

Cultural considerations for home visitors

These notes are intended to help teachers have successful home visits with families from other cultures who have recently immigrated to the USA. Taking a moment to familiarize yourself with a few culturally specific points can help you and your host both feel more at ease and comfortable during a home visit.

These reflections were prepared by the school Liaisons from all our schools in Harrisonburg and are intended to serve as general guide lines. **It is important that teachers remember to approach each family as individuals** for whom these cultural guidelines may or may not always apply. A cultural value held by one family may not necessarily be held by a different family of the same culture, but being aware of general cultural norms can help you build a better rapport with the family and avoid social missteps. The more time you spend with your families, the better you will know what is truly important to them.

In general, the cultures of our immigrant families tend to be more conservative and traditional than the dominant culture of the United States. In these communities, a person's duties and connection to the community outweigh his or her individual preferences or comforts. The wellbeing of the group comes before the desires or needs of the self. Therefore, social obligations and expectations of appropriate behavior may seem more formal than many American teachers may be used to. In some cases there are a few "don'ts" that are important to be aware of. These will be expressly discussed below.

Appropriate Attire

It is very important to remember that for most immigrant families, teachers are highly respected and viewed as knowledgeable authority figures. If an American teacher presents himself or herself as too relaxed, casual, or informal he or she risks being perceived by the family as unprofessional or unqualified to be a teacher. Teachers should be warm and cordial but should also behave as someone who takes his/her profession seriously. This is immediately reflected in how a teacher dresses. If a teacher arrives wearing tennis shoes, flip-flops, jeans, a track suit, sweat shirts or sports clothing, or anything that looks wrinkled or messy, the teacher

risks being perceived as not taking his/her role as a teacher seriously. Also, it may inadvertently communicate to the family that they really are not that important to the teacher.

In order to convey a sense of propriety and respect when visiting our immigrant families, men should be clean shaven or well-groomed. A collared shirt with buttons is appropriate. A tie is not necessary, but neither would it be considered overly dressed if you choose to wear one. For men, never wear shorts to a home visit. Shorts are considered clothing only for children in many traditional cultures.

Most of our immigrant families have conservative views about how a professional woman should present herself in public, and whether you agree entirely with the values or not, you will make the family more comfortable if you avoid sleeveless shirts and skirts above the knee. A good standard is to cover your arms and legs and refrain from showing cleavage. Jewelry should be modest and professional.

If you have a visible tattoo, please consider covering it. Many conservative families may be distressed by the idea of their child's teacher having a tattoo because tattoos in their home-culture may be associated with criminal activity or a licentious lifestyle.

If you decide you do not want to cover your tattoos or moderate your style of dress, just be aware that *your* value of "self-expression" comes at the cost of the comfort and confidence of *your student's family*. You may find it means you will have to work harder in other ways to get your families to trust and respect you.

In many Slavic, Middle-Eastern, Muslim, African and Asian cultures it is considered inappropriate to wear shoes past the front door when you visit a home. Your host may invite you to take your shoes off at the door, where there is usually a noticeable place to store them. This is done for your comfort as a guest, but also as a way for them to maintain a clean home. Plan in advance for this possibility. Wear slip-on shoes and avoid that pair of socks that you've

been meaning to mend. Sometimes, if a guest does not plan to stay long, the host will not expect you to take off your shoes. If there is any doubt, follow your host's lead.

Greetings

Using your common sense and relying on your own good upbringing will usually be enough to help you adequately greet your hosts. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

