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# Celebrating Family, Friends, and Our Diversity

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**W**e live in a culturally diverse country. Teachers and parents can help children develop an understanding and acceptance of the differences between people in our society through the use of educational tools. During the month of December, there are several religious and cultural celebrations which offer opportunities for parents and teachers. Online resources can give adults the historical background behind some of these celebrations so that this information can be taught to children of all ages. Children's authors have done a nice job of portraying various holiday customs in beautifully crafted books that can be shared with children. Neighbors could gather together for a multicultural dinner sharing foods and stories from their culture. If we educate children early in life about different holiday customs they will grow up to be culturally sensitive and caring young adults.

In December, several holidays are celebrated. Hanukkah, or Chanukkah, is celebrated in Jewish households throughout

the United States. The word Hanukkah is spelled several ways but the "Hanukkah" spelling is most common in the US. The Hanukkah story is mentioned in the book of Maccabees which is not considered sacred scripture. It does not hold the religious significance as other Jewish holidays such as Passover. It is a well-known holiday in the United States because of its proximity to Christmas.

This year Hanukkah begins at sundown on December 11th. Each year, the date for Hanukkah varies and is set according to the Hebrew calendar. The history behind this holiday began over twenty-one centuries ago when the Syrian-Greek nation forcefully threatened to take over the Israelite people. It is a story of courage, bravery, and heroes. It is sometimes referred to as the "Festival of Lights" to commemorate God's miracle of the single cruse of oil that burned for 8 days. In present day homes each night of Hanukkah is celebrated with the lighting of the Menorah to remember this miracle. On the first night of Hanukkah, only the Shamash

associated with this December holiday. Here are a few for you to explore. Hershel and the Hanukkah Goblin written by Eric A. Kimmel and illustrated by Trina Schart Hyman, The Magic Dreidels written by Eric A. Kimmel and illustrated by Katya Krening, and The Chanukkah Guest written by Eric A. Kimmel and illustrated by Giora Carmi. Scholastic has a website for additional information about Hanukkah and related activities for kids. <http://www2.scholastic.com/browse/article.jsp?id=11434>

Advent, a Christian season of hope, begins shortly after Thanksgiving, usually the fourth Sunday before Christmas or the closest to November 30th. The word "Advent" means "coming" in Latin. It is a time for preparation, anticipation, and longing. Christian homes might have an advent wreath and/or calendar. The advent wreath has three purple candles and one pink candle set in a circle. Each candle represents a week of Advent. The candle is lit at meal time while prayers are recited and scripture is read.

Shopping malls decorate parking lots and store fronts with Christmas décor. Santa and his helpers arrive at the mall for picture taking, and stores offer sales to entice shoppers to purchase gifts sure to please everyone on the Christmas gift list. Christmas music is played on many radio stations and Christmas shows begin airing on television. Organizations that help the needy recruit people to volunteer, contribute, and donate food, clothing, and gifts. In the spirit of the holiday, people begin to feel more generous and a little more kind to others.

Christmas celebrations became common in America in 1800's. Christmas caroling, decorating homes with pine branches, different names for Santa, traditions around gift-giving and even the foods people prepare for the holiday feast have origins from many different countries. The United States is a melting pot of cultures. The holiday is celebrated with a mixture of traditions from the old and from the new.

In Christian households throughout the United States, the Christmas season celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ celebrated on December 25. Christians everywhere attend services at their place of worship and Nativity scenes appear beneath

candle is lit. It is the candle different in height from the other candles. Special prayers are reverently sung or recited while holding the candle. You can hear the blessings sung at this website- <http://www.jewfaq.org/prayer/chanukah.htm>.

