

‘Christmas is Welcome Here’



I would love to see this sign more often in Children’s Services along with the familiar multilingual signs for ‘Welcome’ and ‘Hello’. It is so sad that some children’s services give up on inclusion deciding it’s too hard and consciously or unconsciously exclude everything in the name of ‘fairness’ to all.

Finding a homogenous picture of Christmas that fits all just isn’t possible. As educators and carers of children we have an obligation to explore what each family and community culture finds meaningful. Acceptance is crucial to this as is bound to encompass a diverse range of experiences. Families in our services need to feel accepted and encouraged to celebrate and share their unique cultures, including mainstream, indigenous and ethnic.

The richness of diversity in Multicultural Australia has *added* many diverse and meaningful celebrations that are not left behind in a foreign country but are very significant for large numbers of people who are Australian. They are no less Australian because of this, but offer the experience as a genuine contribution to the advancement and well being of Australia for all. There is no secret ‘take over’ happening of traditional festivals.

So why the fear? Many parents are driven by the best of intentions to preserve the image of Christmas that they grew up with and faithfully present it for their children and family to share. Some parents may not have had the opportunity as a child to celebrate in ways they wished, so want to ensure their children don’t miss out. So well-intending and precious are these notions, that shock and horror result if a faithfully preserved image is questioned. Mainstream culture can influence systems to be defensive and protective to the extent of rejection of all others. Sensationalist newspaper reports often reflect this.

Questioning and reflection is always important, it can lead to empathy for the frightened child forced to have a photo taken with Santa. We can also begin to identify the clever marketing of Christmas to the vulnerable who get trapped into debt each year or we may begin to wonder why some tolerate obligatory gatherings with people who mean little to them.

Carers and educators of children need to explore the rich significance of Christmas and its celebrations the world over. While the birth of Jesus represents the original meaning of Christmas, if snow flakes, holly and Santa are important to your staff and families, then embrace these symbols in your services.

The only things that need be 'banned' are negative and critical outlooks that put constraints on happy occasions. In the same spirit of sharing and goodwill to all people, carers and educators need to understand the significance of other culturally diverse celebrations. Acknowledge these in appropriate ways that will be relevant to children.

What a powerful message for peace and harmony if we extended our understanding and celebrating to other significant festivals and celebrations, such as Chanukah, Tet, Diwali, Holi, Id Ul-Fitr, Id Ul Adha, Muharram, Rosh Hashanah and others.

It is tiring to hear and read each year about misinformed and negative articles about Christmas being 'banned'. I like many others believe that children's services can move beyond this and provide leadership in our society for global peace and harmony, as it is the most important challenge our children will face in the future.

The International Year for the Culture of Peace 2000 left us with a simple truth: *The giving of acceptance to others is additive*. In accepting others we don't lose any respect for ourselves or what we personally believe in. Many people need to feel acceptance first before being able to reflect it.

Children's services are an excellent place to start.



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