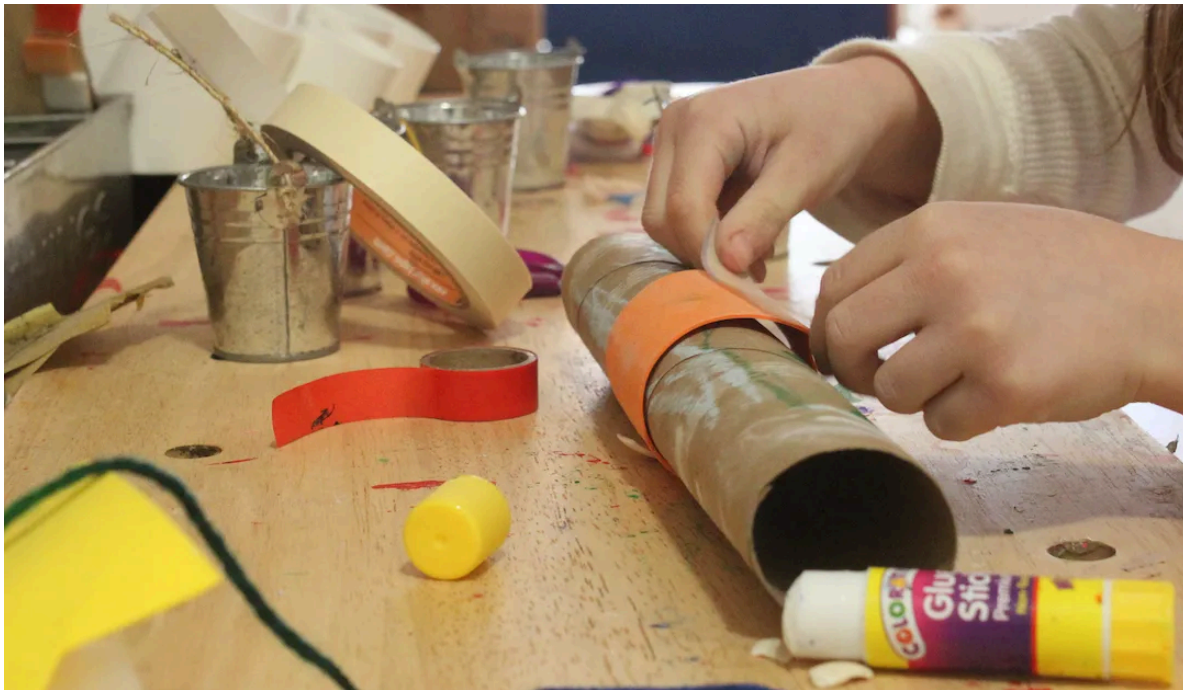


# Thanksgiving from a Native American perspective

Nov 24, 2019



Go to your local search engine, type in "Preschool Thanksgiving" and see what images pop up. These might match images already in your head; turkeys, fall leaves, corn, or smiling pilgrims and Native Americans sharing a bountiful meal. This is where the trouble begins.

As someone with Native American blood in my veins, I have always (even when I was a first-year teacher) braced myself for that flood of images November's Thanksgiving celebration brings. Clipart pics of pilgrims and Indians happily holding hands brings a flood of memories. I think of my Pocohontas-themed birthday party in 1995. I also flashback to being forced to don pilgrim garb in first grade because I drew the wrong popsicle stick-half of us drew "pilgrim" sticks, the other "Indian," and we all churned butter together.

Someone doesn't have to be of Native American descent, though, to know Native people—then and now—are facing some very different circumstances. Last year, when First Nations

people peacefully protested the Dakota Pipeline running through tribal lands, they had fire hoses turned on them. I also think of leaving home in Oklahoma for college to the culture shock of realizing in the rest of the world, my ethnicity is as common as a unicorn, and being asked repeatedly, "Did you grow up on a reservation?" or "Did you live in a tipi?" I also think of stories told by relatives when my ancestors were brutally "relocated" from their homes to land far away by Andrew Jackson.

