

## A question of belief

How can settings sensitively respond to the request of Jehovah's Witnesses families to not include their children in celebrations such as birthdays. By **Gabriella Jozwiak**

**Q.** A new child has recently joined our setting, whose parents are Jehovah's Witnesses. They do not want their child learning about religious festivals or celebrating birthdays, even though this is part of our setting's curriculum and culture. How should we address this?

**Sharon Curtis, manager, Ellesmere Children's Centre and CEO, Emosi**



'We've had this situation for many years. The stance that we take here is we're multi-faith. We work from a premise of recognising and being respectful of different cultures, different religions, values and ways of being.

'We once had an experience of a Jehovah's Witnesses parent complaining that we were playing Christmas music in the setting. We include things like a Christmas tree and non-religious Christmas songs, such as jingle-bells. The parent didn't like it, but I had a chat with them and explained our premise. We didn't change the music.

'We do celebrate children's birthdays by giving the child a birthday hat to wear. If the Jehovah's Witnesses family doesn't want their children to do this, we won't do something so overt. That child might

not even be aware it is their birthday.

'At Christmas, some Jehovah's Witnesses families don't bring their children in when we're doing a nativity play. But we try to encourage them to let children stay for Christmas parties, by explaining it's important for the children to have social moments together and play games.

'We have also suggested to parents that they come in and talk to the children about their beliefs. We recently had a four-year-old Hindu girl whose parents shaved off all her hair. They came into the setting and explained it was a coming-of-age celebration. That girl might have experienced bullying. But she actually had such a sense of pride when her parents came in.'

**Beckie Capewell, manager, East Cliff Pre-Schools**



'As well as cultural considerations, if you have a Jehovah's Witnesses child in your setting, it's important to remember that their parents may refuse to let their child have blood transfusions. I have been clear with them that our terms and conditions state staff must act in the best interests of the child during a medical emergency. If we can't get through to the parents, we will follow doctors' medical advice.

'Our setting is hugely multicultural – only 17 per cent of the children are English. We teach about all religions, but if a parent doesn't want their child to take part in something, for example, the Christmas nativity, we tell the parents they can take their child out of nursery and we'll replace their session on another day. At Christmas, I might adapt activities for a

Jehovah's Witnesses child. But I would say to parents that Christmas is part of our culture. We talk about all religions in the setting and I would suggest the Jehovah's Witnesses parent comes in to tell us about their beliefs too.

'On birthdays, if a parent doesn't want their child to receive cake or take part in a celebration, we are happy to let them go and play in a different room. However, I do explain to parents that the child might experience social isolation as a result. At their young age, they are unlikely to understand the benefits of their religion or why they are being sent to a different room. But the parents' request to take them out does not go against health and safety or safeguarding regulations, so we wouldn't say no.'

**Kyla Fory, nursery manager, Watermead Nursery**



'As a setting we tend to celebrate seasons throughout the year, although we do celebrate religious festivals too. If we are introducing a festival to the children, we'll let the Jehovah's Witnesses children go to a school readiness session in a different room so they don't

hear about it. We hold school readiness groups regularly so it's nothing unusual for them. When they return back to the room, they can play with the resources that are out without having heard the religious background. For example, for the Hindu festival of Holi, we had paint splatting. That's an art activity, but the other children learned the religious

meaning behind the painting. This way the child is still involved in all of the activities and we're being inclusive as a setting.

'If a child in the setting has a birthday and we want to sing to them, we can do the same – the Jehovah's Witnesses child can go off and do school readiness. If a parent has brought in a cake to share, we will message the Jehovah's Witnesses child's

parent to ask it's OK to give their child a bit of cake. If they say no, we might share the cake while the child is out of the room, and give them some of our homemade cake or a biscuit instead.

'We also try and celebrate Jehovah's Witnesses celebrations; for example, they like to celebrate parents' wedding anniversaries or hold present days, rather than birthdays.'