

As you may know, many Native American images found on Thanksgiving cards, decorations, and school materials are very stereotypic. They are often based on a "composite" view of Native Americans rather than on accurate and diverse Native American lifestyles and traditions. As a consequence, Thanksgiving imagery serves to teach and reinforce children's misinformation and stereotypic thinking about Native Americans, laying a foundation for later prejudice.

Moreover, the story of Thanksgiving is usually told from only one side -- that of the European pilgrims who came to America. Rarely is it told from the perspective of the people who were already here. As a result, the role played by Native Americans in helping the pilgrims to survive is often downplayed or ignored. To many Native Americans today, Thanksgiving is a day of mourning because it is a reminder that in return for their help, they were repaid with the loss of their land and destruction of their people.

What, then, do we propose to do? We do not advocate the elimination of Thanksgiving. Instead, we strive to help children understand that Thanksgiving means different things to different people. Some families celebrate Thanksgiving and others do not, and we can explain why (in language appropriate for children). We can also discuss how Thanksgiving cards and decorations sometimes misrepresent Native Americans and lead them to feel hurt or offended.

What we teach our children about Thanksgiving can be part of a larger effort to help students learn accurate information about Native Americans of the past and present. Our goal should be to counter misleading portrayals in children's books, television shows, and movies (e.g., Westerns), so that children do not acquire stereotypes that promote racism later in life. As part of this effort, we should not permit children to role-play cowboys and Indians (the historic enemy of Indians was not cowboys, but the U.S. government -- some of the first cowboys were actually Indians). Furthermore, we want to make sure children understand that being an Indian is not a role, but part of a person's identity.

If your family is not Native American and you're not sure what your child or children think about Native Americans, this Thanksgiving may be a good time to find out. You might ask questions such as:

- "What do you know about Native Americans?"
- "Would you like to have a Native American friend?"
- "Where do Native Americans live today?" (most live off reservations)
- "Can Native Americans vote in U.S. elections?" (yes, they are citizens)

For Thanksgiving, you might also consider giving a [multicultural book](#) about Native Americans or other groups. As we give thanks this season, we hope you will find ways within your family to reinforce these lessons and help instill in our children an appreciation and accurate understanding of all cultures.

For primary source materials on Thanksgiving, an excellent source is the [Library of Congress](#).