

Our Culture is Not a Costume

As the Halloween season approaches, many schools and students will have Halloween parties, dress up days and fun activities. For Native Americans, Halloween can be a time where we visually see our culture misrepresented and misunderstood. Even in 2018 where information is readily available on what is appropriate and inappropriate, students and adults are still dressing up as an “Indian” for Halloween. As educators, it is our job to make sure that all students feel included and respected during this festive time of year. Native Knowledge has provided you with some information on how to tackle the Halloween season without being offensive to Native American people or other cultures.

1. It’s important that teachers and students know the term Cultural Appropriation. In its simplest form, cultural appropriation is taking elements of someone’s culture without permission. For Native people, this is a complicated issue. There are many symbols and elements that have specific tribal meaning, sacredness, and significance.
2. Refrain from allowing students to dress up as any race or ethnicity. Native Americans are not the only culture that is misrepresented during Halloween.
3. When individuals dress up as “Indians”, many times these costumes will have paper feathers, war bonnets, and inappropriate outfits, especially for females.
 - ▶ Feathers are very sacred to Native people. Certain feathers have significant meaning. Certain feathers must be earned, you cannot buy them.
 - ▶ War Bonnets have a very special distinction. Only the most accomplished in our tribes may don a War Bonnet.
 - ▶ Specifically for females, “Indian” costumes can be very revealing. This is an inaccurate representation of our culture.



Jude represents a Native American tribe and is wearing regalia for a Native American dance performance.





“ We don’t call our (Native American) dance outfits— costumes. Costumes are put on to become **something you are not**. When we put on our regalia or dance outfits, we are putting on these items because **that’s who we are**. ”

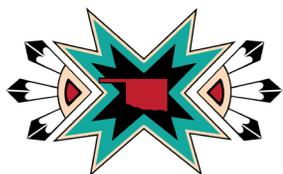
—Cortney Yarholar,
OKCPS Native American Parent
and Volunteer

4. Practice the Three S’s*

- ▶ **Source:** Consider the source of the culture and ask yourself has this culture been oppressed or discriminated against? If yes, proceed with caution or stop.
- ▶ **Significance (or sacredness):** Are these items special or sacred? If you don’t know, research them or don’t wear them.
- ▶ **Similarity:** Are you being inspired by a culture or just copying what you have seen? Make certain you are respecting that specific culture in the appropriate way.



Halloween is a great time to push a child’s imagination to it’s limit. Dressing up can be a great way to accomplish this. Please help us by providing the right perspective to make informed decisions about costume choice. It is a great time to practice respect and thoughtful decision-making while having a happy Halloween.



OKCPS is happy to share our Native Knowledge series at no cost, but we do ask that you site and credit OKCPS for the use of our educational materials.

References: Alia E. Dastagir, “Is it OK for a white kid to dress up as Moana for Halloween? And other cultural appropriation questions” USA TODAY, Published 4:18 p.m. ET Oct. 23, 2017