

5-2 Cultural activities: cherishing traditions

Every country has its own customs which have been passed down for generations in the form of traditional cultures and festivals. Japanese kindergartens have incorporated some of these cultural heritages into their programs. In the process of engaging in their own traditional activities, children learn the meanings of these activities and so become more involved in their own culture. Cultural activities can also provide children with a wonderful opportunity to facilitate social interaction and direct their interest towards the around them, further stimulating their language skills and creativity in arts and crafts work.

Origami

Origami, or the Japanese art of folding paper, has been an integral part of Japanese culture for more than 1,000 years. It is the art of folding, inserting, and unfolding a sheet of paper, usually 12cm by 15cm (5" by 6"), into three-dimensional figures such as animals, flowers, vehicles, and boxes. Similarly, cutting paper that is folded in several layers, and then unfolding it, can create an unexpected geometric pattern, which stimulates children's imagination and leads to new art play such as displaying the art on the window or hanging it like a mobile structure. Today, with the extensive kinds of Origami paper - including various colors and patterns, paper colored on both sides, round paper, and rectangular paper - Origami art has evolved into a more extensive fun activity as new creations and applications have been introduced.

Educational goals

- **Building bonds between the older and younger generations through Origami play that can entertain people regardless of age.**
- **Developing manual dexterity and concentration through Origami play that demands hand and eye coordination.**
- **Learning the names of colors and enjoying beautiful color combinations by using various color papers and creating decorations with them.**
- **Becoming familiar with geometric shapes such as a triangle, square, and rectangle through the process of folding paper, and, by appreciating a finished work, experiencing the wonder of making a sheet of paper into a three-dimensional figure.**
- **Feeling accomplishment and satisfaction, and learning practically that following the steps of instructions will finally result in rewarding work.**
- **By teaching and helping how to fold with each other, cherishing sympathy and compassion with others.**
- **Stimulating imagination and creativity through experimenting with new ways to cut and fold.**

Playing with Origami

By showing how to put two corners together and firmly press the folded edge, a teacher should start with easier figures a dog, a cat, a bird, and a flower. Children learn the steps by imitating the teacher.



Once children have learned how to fold, they pick up their favorite colored paper and start doing origami on their own. A finished fold became a dog with added eyes and a nose. Instead of following a teacher's instructions, children can make their own favorite animals.

A slight change in folding angles can stimulate children's imagination. The finished fold, seen as a tulip flower, can be glued onto the construction paper with additional drawings or skewered with a stick and put in a flower vase.



Many trials at folding created something that cracks open when squeezed from both sides. Then, imagining 'an eating face,' a child added eyes to the object and started feeding it with paper and her finger. It marks the creation of a new play with Origami.



A child, who was inspired to make something big, asked for a big piece of Origami paper. A teacher cut newspaper into a square and gave it to her instead.

Folding newspaper is hard work for small hands and thus a teacher was on call. When the teacher was gone, her friend joined in to fold the paper. After talking with her friend, she finished her work by adding eyes and a nose.



A child is folding newspaper to make Kabuto, a feudal Japanese soldier's helmet, which he once made with his teacher. Other friends were also prompted to copy.

Newspaper Kabuto is big enough to put on the head. With their hand-made Kabutos on, children has started a fun play.

Keep in mind

- When teaching Origami, a teacher should deal with a small number of children, instead of instructing a whole class at once. Make a circle of children, small enough for the teacher to reach children in need of help quickly.
- Start with simpler animals and figures that are familiar to children – a dog, a cat, a bird, a flower, a boat, and a house.
- Although it is important to teach children exact steps by showing how to fold and neatly put corners together, never expect perfection from the beginning. The first step to draw children's interest in Origami is to make them feel excited about turning a sheet of paper into something else.
- For children who are struggling with Origami, help them by guiding their hands. Even though unsatisfied with their work, the children will be encouraged to do it again by the teacher's warm assistance.
- A child's work that intended to make 'a dog' can sometimes end up with 'a flower' in the upside-down position. Value a child's opinion about his or her finished work.
- Once accustomed to folding, children sometimes display a behavior that only aims at 'folding' for its own sake, in order to make as many pieces of work as possible. A teacher may need to teach them the versatility of Origami art by showing them various possible creations and applications.

Tips and suggestions

- Any paper, including newspaper, flyers, brochures, magazines, and wrapping paper, can become Origami paper by cutting it into squares. Even square piece of cloth can do.
- A piece of folded work can be used in many ways: posting it on the wall, making it into a necklace, or a bow or a hair accessory with a pin, building it into a larger art piece by gluing it on construction paper with additional drawings, creating a greeting card, and combining several pieces to build a mobile structure.
- With square and rectangular paper, Origami can make great play toys such as Kabuto (a helmet), airplanes, paper guns, and cups and boxes.
- Similarly with 'Sasabune' (a bamboo boat), play in which a boat made by folding a bamboo leaf is put on the running water, the act of folding can be adopted in other fun and creative activities such as folding any available leaves into something and further creating something new by adding branches or wooden pieces.

