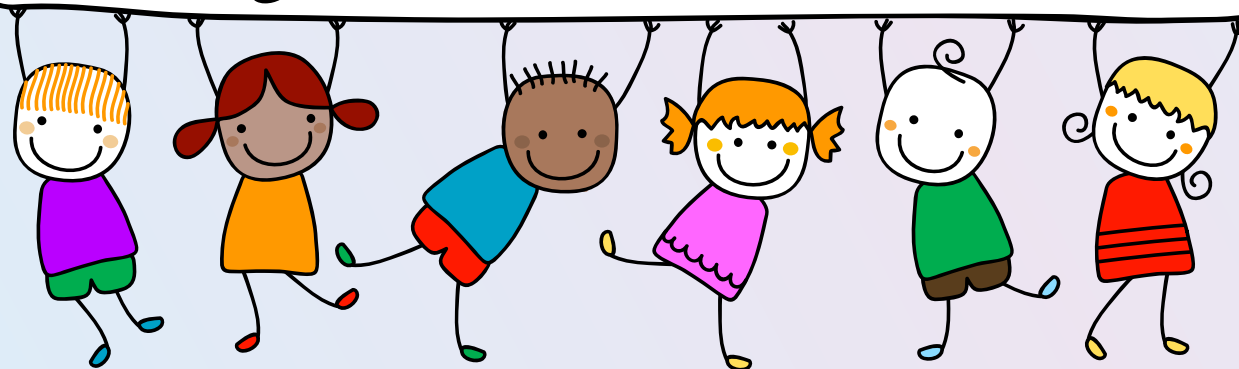


Setting the scene for

2018



Melanie Pilcher, quality and standards manager at the Alliance, shares some ideas for mixing up your events calendar

As we welcome 2018, early years practitioners pin new calendars on office walls, make notes in satisfyingly clear diaries and start to plot key events as part of their long-term planning for sessions.

This year is likely to consist of the usual fixed dates for the annual cycle of events – including transitions and seasons. Staff rotas, shift patterns and holidays must also be carefully recorded. Then there are other regular events to consider – such as planned outings, photo days, fund raising and events in your local community.

The months ahead are full of possibilities and opportunities for cohesion as routines are established. This in turn brings a sense of security and belonging for children that are essential to their personal, social and emotional development.

It is within this supportive framework that practitioners nurture all areas of learning and development. Children learn about each other, their community and establish friendships. They explore their immediate environment and are encouraged to be curious and interested in the world around them.

Celebrating diversity

In order to further develop children's knowledge and understanding of the world it is important that they are also able to celebrate and explore diversity. Practitioners can teach children to respect and value others regardless of their skin colour, their physical capabilities or the language they speak. Opportunities to learn about each other should be incorporated into appropriate, realistic experiences that build on

children's personal interests and their innate curiosity.

Nicola Gibson, inclusion manager at the Alliance, says: "Children learn positive attitudes and behaviours towards those with different identities to their own. By providing children with naturally occurring day-to-day experiences of diversity rather than just periodic events, children will learn to embrace and not fear difference."

In an increasingly diverse society, many early years settings will benefit from the cultures and traditions of the children who attend. Children will enjoy learning about their friends' home lives using resources that are likely to be available in the community. However, not all communities are diverse – so some thought and planning might be needed to ensure that you are broadening children's experiences in a meaningful way.

Immersive approach

There can be a temptation to plot a few key festivals and celebrations into the calendar as single-day events, even though the occasion itself might usually be celebrated over several days with weeks of build up – much like Christmas. Practitioners should do their research and consider what they want children to gain from each experience. You should give equal prominence to each festival and celebration you decide to take part in. Allow children to fully immerse themselves in each experience so that the characteristics of effective learning are enabled as their curiosity is ignited.

It is a good idea to start with a list of significant dates that reflect the diversity of the children and families who are attending the setting and build up from there. The emphasis should be on the cultural aspect of the celebration, rather than any religious significance. It is not appropriate for early years settings to teach religion to very young children, but they should raise awareness that people can have different beliefs.

Practitioners should focus on the wider learning opportunities in the activities they offer rather than any tokenistic one-off events – these might look good on planning sheets but they will have little impact on

children's knowledge and understanding. Most festivals and celebrations will encompass some or all of the following that cover many areas of the Early Years Foundation Stage:

- **Decorations** – These could be lanterns, wall hangings, patterns and greetings cards. The emphasis is often on lights, vibrant colours and symbols that are easily recognisable as belonging to a distinct culture.
- **Music** – Different musical instruments, songs, nursery rhymes and verse can soon become regular favourites during circle time activities. Tell stories in their first language, as well as English, to help children recognise some key words.
- **Dance** – Along with the music comes an opportunity to move. Watch DVDs or invite a guest, perhaps a family member or parent, to teach the children a traditional dance.
- **Food** – There are endless opportunities to make and bake traditional festival food. Search online for healthy recipes enjoyed by different cultures or ask families to suggest popular dishes.
- **Traditional dress** – Clothing is important for people and cultures all over the

world. There are many beautiful, unusual costumes and headdresses worn for special events

- **Gifts** – The tradition of exchanging gifts during festivals or celebrations can teach children about the gift of caring and sharing. Not all gifts have to have a monetary value. Children can be encouraged to think about the many ways they can give to others by being a good friend.
- **Art** – There are endless opportunities for creativity as children replicate designs such as Hindu Rangoli patterns, Indonesian Batik or Aboriginal art that uses only the colours found in nature to tell stories with painted dots, patterns and symbols.

When we see examples of how divisions in communities can cause feelings of resentment or isolation, what better time to remind ourselves that the children we are working with now will shape the world that we live in tomorrow. If they learn acceptance and tolerance through understanding difference in their early years, they will have the skills needed to flourish in a global society where prejudice and racism are never accepted.

