

Celebrating Thanksgiving Respectfully

BY WINONAH LaGRANDE

Often, the only time children learn about Native Americans is during a Thanksgiving celebration. As cute as some traditional activities may be on the surface, such as “Paper-bag Indians” and play-acting the “First Thanksgiving,” some are misleading and potentially harmful as narratives, even in early childhood settings. So, how can we be respectful of the reality of Thanksgiving for so many Native Americans and not make this holiday too heavy for our young children?

Shift the Focus: Focus less on the origin story and more on what the holiday has become. This has the benefit of connecting the holiday to tangible elements in the children’s’ lives. We can do that by talking about being thankful or discussing how traditional foods vary from family to family.

Acknowledge the Land and the Tribes: The first Thanksgiving generally refers to a meeting between the Wampanoag tribe and the Plymouth colonists. However, the likelihood is that you are living in an area previously populated by a completely different tribe! This year, honor Native Americans by learning about different tribes and the people that are indigenous to where you live. Use [this resource](#) as a starting point. If you are having a feast in your classroom, you can practice a “land acknowledgement” which may be as simple as saying “We are gathered here today on traditional Lakota (your local tribe here) land.” This practice shows respect for indigenous peoples and recognizes their enduring relationship to the land. This practice may also raise awareness about the differences in tribes and, again, help connect the content to the children’s’ lives and experiences more directly.

Check out the following resources to learn more about celebrating Thanksgiving and Native American History month in respectful and meaningful ways!

Resources

- [Transforming Teaching and Learning about Native Americans](#) from the *National Museum of the American Indian*
- [Kids’ Books That Share True Stories of Native Peoples](#) from *Parent Map*
- [Teaching Thanksgiving in a Socially Responsible Way](#) from *Teaching Tolerance*
- [Interfaith Worker Justice](#)

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