- Take the time to learn an appropriate greeting in the native language of the household. This displays respect and openness to the family's culture.
- In Muslim households, physical greetings such as handshakes should be between only people of the same gender. For example if you are a male teacher and you extend your hand to shake a woman's hand, you are putting her in a difficult situation. This is not a normal interaction from her perspective. Do not be offended if she refuses to shake your hand. Placing your hand on your chest is an acceptable gesture of welcome in this situation. Men shaking hands with men and women with women is not a problem.
- Indigenous Mexican families may also not be comfortable shaking hands, but they will usually do so to humor their guests.
- With all families, be cautious about hugging or excessively touching your host, unless you have an established relationship with them. Patting Mom or Dad on the back or reaching for them as you talk may seem normal to Americans, but it often comes across as paternalistic, patronizing, or intrusive when interacting with adults from other countries. Never pat any adult on the head. This is rude.
- When entering a living room or space where other adults are, your hosts will expect you to greet all the adults in the room even if they will not be part of the conversation. Take time to do this. A simple handshake or gesture is fine. Give special respect to elders if they are present.
- Knowing what to call a mom or dad is often very culturally specific. To be on the safe side, after you introduce yourself ask the parent, "How may I call you?" With Hispanic parents, it is not appropriate to use the first name of a person with whom you are not close friends. Almost always, you will be safe if you refer to men as Señor and women as Señora. There is no need to add any first name or last name after that.

Accepting Hospitality

For most families of traditional cultures, good social graces require that they offer their guests at least a little something to eat or drink. Even the most humble household will make an effort to bring you some refreshment.

As the guest, it is your part of the deal to accept this graciously. It is in some cases an actual sacrifice of resources to share this with you and for you to refuse it may send a message that you think their offer is not worthy of you.

Accept an offer of refreshments the first time you are offered. Simply say, “thank you” even if you do not want what they have offered you. Then if you really do not think you can handle what they have given you, just hold it in your lap, or as you get ready to leave say that you would like to take it with you. If they offer you a beverage that you cannot drink such as tea, coffee or soda, it is ok to indicate you would prefer water.

Do not take a water bottle with you inside the house. Remember, it is the host’s responsibility to offer you refreshment and you deprive them of that opportunity if you carry a water bottle with you. It would be like going to someone’s house for dinner and bringing a bag of McDonald’s food with you when you arrive. Some families may even interpret this as a sign that you doubt their cleanliness or simply mistrust them.

Do not bring your own children with you to a home visit (for example, on the way home from picking them up from soccer practice). This conveys a sense that the visit was an afterthought.

Suggestions for the conversation

- Relax and try your best to appear comfortable.
- Limit “small talk.” Project sincerity at all times.
- Do not point out obvious deficiencies or problems with the house (such as leaking faucets, dirty kitchen table, or broken furniture). You can be sure your host is already very aware of those things. Focus on the people you came to visit.

- Especially with families who have come to the USA as refugees, do not ask “Why did your family come to the United States?” These questions are sometimes very difficult to talk about and can bring up unsettling feelings and memories.
- For most immigrant parents, their number one priority is their child’s behavior. Most parents will want to start with this topic. After you discuss behavior, you can address academic concerns.
- Initiate the conversation with something positive but beware not to set-up a “bait and switch” dynamic (For example, do not say, “We love having your son in class **BUT...**”). Parents often perceive this as being dishonest and insincere. Especially with Slavic families a good strategy to use may be the “good news and bad news” approach. When you discuss problems, be serious and do not smile too much. Bad news delivered with a glib or cheery affect confuses parents, and they may perceive you as being fake. Be direct and straight forward. State problem behaviors concretely (He is copying other student’s work) but, do not make judgment statements (Your son is a cheater.) One perception this community often has is that American teachers can be “wishy washy” or indecisive. Remember, you are the professional. Parents expect to be able to trust your professional judgment. Be ready to tell parents what your expectations are and what you would like them to do to help you. If you do not have a plan ready when you bring up a concern, this may come across as weakness and a sign of being an ineffective teacher.
- Consider starting the conversation about academics by asking parents what goals they have for their own children. Allow sufficient wait time when you ask parents to offer their input. They will need some time to formulate an answer. Be a good listener and demonstrate to parents that what they are saying is important to you.
- When asking for parent feedback, try to avoid asking vague questions such as “What do you think about that?” Instead try a direct question such as, “How much time do you expect your son to spend on Math homework?”

The Families' Expectations

The idea of a teacher coming to visit a family's home may be a very new idea to some people.

Below are some reflections of what may be the family's expectation by cultural groups.

(Remember, these are only generalizations).

