

The Holiday Season and Child-Led Learning

Nov 19, 2021



The weather has gotten cooler, the leaves are falling, and the holiday season is just around the corner.

In most preschools, this is the cue to get out the orange and brown art materials to create a "handprint" Thanksgiving turkey, complete with feathers (often glued on by the teacher!). A few weeks later, this is often followed by red and green artwork for Christmas. It's all very sweet, but also intensely generic, allowing little room for individuality or imagination.

At Stepping Stones, we do things differently. First of all, we recognize that there are many holidays and festivals at this time of year: Christmas, Thanksgiving, Diwali, Chanuka, Kwanzaa. It's important to us not to focus on one, but to make space for the children to learn about all the different cultures and the special days they celebrate.

A place to grow as an individual

As we at Stepping Stones are a child-led organization, 'making space' is an important part of our educational philosophy. This means that the teachers follow the lead of the children, focusing on the topics that are meaningful to them, drawing out their natural curiosity, and enabling them to develop their talents. We include holidays in the curriculum, but for the children, it is just one element in a world full of wonder. And just as with any topic, we weave the holidays into our learning, ensuring the children have access to all the information and materials when they want to delve deeper: art supplies, books in the book corner, sharing experiences during circle time and so on.

There are many benefits to a child-led approach. Educational consultant John McCarthy explains how **allowing the children to have a say in the learning process brings out their natural leadership skills** and teaches them to trust themselves. As John states, 'My fifth-grade son shared these words of wisdom regarding school vs. home activities: "Why do they (teachers) keep talking about the real world out there? This is my real world."'

McCarthy clarifies that a child-led approach is not about leaving the children to their own devices. On the contrary: with careful guidance, our teachers imbue the children with the complex skills which are necessary to make age-appropriate decisions, from understanding WHAT they would like to learn, WHY a topic is worth spending time on, and HOW they can go about it.

And when it comes to teaching the children self-empowerment, the Thanksgiving turkey is not always a winner: many young children object to having their hand forcibly dipped into paint (which is not the same thing as freestyle finger-painting) in order for the teacher to be satisfied with a perfect handprint. How can we teach them about healthy boundaries if we don't respect this simple request?

Finally, there is one more important reason for leaving the orange and brown paint on the side. Generic art projects tend to focus too heavily on the end product rather than the learning experience. Traditional teaching methods and teacher-centered learning places the emphasis on attaining specific universal goals.

A changing world requires a change in mindset

Historically, there was certainly merit in traditional methods, as their aim was to ensure that as many children as possible received an adequate education. When resources are scarce and budgets tight, having these minimal benchmarks safeguards the education system somewhat. Over time, however, society's definition of "education" has shifted and our expectations have changed. In a world where information is so easily accessible, it is now far more valuable to teach children learning skills so that they can explore the world for themselves. It is far more beneficial to help each child flourish in the subjects they love rather than languish in an education system that doesn't make space for their talents.

The possibilities are endless. How amazing is that?!

At Stepping Stones, we want to enrich the children's lives by allowing them to discover the world for themselves, with the teachers acting as their guides. Each and every one of your children is an amazing human being, with so much potential, and they each deserve to have the space to learn and grow, developing their particular strengths and experiencing educational success every day.

And as the holiday season approaches, we look forward to including it as one aspect amongst the many different possibilities the Stepping Stones children can choose from. So you may not get that handprint turkey, but I know that whichever way your child chooses to explore the holidays, it will be meaningful to them.

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