge all the birthdays or name days that have happened that month, or in the regular group meeting draw attention to who is missing, or twice a year organise with the children a social occasion for families. These kinds of small acts are the glue that holds a group together.

Be sure to document celebrations so that everyone can recall and relive them. They become part of the record of the life of the service. And keep them in perspective – attention to holidays and celebrations should be just one choice among a number that children have in the service.

## References and further reading

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) 2009, *Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*, DEEWR, Barton, ACT.

Department of Human Services (DHS) 2004, *Shared Visions: Resource Kit for Outside School Hours Care*, Department of Human Services, Melbourne.

Refer to:

Chapter 2: A vision and way of thinking

Chapter 5: Relationships

Chapter 6: Planning and evaluating OSHC programs

Factsheet 10: Encouraging positive relationships among children

Factsheet 12: Documentation and planning