Tanabata (star festival)

One of the Japanese annual festivals, Tanabata, or Star Festival, literally means the night of July 7. Its origin goes back to the old Chinese legend involving two stars, the Weaver Star and the Cowherd star, and later the story merged with Japanese traditional beliefs. Being separated by the Milky Way, the two stars were only able to see each other once a year, on the night of July 7. By the Star Festival night, bamboo branches are decorated with 'Tanzaku,' or strips of paper, on which people write their wishes. Origami works and other colorful decorations are also tied to the bamboo. In kindergarten, a 'Star Festival party' is organized in which a teacher reads a picture book or uses a picture-story show to talk about the Star Festival legend, and children participate in a drama or dance based on the legend and sing and play musical instruments along with the festival song.

Educational Goals

- **Learning and appreciating Japanese traditional culture.**
- **Becoming interested in stars in the sky by learning about the Milky Way in the legend.**
- **Feeling pleasure and accomplishment derived from cooperating with others in making Tanabata decorations, tying them to the bamboo branches, and participating in drama and dance performances.**
- **Through writing one's own wishes on a Tanzaku paper strip, thinking about one's goals and future.**
- **By showing one's wishes to teachers and parents, sharing with friends, and explaining in front of the class, children can learn to understand each other better.**
- **Learning the way to express personal thoughts by means of language through writing their wishes by themselves or, for smaller children who cannot write well, by having a teacher write them.**
- **Strengthening the bond among children, teachers and parents by organizing the Star Festival party where parents participate in kindergarten activities such as decorating bamboo branches and watching children's various performances.**

Enjoying star festival

On the parents viewing day, parents and children worked together to make decorations with Origami paper.

Even smaller children worked hard by watching what their mothers do.

In an older class, a thin paper strip is rolled in a ring and connected with another ring to make a long paper chain.

Also, colorful triangles are glued in line to make a nice garland.



Parents carried the finished decorations to the hall and hung them on the bamboo branches.

With smiles, parents are reading children's wishes: 'I want to be a soccer player' and 'I wish I had a doll.'

The Tanzaku strips, on which children wrote their wishes, are tied to the bamboo branches with strings.

The bamboo is now decorated with many colorful Tanzaku strips.



Parents who arrive to pick-up their children brought in decorations and Tanzaku strips prepared at home and hung them on the bamboo branches.

A beautifully decorated bamboo tree is posted at the school porch.

With the bamboo overlooking the yard, children are playing happily.

Keep in mind

- Children's wishes vary from wanting a certain thing -for example 'I want a toy' and 'I wish I had a doll' - to those stating their future dreams, such as 'I want to become a pianist' and 'I want to be a soccer player.' A teacher needs to value and accept each child's unique thoughts and feelings expressed in the wish.
- When children write their wishes, they need to feel that their wishes are heard and shared with the class. For this end, a teacher should speak to each child by walking around the classroom and call each of them to tell his or her wishes in front of the class. Children, in turn, will feel more secure and confident by knowing that their wishes are accepted by others, and furthermore, not only the teacher but also the children will be able to understand everyone in the class better.
- For activities involving writing letters, children who cannot write can draw a picture or have a teacher write their wishes.
- A picture-story show or a picture-book reading will serve as a handy tool to teach the Star Festival legend easily to children. A drama performance can also be a great way in which children themselves can present the legend story. After having great fun, children are ready to listen with interest to the festival's cultural background and origin.

Tips and suggestions

- Making the Star Festival party into an activity involving mixed age groups can be a valuable idea; older children help younger ones decorate the bamboo, show them the drama and concert, and sing songs together.
- The traditional festivals need not be practiced in the way that they used to be. What is important is to provide children with as many hands-on experiences about the festivals as you can. For example, if a bamboo tree is unavailable in your country, any trees in the school yard can be substituted. One of the essential goals in kindergarten education lies in developing a mind that cherishes old traditions, even though they may change the formalities.
- Remind children that behind the traditional festivals and events lies much wisdom and practices derived from people's everyday lives and passed down for generations. Not only enjoying a festival itself but also knowing the meaning will contribute to understanding and appreciating the children's own culture.
- For a festival influenced by several cultures, the understanding of the origin can lead to appreciating both children's own and another country's cultures. As in the Star Festival, where the Japanese and Chinese cultures meet, children, upon hearing the Chinese legend, can imagine the neighboring country across the ocean and further expand their imagination to other places in the world.

