



CEIEC

Centre for Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood C.E.I.E.C  
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## CEIEC Equity Issues Paper

### Santa in early childhood services - what's the fuss?

A Brisbane early childhood centre received an anonymous death threat on 3 December 2002. On that day, "The Australian" had reported that the centre has excluded Santa Claus from its Christmas celebrations for the past two years, as part of its policy of making people from every culture feel equally at home at the centre. "The Australian" report accompanied reports by newspapers in Victoria that several early childhood centres in that state had 'banned Santa Claus'.

*What issues do early childhood staff face in deciding whether to involve Santa in their end of year celebrations?*

#### Issue 1: Santa can be culturally exclusive

Many early childhood educators have argued for some time that an early childhood centre that celebrates only Christmas denies its children the opportunity to learn about the full range of Australia's cultures. Concentrating on celebrations in one culture – whichever it is – at the expense of all the others stops us understanding and respecting other cultures and it invites intolerance and discrimination.

Australia is a society with many cultures, races and religions and its rich tradition of tolerance and fairness has grown as its diversity has grown. In some early childhood centres, staff and parents have tried to continue that tradition of fairness by avoiding celebrations specific to one culture that could potentially exclude people from other cultures. Christmas is one such celebration.

"The committee and staff felt it was not appropriate to have Santa for equity and cultural and religious reasons and chose instead to have a performer come and party with the children for the end of the year. We, too, received hate mail and death threats. *An early childhood teacher.*

#### Some questions facing early childhood communities:

- Should we avoid all celebrations that are culturally and/or religiously specific?
- Should we include diverse cultural and religious celebrations in our centres throughout the year, including at Christmas time?

#### Issue 2: Santa can promote the commercialisation of Christmas

In a society where Christmas is the peak period of commercial activity, Christmas and Santa have become associated with commercialism, acquisitiveness and competitiveness. This can be difficult for families living in poverty. Many charities support a growing number of people for whom a 'traditional' Christmas is increasingly beyond their means and for whom "If you're good, Santa brings you what you want" is a burden, not a promise.

I have thought for a long time that the materialism of Christmas has become the predominant theme of Christmas in Australia. When I was teaching, I encouraged the children to think more of giving than receiving at this time of the year, eg. making gifts for family and local elderly people. *A Victorian Children's Services Development Officer.*

Some questions facing early childhood communities:

- Should we promote the commercial aspects of Christmas?
- Should we promote the religious nature of Christmas?
- Should we actively promote giving rather receiving as the spirit of Christmas?

**Issue 3: Santa can counter 'Stranger Danger' programs**

Child safety and protection programs tell children not to talk to strangers. Yet at Christmas, many children are encouraged to talk to a man in a red suit and with a white beard whom they have not met before and whom some children find frightening and distressing.

Some questions facing early childhood communities:

- Should we encourage children to talk to this particular stranger?
- Should we invite Santa in when we know many young children cry or feel fearful or anxious about him?

**Responding respectfully to the issues**

A respectful response to the questions about Santa in early childhood services starts by respecting the diverse ways in which families understand Christmas and its role in their lives. In practice, this can mean, for example:

- avoiding Christmas altogether
- concentrating on the religious and ceremonial aspects of Christmas
- emphasising the giving of gifts rather than the receiving of gifts
- leaving families to decide about Santa. If families take their children to meet Santa, rather than Santa visiting the centre, no child will feel excluded from Santa's visit because they have a different culture with different celebrations. If families want their children to meet Santa, he's in most shopping centres for weeks before Christmas. Leaving families to decide means that they can choose whether they want their children to talk to a strange man whose appearance often frightens them! This doesn't condemn poor Santa, it just reminds us that meeting Santa counters the message, "Don't talk to strangers" and isn't always the happy time we want it to be.
- inviting families to share their end of year rituals and celebrations with each other. For example:

We are having an end of year concert which relates to the program, "The Rhythm of Life: Rituals, traditions and celebrations". We are collecting data on all kinds of rituals and celebrations from families, which we then discuss in a large group, and display. As most of our children do celebrate Christmas and more than half are Catholic, we even have a Nativity on the Interest Table this week, along with other displays of how other cultures celebrate Christmas, and what the meanings of Christmas may be. *A Victorian early childhood worker.*

## Respectful resolution of the issues: some principles

### *With the parents*

- Clarify your own ideas on Christmas, on Santa's role in Christmas and the issues it raises – why would you celebrate Christmas with young children, what could they learn, and who would gain from it?
- Talk with colleagues about how they manage Christmas celebrations and Santa's role – ask colleagues how they came to their decisions.
- Reflect on ways to make Christmas meaningful to young children – if you believe that it's important to celebrate Christmas in an early childhood setting what is the most meaningful way to do so?
- Before Christmas, discuss with families how you will approach Christmas and Santa – ask families if they celebrate Christmas at home and if they believe it should be celebrated in your service?
- Reflect on the effects of including Santa in your celebration for each child and family in your group - ask yourself how included or excluded will specific families and children feel? Who will benefit most?
- Decide the most respectful and inclusive way to handle celebrations in your service at this time of year and other times of the year.

### *With the children – if Christmas is to be celebrated in your service*

- Encourage children to share with each other their ideas and feelings about the different ways they celebrate this time of the year
- Ensure that each child has accurate information about Christmas
- Honor each child's family celebrations (or lack of them) by talking with children about the different ways that people understand Christmas
- Emphasise the values behind the celebration, not its commercial aspects
- Avoid stereotyping in your celebrations, including gender-stereotyped roles and gifts for children or families.

Each centre's attitude to Christmas should reflect the views of its staff, its parents and its children. A high-quality centre adapts to the changing needs and wishes of its specific staff, parents and children. Requiring it to celebrate any particular festival or event prevents it from doing so.

### An aside about Christmas and its origins: for reflection

(Some) of the Christmas customs that we observe today have their roots in pagan ceremonies that developed long before the birth of Christ. Both the midwinter festival of Yule in northern Europe and the Saturnalian midwinter holidays in southern Europe contained elements which have connotations with the modern Christmas. For example, Saturnalian celebrations which noted the passing of the old year and paid homage to the new Year included much feasting and drinking, as well as the exchange of presents. ... In addition ritual fires and the use of evergreens were important factors in ceremonies which were partly designed to placate the gods and ensure the return of the waning sun. (Golby, 1981, p. 13)

In England, .. legislation was passed in 1647 (during the Puritan revolution) stating that all festivals and holidays which had 'superstitious' connotations should not be observed. This, of course, included Christmas. (Golby, 1981, p. 14)

The Restoration in 1660 ensured that the laws against Christmas were relaxed. But Christmas did not return to becoming the popular festival that it had been in the previous century... Christmas became one of many holidays, rather than an exceptional event. (Golby, 1981, p. 16)

**For further discussion and/or information CONTACT:**

- Elizabeth Dau, Early Childhood Consultant, Adelaide and CEIEC member.  
e-mail: [ingtrain@senet.com.au](mailto:ingtrain@senet.com.au)
- Diana Hetherich, Early childhood teacher. [dianajh@optusnet.com.au](mailto:dianajh@optusnet.com.au)
- Glenda Mac Naughton, Associate Professor of Early Childhood and Director of the University of Melbourne's Centre for Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood. e-mail: [gmmac@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:gmmac@unimelb.edu.au) Tel.: (03) 8344 0985

Resources, references and further reading

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Contributors to this CEIEC issues paper: Elizabeth Dau, Patrick Hughes, Glenda Mac Naughton, Diana Hetherich and Judy Baird.

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