

NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURES and CLOTHING

Native American Is Not a Costume

Dressing up as a Native American is never appropriate. For years, classrooms across the country have included special days where students “dress up” as Native Americans for different celebrations and lesson activities. Often, the outfits people wear to look “Indian” have nothing to do with Native people and cultures. Native American cultures are vastly diverse and have a wide range of traditions that determine the clothing and adornment Native people wear. “Dressing up” as Native Americans gives students a generalized and inaccurate perspective on Native cultures and identities. Often, these costumes suggest that Native cultures exist only in the past. We promote lessons and activities that share the continuance and creativity of Native American life and cultures.

We ask that you and your students specifically refrain from making or wearing Native masks, headdresses, or imitations of either. We promote teaching about specific Native traditions without adapting them into your classroom. For example, in some Native communities, masks and headdresses are worn only by specific people who have particular abilities, have achieved a specific status, or possess certain cultural knowledge.

Today, many Native Americans wear traditional clothing for social and ceremonial occasions. In some Native cultures, people wear their traditional clothing every day. Traditional clothing, or regalia, is an important and lively aspect of Native cultures. Many Native American artists and designers integrate contemporary fashion and tradition to celebrate their unique and vibrant heritage. [Today, Native identity is shaped by many complex social, political, historical, and cultural factors.](#)

Try these culturally sensitive activities and resources:

- Have a lesson on traditional clothing and how it can change over time. NMAI’s [Infinity of Nations](#) website has many images and information about headdresses from various communities in the Western Hemisphere.
- For grades K–4, use the [“Smithsonian in Your Classroom: Native American Dolls”](#) lesson plan to learn how Native doll makers use their work to continue traditions and develop new ones.
- For grades 4–6, use the [“A Life in Beads: The Stories a Plains Dress Can Tell”](#) teaching poster from NMAI.
- Check out the book [“Identity by Design: Tradition, Change, and Celebration in Native Women’s Dresses”](#) by Emil Her Many Horses.
- Learn about [beaded horse designs in Plains clothing through NMAI](#).
- Connect to your students’ individual cultures by exploring their own traditional and contemporary clothing.



Two Kiowa girls with an infant, ca. 1890. Photograph by Thomas Craft, [NMAI](#)



Young Powwow Dancer, 2007. Photograph by staff photographer, NMAI