

WE'RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER

Life in an Algonkian Village of the Eastern Woodlands

When you're at home, does your family ever ask you to help out with tasks you don't find that exciting? You probably see adults around you working at various jobs where they earn money in order to pay for food, clothing, and other things. In an Algonkian village of the Eastern Woodlands a thousand years ago everyone would have had different tasks to do, but they didn't do these jobs to earn money. They had to work to complete these tasks, because that is the only way that they would survive. What jobs do you think they would have had to do?



In modern times, when we need food we can buy it at a grocery store or go to a restaurant. A thousand years ago, that was not an option. Instead, members of the village would have to hunt, fish, gather or grow their food in a garden. Each of these jobs required different skills. Hunters would have to know how to track and approach different kinds of animals and which kinds of hunting tools would work best for each kind. Gatherers would need to know which plants you could eat, and which plants could make you very sick. Those who fished would need to know how to weave nets, make fishing hooks and spears, and create a weir, or fish trap. Gardeners would need to know when to plant crops, how to take care of them, and how to protect the garden from animals that might want to eat it. Believe it or not, one of your jobs might have literally been to be a scarecrow, and to scare away these animals from on top of a platform in the garden using rattles, stones, or dull arrows.

Besides getting food, people in an Algonkian village would have needed to cook it, preserve some of it for later, make tools and clothing, gather firewood, build and repair their homes, and care for each other. They were careful not to waste anything and shared with each other when they made something. They also did not waste the skills of any person who could help the village. Boys and girls, men and women, young and old – all had important tasks in the community. Sometimes women went hunting. If they could use a bow and arrow and were good at being stealthy, why not? Some men stayed back in the village and did other tasks, but were not thought of as less than the hunters. They were doing important tasks that needed to get done.



Just like you might be at home, children would be given tasks to do, as well, although they also had time to play games, explore, and observe their Elders. Children were thought to represent the future, so the tasks they were given, the games they played, and the lessons their Elders taught them often allowed children to learn important skills for later in life, just like you learn important skills at school, on the playground, and at home.



As adults became Elders, they might not have been able to do physical work as much, but they served very important roles in the village. Because of their life experiences, they were known to have a lot of knowledge, so they were respected as healers, teachers, and leaders.

Children and younger adults might seek them out for advice on important decisions or knowledge about certain plants or animals. They often told stories – sometimes real, sometimes imaginary – about the world around them. Sometimes their stories were serious, sometimes they were funny, but they almost always contained lessons, in order to pass down knowledge and values to future generations. An Elder council, often made up of Elder women, made decisions that would impact the entire village, such as who should be the Sachem, or chief. Even today, Elders are highly respected in Native American communities.

As you can see, there was a lot of work to be done in Algonkian villages a thousand years ago. If people weren't doing their jobs they got reminders, and if they had a habit of not contributing they might be sent away from the village, where they would have to fend for themselves. By sharing resources, items, and responsibilities, though, people were able to work together to survive. People took turns doing everyday tasks, and went to those with specific talents when there was a task requiring those talents. While we now have grocery stores, electricity, and other technology that didn't exist a thousand years ago, perhaps their way of life could teach us important lessons about how to work together in modern times.



THE INSTITUTE FOR
AMERICAN INDIAN STUDIES
museum & research center

38 Curtis Road | Washington, CT 06793 | 860-868-0518

nieonline.com/courantnie

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI. 3.2, 3.7; 4.2, 4.3, 4.7, 4.8, 5.2, 5.3, 5.8

