



Information for Families and Staff

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FOCUS on Early Childhood Mental Health

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NURTURING THE NATURAL CURIOSITY OF CHILDREN



In the introduction to a collection of *Curious George* books, the editor quotes one person's response about why he liked the books: "George did all the things we didn't dare to do, so we could do them in our imagination and not be scared." Curiosity, especially when mixed with courage and imagination, helps us understand our world and is something to encourage in our children right from the start.

WHY CURIOSITY IS IMPORTANT

- Helps children develop their whole selves, including their minds
- Provides answers to many of the mysteries of daily life: What happens when I do that?
- Increases children's potential to learn new things and builds confidence in the ability to learn and grow
- Enhances children's ability to be open-minded and tolerant of different ways of handling challenges
- Contributes to their enjoyment and awareness of the world

HOW CURIOSITY FADES

- Fear—when a child is afraid, she won't explore and will stick with the familiar
- Disapproval—when a child hears "Don't" all the time, his desire to experiment will decrease
- Absence—when a child doesn't have a caring adult to share his new experiences or offer safety when trying new things, he may stop trying

HOW TO ENCOURAGE THE NATURAL CURIOSITY OF CHILDREN

- Show your own interest in what's happening in your world
- Encourage children to pursue their own interests (music, play, books)
- Answer questions simply, clearly, factually, and in keeping with the child's developmental stage
- Ask open-ended questions (How do you feel about ___? Why is green your favorite color?)
- Redirect a child's interest but don't discourage it (e.g., if he likes to pour his cup of water on the floor, provide opportunities to experiment with water in the bathtub or backyard)
- Provide toys that encourage a child's imagination and aren't limited in their use
- Praise a child's discoveries of new things and efforts to master new skills
- Encourage children to explore their natural surroundings and look for answers to their own questions

RESOURCES

- "Tips on Nurturing Your Child's Curiosity," Zero to Three; <http://tinyurl.com/3feyuzk>
- "Emotional Development: Curiosity—The Fuel of Development," by Bruce Perry, M.D.; <http://tinyurl.com/nss2gu>
- "Five Ways to Develop Your Child's Curiosity," ETL Learning; <http://tinyurl.com/3wvnm6>



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Pennsylvania Early Childhood Mental Health Advisory Committee
Ensuring that coordinated and effective mental health services are available for all young children across the commonwealth

FOCUS on Early Childhood Mental Health factsheets: www.parecovery.org
Pyramid Model graphic courtesy of the Center for the Social and Emotional Foundations of Early Learning

ANTI-BIAS EDUCATION: HOLIDAYS & FAIRNESS- HALLOWEEN



Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves, by Louise Derman-Sparks and Julie Olsen Edwards, provides practical guidance to confronting and eliminating barriers of prejudice, misinformation, and bias. Most importantly, the book includes tips for helping staff and children respect each other, themselves and all people. Individual chapters focus on culture and language, racial identity, gender identity, economic class, family structures, different abilities, holidays, and more.

Many early childhood educators have questions about how to approach the holidays. *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves* offers useful information and tools for teachers as they consider the specific families in their program. The following text is excerpted from the chapter titled “Learning About Holidays & Fairness.”

The October–December Push

The three national holidays of Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas are the ones that most often appear in early childhood programs. They bring pleasure to many families and staff, as well as to children. However, they also pose a range of challenges for many families. Whether or not to include any of them in your curriculum, and what activities to use if you do, requires thoughtful decision making.

Halloween

Many children have fun every year celebrating Halloween in their neighborhoods, schools, and early childhood programs. At the same time, however, its pagan origins and associations with witches, ghosts, and evil make Halloween problematic for some families, including some fundamentalist Christian, Jehovah’s Witness, and immigrant families. Still other families do not like the traditional gorging on sugar that follows trick-or-treating, or they no longer allow their children to go out at all because of their fears about possible harm. Commercialism also has turned Halloween into a time when parents feel pressured to buy expensive candy and ready-made costumes that sometimes are inconsistent with their values or budgets. In addition, children under 4 may find some of the costumes frightening. For one or more of these reasons, some early childhood programs decide not to include Halloween in their curriculum or to modify how they do Halloween activities.

Designing new ways to do Halloween activities

Take into account approaches and concerns of specific families, adapt your activities, or create new ones.

- **Involve children in making Halloween masks** (and perhaps costumes). Display the finished masks in the classroom or let children wear their costumes for a parade at school. Besides helping to reduce the emphasis on commercial costumes and masks, this activity is a way of lessening the fears many preschoolers have of the masked figures that appear on Halloween.
 - **Provide a Halloween substitute.** If some families do not want their children engaged in any traditional Halloween activities, consider creating an alternative celebration. For example, substitute dress-up costumes that children put together from the program’s costume and scarf box and have a parade. Here’s what Debbie Ravaçon’s program did:
 - *When I started as director, I wanted to change our traditional Halloween practice of taking the children in costumes around the college to get candy. Children got scared, some families kept their children home that day, and the quantity of candy violated the center’s commitment to healthy eating. The staff struggled with what to do because they enjoyed the activity themselves. Eventually, we agreed on doing a child-made funny hat parade around the college, with no candy. We also let the whole college know why we made these changes.*