



By Karen Stephens

Multicultural Resources for Kids' Global Learning

As every parent eventually discovers, first hand experiences are the best method for teaching little ones — about anything. Nurturing children's awareness, understanding, and appreciation for racial and cultural diversity is no exception.

To help children live happily, peacefully and productively in a diverse society, acquaint them with many ways of doing things according to various cultures. So that lessons of multicultural respect last a lifetime, introductions should begin by age two.

The first and most influential factor in the formation of children's diversity attitudes is parents. What parents say and do is children's first model for acceptable ways of treating and interacting with others. From that foundation, there's more parents can do to bless children with diversity in their *everyday* life. Ensure that children meaningfully experience cultural variety in family friends, child care, school, places of worship, and other aspects of community life. In those settings, parents help children gradually become aware of the many ways humans express their gift of life.

From person to person and group to group, we all have unique, creative, and inspiring ways of living with and caring for others. Helping children create authentic, on-going relationships with those *real* people enjoying their *contemporary* culture is fundamentally important. Those relationships will teach children far more about cultural appreciation than anything else you can do.

On top of those human resources, there are also children's products available to enrich their play and learning with cultural creativity. Some are good, some are not so good. Be wise and picky when offering your child multicultural materials. Select play resources that are accurate, honest, and respectful. Play materials shouldn't distort racial features or misrepresent and stereotype cultural practices.

When well chosen, multicultural play materials can help set the stage for meaningful experiences that expand the hearts and minds of young kids. What types of multicultural materials do children enjoy? Pick typical childhood toys, but with an added twist. Multicultural materials have diversity built into the design.

For instance, dolls of color and realistic features can introduce children to variety in race and culture. Such dolls should have authentic clothes and accessories as well. Contemporary as well as traditional dress for dolls and dress up play is important. It helps children understand that cultures have a past, present, and a future.

Locating Resources

Look first in your own backyard for cultural diversity. Your grocery aisles and farmers' markets have a bounty of unique products from around the world, from baskets to breads and vegetables for cooking projects.

Garden nurseries also have excellent resources for kids' global learning. Children can learn about foods favored by various cultures. Plant an herb garden so children can explore spices and scents loved around the world, from lavender to oregano.

Visit local botanic gardens that illustrate gardening preferences. For instance, after visiting a "sand garden" of Japanese design, children can make one in their sand box or sand table at home or child care. Or they can even make a miniature one in a shoe box lid.

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Where can you get children's multicultural play items? Any music store should have (or can order) child and adult recordings that include multicultural rhythms. Likewise, any bookstore can lead you to multicultural children's books.

There are also many specialty stores that carry toys, games, or arts and crafts that let kids try out the ways of the world. Look in your yellow pages to see if you have a Ten Thousand Villages or Crossroads store in your area. Keep an eye out for multicultural festivals in your area. Children's discovery museums usually have a nice selection of international children's toys, too. You can also shop at your local ethnic grocery or clothing stores for items.

Ensure that children meaningfully experience cultural variety in family friends, child care, school, places of worship, and other aspects of community life.

Here are some specifics to offer children:

- Picture and story books that reflect diverse characters in terms of race, gender, age, culture, and abilities. There are wonderful multicultural books related to: alphabet and language, counting, foods, clothing, dress, and hairstyles; family life and everyday childhood experiences, games and celebrations, cultural heritage and traditions, and even the world of skin colors and hairstyles. Ask your children's librarian for suggestions.
- Puzzles and table top toys, often called manipulatives.
- Wooden or plastic animals to use in sand or in block play.
- Child-sized rhythm instruments used worldwide, such as drums, rhythm sticks, rain sticks, and maracas.
- Multicultural dolls, puppets, doll house, and play people in *contemporary* dress as well as some in culturally traditional or historical dress.
- Multicultural art materials, such as a variety of papers, crayons, markers, and paints. (Markers, crayons, and paints should have a variety of flesh tones included.)
- Dress up clothing, such as culturally distinct scarves, hats, shoes, vests, ponchos, kimonos, etc.
- Pretend play housekeeping items, such as a tortilla press or a wok for children to enjoy when pretending to be mom and dad of the house.

On-line Mail Order Catalogs

If you can't find those items locally, a catalog company may help. Below is a small sampling of vendors with web sites that carry children's multicultural play items.

- Lakeshore Learning Materials: www.lakeshorelearning.com
- Kaplan: The Early Childhood Edition: www.kaplan.com
- Community Playthings: www.CommunityPlaythings.com
- Music for Little People: www.musicforlittlepeople.com

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.