These stories and perspectives of Native American history and culture might be a little much to fully explain to small children. Still, it is important for parents and educators alike to realize the holiday tales and celebrations we share with wee ones when they are between 3 and 5 years old could linger for years to come. What we share with our children during their early-education experience likely will remain with them their entire lives.

My own experiences with Thanksgiving have always impacted how I approach this topic, and how I plan to address the holiday with my students. Initially, I was nervous and uncertain, but I began to focus on the unique opportunity in front of me. I decided not to skirt the story that the children in my class will be told by society or even future teachers, but face it head-on.

I started off by finding a book on Thanksgiving—it wasn't perfect, but it provided a jumping-off point for discussion. I shared with the class, and we discussed how Native American characters were shown (and why the author chose that term instead of "Indian." We compared the book to others featuring Native characters. I encouraged the class to think back to the fairy-tale unit, where we'd explored the idea of different perspectives at an age-appropriate level.

After the discussion, the children realized that just as people don't dress as the pilgrims do anymore, Native American people may no longer dress the way shown in the books. I affirmed their views, and when I told them I came from a Native background, their interest was piqued. The traditional narrative tends to give the impression that Native people aren't around anymore, and my presence served as proof that isn't the case.

I brought in more books to share. One was of a higher reading level and a little long to share cover to cover, but provided a more authentic view of my tribe, which is Choctaw. I let them look at some of my loom-beading supplies and invited them to explore. I set up a weaving activity station and a place to make necklaces. They delved into these hands-on cultural experiences. The students were enthusiastic and interested in these lessons, which demonstrated in a way these young learners could grasp that Native culture is very much alive and well.

As a Native American and teacher, I understand this time of year may be difficult for parents to explain to young ones for many reasons. Parents expect the traditional first Thanksgiving story, and they eagerly await the adorable handprint turkey keepsake. They

know of the real story, but non-Native people may be uncomfortable sharing the real story with their children. Here are some suggestions to keep in mind when exploring the Thanksgiving story and Native culture with your kids this time of year.

### ***Screen your seasonal books***

When we select books for children at home or in the classroom, we should be mindful of the information inside. Especially when these titles portray people from different cultures, the stories shared can be positive or negative—we should strive to choose the former.

### ***Bring Native Americans into the present***

Native American people were the first people here in America. However, unlike the impression many historical narratives give, we did not step off the stage of history after the first Thanksgiving. Parents and teachers should impart to children that Native peoples are still here, and still contributing to culture.

### ***Avoid generalizations***

The indigenous peoples of America are as diverse as the rest of the population. Consider familiarizing yourself with local tribes and research how their communities function in the present. You may be surprised to learn not everyone lived in tipis or wore headdresses.

### ***Be wary of “Indian” crafts***

Some creative projects, though well-intentioned, might be insensitive to Native people. Paper vests made of grocery bags and feathered construction-paper headbands may come off as microaggressions to people in the community.

### ***When in doubt, go with turkeys***

If you’re concerned as a parent about hitting a wrong note when covering Native culture, consider focusing on the creature that serves as the star of the traditional Thanksgiving meal. It likely is better to let children have fun making crafts with birds and feathers than to impart wrong or offbase information.

This list might seem limiting, but it is vital to think critically about the messages we send to future generations. It might help you to know that even Native Americans like me still don’t know everything about our cultures and our place in the world. We all have work to do, and it’s an important lesson to share with our children. No matter how old we are, there is always room to learn and grow.

Happy Thanksgiving!

<input type="text"/>	Search
----------------------	--------

## Recent Posts

November at Stepping Stones Nursery School

A Parent's Guide to Finding the Perfect Preschool: Why Play-Based Learning and Outdoor Learning Matter

Embracing the Wonder of the Holiday Season Through Child-Led Learning

Empowering Young Children: Confronting Fears with Confidence

Rough & Tumble Superhero Play: An exploration of preschool play urges



© 2025 Stepping Stones Nursery School. All Rights Reserved.