Each night of Hanukkah, small gifts are exchanged and families might play a Dreidel game with young children. The game uses a four sided wooden or clay top with Hebrew letters printed on each side. The letters on the Dreidel mean, "A Great Miracle Happened Here." There are well written children's books by author Eric A. Kimmel that explain traditions

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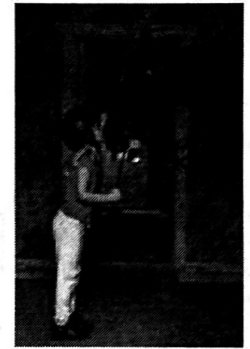
the Christmas tree. It is a time to reflect on blessings and be thankful for them and to extend love and kindness to others. Here are a few Christmas stories to share with children. Charles Dickens A Christmas Carol adapted by Stephen Krensky(definitely for older children), Christmas Tapestry written and illustrated by Patrica Polacco, The Baby Who Changed the World written by Sheryl Ann Crawford and illustrated by Sonya Wilson, The Tree Nobody Wanted: A Christmas Story written by Tom McCann and I Am Christmas written by Nancy White Carlstrom and illustrated by Lori McElrath-Eslick. In addition, here are some websites to view for more information and activities for Christmas. <http://www.apples4theteacher.com/holidays/christmas-religious/kids-books/>, <http://www.northpole.com/>, <http://www.topshelfmarketing.com/christmas/hangman.php>

Kwanzaa is a week long holiday, December 26 through January 1, celebrated by African-American people in the United States. The word "Kwanzaa" comes from the Swahili phrase, "Matunda ya Kwanza" which means "First Fruits." It was founded by an African American scholar named, Dr. Maulena Karenga. This week long holiday honors African American heritage and culture. Kwanzaa is a unique holiday because it focuses on traditional "African American" values of family, community, responsibility, commerce, and self improvement. It is not a religious or political holiday and is not a substitute for Christmas. Kwanzaa celebrates seven principles. Like the celebration of Hanukkah, candles are lit during Kwanzaa. A "Kinara" is the candle holder. Small gifts are exchanged but celebrations last seven days. Often, special clothing, such as a Dashiki (shirt or suit), or a Kufi ( cap), or a Kaftan (dress) is worn during Kwanzaa celebrations. (Wikipedia) Here are several children's books for this holiday; My First Kwanza Book written by Deborah Chocolate and illustrated by Cal



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Massey, Seven Spools of Thread written by Angela Shelf Medearis and illustrated by Daniel Minter, It's Kwanza Time written by Clay Goss and accompanied by a variety of illustrators and includes both folk tales and true stories, and a non-fiction resource, Celebrate Kwanzaa: With Candles, Community, and The Fruits of the Harvest part of the National Geographic Holidays Around the World Series for children grades 1-4. For more information on Kwanzaa celebrations and crafts for children consult the following websites: <http://www.enchantedlearning.com/crafts/Kwanza/> and <http://www.kidspartyfun.com/pages/themes/kwanza.html>.

There is a common thread that binds all of these holiday celebrations and it begins with the unity of family and community. People feel a sense of belonging within their family circles and often times a family member returns home for the holiday. People

are more giving to others out of love and respect for each person's humanity. People participate in meaningful holiday activities. The festivities usually include candles and light symbolizing warmth and love.

Whether you will be lighting a Kinara, or a Menorah, or placing lit candles in your windows, whatever customs you and your family celebrate this December remember to be sensitive to and respectful of the diversity of this great nation. We have the freedom to celebrate the holidays in whatever way we choose. Let us be thankful for this freedom and teach our children to respect it. May you be surrounded by the love of your family and friends and may you find peace in your heart this holiday. 

### Sources:

#### Hanukkah

- [http://www.chabad.org/holidays/chanukah/default\\_cdo/jewish/Hanukkah.htm](http://www.chabad.org/holidays/chanukah/default_cdo/jewish/Hanukkah.htm)
- <http://www.history.com/content/hanukkah>
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#### Kwanzaa

- <http://www.tike.com/celeb-kw.htm>
- <http://www.kidspartyfun.com/pages/themes/kwanza.html>
- <http://www.officialkwanzaawebsite.org/index.shtml>

#### Christmas

- <http://www.history.com/content/christmas>
- <http://www.cresourcei.org/cyadvent.html>



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