



## TEACHING RACIAL TOLERANCE, UNDERSTANDING & APPRECIATION

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It is easy, in the course of an activity that incorporates stories and ideas from around the world, to unintentionally fall into the common practice of using language and conduct that show disrespect for specific cultures. The best approach is, wherever possible, to involve local peoples from that/those culture/s when planning and conducting activities. Teaching tolerance and appreciation for cultural differences can enrich and expand all of our lives. A few simple do's and don'ts help to avoid some common problems.\*

- **Don't** say things like "That's what the Mexicans wear." This is offensive to, and stereotypical of specific peoples—just as putting dark makeup on for Martin Luther King Day would deeply offend African Americans, or wearing headdresses would offend Native Americans. Costumes can also prompt children to mimic voices and to do other things that mock other cultures.

**Do** study and try to understand the unique and valuable customs of specific cultures and learn from them while maintaining the context of your own culture, habits and dress. Have the children speak to local people from that/those culture/s, or reach out to children in distant communities or countries through a letter exchange. Explain that, like many other people who live in North America, many of us are of mixed ancestry and there is no way to tell if someone is of a specific cultural background simply by looking at them.

- **Don't** refer to people using culturally derogatory names. These words reinforce the fallacy that certain cultures are somehow backward, inferior or less advanced and civilized than people of European and other ancestry.

**Do** discuss the particular language and customs of local peoples and those from whom the stories come. Help the children understand these peoples as the unique cultures that they are.

*(Continued)*

- **Don't** speak of native cultures as if they only existed in the past. They have a history *and* are here among us today. Contemporary native peoples often dress and look much like the general culture in which they live. They do not tend to wear native costumes except at museums, during cultural holidays and on special ceremonial occasions.

**Do** discuss that Native peoples, too, live in the modern world. They work at jobs, go to school, play sports, drive cars and have family lives in our contemporary world. Some live close to the traditional ways and others are more immersed in modern culture.

- **Don't** speak as if peoples from any particular region are one large culture. Not every African culture traditionally lived in grass huts and hunted lions with spears. There are thousands of cultures throughout the world, each with its own distinct language, customs, beliefs and ways of living in the world.

**Do** refer to each Native person's culture by using his or her specific cultural name.

Discuss the language, beliefs and customs of each culture as the distinct, unique people that they are, closely connected to their local environment.

- **Don't** instruct the children to “sit Indian style,” “walk Indian file” or to stop acting like a “bunch of wild Indians.” Refrain from having the children refer to each other with words such as “squaw” and “brave.” These words are offensive to native peoples and they imply that native languages and cultures all use the same forms of speech. Many words are completely misunderstood. To be called a “squaw” is considered an insult and implies that women are beasts of burden and public property.

**Do** use simple, direct language like “walk single file,” “sit on your bottoms and cross your legs” and refer to “boys” and “girls.”

- **Don't** belittle sacred ceremonies and beliefs by trying to imitate them or adapt them to an activity. *Stay away from them entirely.* These are the heart and soul of each culture and are easily trivialized by misunderstood mimicry. They are meant to be conducted by members of a particular culture only. Would you, for the fun of it, conduct part of a Catholic communion service or a Buddhist meditation around a fire with the children?

**Do** invite local people of particular cultures to visit the children to discuss their beliefs and ceremonies. Study religions objectively and as a lesson to be understood without being imitated and practiced. Encourage children to learn more about their own spiritual tradition and how their beliefs support our being close to, and caring toward, Earth and other people—for example Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism or Bahaism.

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\*This list is adapted, with permission, from material produced by the Institute for American Indian Studies, 38 Curtis Rd., P.O. Box 1260, Washington, CT, 06793, as found in *Native American Sourcebook: A Teacher's Resource on New England Native Peoples* by Barbara Robinson (Concord, Mass.: Concord Museum, 1988), 167. For ordering information contact: Concord Museum, 200 Lexington Rd., P.O. Box 146, Concord, MA, 01742. (<https://concordmuseum.org/collections/publications/>)