Setsubun and Hina-Matsuri

The Japanese traditional activities, 'Setsubun' and 'Hina-Matsuri,' are still practiced nationwide today as the festivals to welcome the forthcoming spring. And many educational goals can be achieved through using these festivals.

'Setsubun,' or Bean Throwing Ceremony, is carried out on the night before the first day of spring (usually around February 4) to ward off bad luck. Among the customary practices is Bean Throwing. The method may vary across regions, but in general, people throw roasted soybeans inside their houses with a cry of 'Out with demons! In with good luck!' Also in kindergarten, children make demon masks and paper bean boxes and do Bean Throwing both at the school yard and inside the school.

'Hina-Matsuri,' or Doll Festival, is scheduled on March 3 to pray for girls' health. Also known as 'Momo no Sekku (Peach Festival),' it comprises 'Go Sekku (Five Major Festivals)' together with 'Tango no Sekku (initially the boy version of Hina-Matsuri, then renamed 'Children's Day'). And its origin goes back to over a thousand years ago. Families with daughters celebrate the festival with Hina dolls, peach blossoms, a diamond-shaped rice cake, and Shirozake (sweet sake with rice malt). Many kindergartens adopt Hina-Matsuri in their program. Children enjoy the festival through arranging Hina dolls, making their own Hina dolls, singing and playing musical instruments along Hina-Matsuri songs.

Educational goals

- **Understanding the children's own traditional cultures, by listening to a teacher's explanations, picture-book reading and picture-story shows based on Hina-Matsuri and Setsubun.**
- **Feeling the change of season and happiness to welcome spring, through participating in the Hina-Matsuri and Setsubun festivals that are both closely related to the Japanese four seasons.**
- **Realizing that children are raised with love by lots of people around them, including parents and teachers who always watch their healthy growth and celebrate the festival for them, through the Hina-Matsuri festival.**
- **Becoming interested in Japanese traditional costumes such as 'Juni Hitoe (ancient court costumes literally meaning twelve kimonos)' and the ancient lifestyle, by using books with Hina dolls and other decorations close-by,**
- **Experiencing the pleasure in sharing the festival with others, which cannot be felt at home, through interacting with friends and teachers in the preparation of a festival, for example, in craft activities.**
- **Enjoying various special activities such as craft work, playing the musical instruments, performing drama, and paper puppet theater.**

Children around Setsubun and Hina-Matsuri time



In the schoolyard, spirited by smelling the early spring air, children do Bean Throwing using their hand-made demon masks and bean boxes.

The toys such as demon masks that have been made for the bean throwing can be used in other plays as well.

A child is holding the demon club that was made together with friends.

Children's demon masks are uniquely made with different materials and designs. Some of them look somewhat funny and therefore appealing to small children who otherwise might be scared of serious masks.

As Hina-Matsuri draws near, Hina dolls are arranged on the staircase-like shelves. Depending on the kindergarten, hand-sewn kimonos are offered to children who get dressed in them for fun.



Sitting with good manners on the tatami mat, children are doing the Japanese picture card game.

Hand-made crowns and kimonos are children's favorite toys. Even after the Hina-Matsuri festival is over, some children are still wearing them.

Keep in Mind

- Since modern Japanese society has seen a significant increase in nuclear families, which are not so actively involved with the community, often now only the brief formalities of annual festivals are practiced at home. A kindergarten, therefore, should provide children with a full knowledge about the festivals' origins and their traditional values.
- If they are told through fun and interesting kindergarten activities, even seemingly difficult concepts about traditional cultures can reach children's flexible minds.
- Setsubun and Hina-Matsuri festivals should be fun experiences which children can remember through shared activities such as singing and playing musical instruments.
- In making demon masks and Hina dolls as well as decorating them, value children's unlimited ideas and free imagination, rather than evaluating their work.

Tips and suggestions

- A country's and region's unique traditional festivals can be incorporated into the school calendar by adopting them in accordance with the kindergarten's particular situations and conditions.
- By communicating people's wishes and prayers that have been passed down through the festival, rather than just focusing on the formal practices, a teacher can provide children with the ideal opportunity to consider their own cultures and to cherish them with pride.
- A teacher, parents, and children can work together with fun to make decorations and toys for the festival.
- Do not be limited by store-bought construction paper and Origami paper, craft materials can be found everywhere: scraps of cloth, woolen yarn, empty boxes and old buttons, fallen leaves and twigs, and pebbles will do. Even not elegantly made, the hand-made craft piece that reminds a child of fun activities with friends will stay in children's mind for a long time.