Slavic Families:

- A family would generally feel good about a teacher visiting their home
- The idea of a home-visit would not be entirely unfamiliar
- Often in some Slavic countries teachers visit their students at home if the student has been sick for more than a day or two. Sometimes they bring missed work, and classmates may even come to wish their classmate well.
- A Slavic family would understand this as a way to show concern and care for a student and family
- Many Slavic families will enjoy the idea of opening their home to American guests. They are eager to get to know Americans whom they can respect and trust. They may be interested to learn about American social customs and behaviors.

Middle Eastern/Muslim Families:

- Talk with your school Liaison to know more about what to expect when visiting a Muslim home. Remember, not all Arabs are Muslims and not all Muslims are Arabs. Kurds, Afghanis, Pakistanis, and Iranians are not Arabs. Make sure you know the basics about the family you are visiting before you go so you avoid needless mistakes.
- Teachers do not routinely visit students' homes, so this may be a new idea to these families. Teachers should be certain to explain the reason for the visit to the family before they come.
- Hospitality is an extremely important part of these families' culture and religion, so they will want to be very good hosts. They may invite the teacher to stay for a meal. When you call to set up the visit let the family know if you need to limit the visit to only a short time. (I'm afraid I won't be able to stay too long on this day). If you are invited to eat at

a family's home, take advantage of the opportunity to have a delicious meal! These cultures are world-renowned for their extra-special attention to guests. You will not be disappointed.

Latin American Families:

- In Latin America teachers almost never visit a home due in part to safety concerns. This may be a very new idea to some families and may even cause them a little (or a lot) of concern. In many Latin American countries, parents have much greater access to schools and their expectations may be that anytime is a good time to drop by the school to address a problem or concern. In some countries, parents come to the schools to pick up their child's report cards and progress reports. Home visits are just as new for many of these families as they may be for you, the teacher.
- For Latino homes hospitality is very important. Even very humble households will do their best to make a special guest feel welcome.
- Houses are very busy places and a lot may be going on around you. Be gracious and flexible even if things do not go exactly as you planned.

Eritrean Families:

- For these families, most of whom will be refugee families, everything in their life is a source of change and adjustment right now.
- They may be uncertain and perhaps fearful about teachers visiting their homes.
- Be warm and welcoming but stay focused on the reasons why you are visiting.
- Try to find out if these families have resettlement sponsors before you visit. They may be helpful in arranging logistics with these families.

Concerns about Personal Safety

Be honest with yourself. If you know that visiting homes of a different culture or visiting a low income neighborhood will be a challenge or stressful for you, be honest with your administrators and ask for additional support. It is better to go with someone who can support

you than for you to inadvertently project a sense of discomfort, nervousness, or fear which could offend the family and damage your relationship with them and potentially negatively affect their feelings about the school.

If you are concerned about your personal physical safety, talk with your Liaison or administrator to go over some simple things you can do to feel more comfortable.

Concerns about “picking up” insect pests are largely exaggerated. Keep in mind this child has already been in your classroom for months, as has his jacket, backpack, and lunchbox. Certainly, some houses do have insect problems but consider the fact that anything that was in the house that was truly that bad would have already made its presence known to you in your classroom. How many of us as middle-class teachers can say that we have never had problems with ants, fleas, or other pests in our homes?

Remember, if there are pests in a house do not make the assumption that it is because the family you are visiting is unclean. Especially in apartment complexes, no matter how clean they themselves are, tenants are often at the mercy of those who live around them when it comes to pests. If you enter a house preoccupied with what you “may catch” it will inevitably show on your face and detract from your ability to focus on the people you came to visit. Remember, clothes were meant to be washed and life sometimes requires being a little uncomfortable. Always act and conduct yourself in a way that protects the dignity of your host. Being a gracious guest means sometimes you just have to get over some things.

Above all, keep in mind that home visits are really more for your benefit than they are for the family. The opportunity to build a relationship in these moments is tremendous. Seeing where a child spends the other half of his or her life could help you fill in the pieces to the jigsaw puzzle that is this student’s education. Enjoy yourself on these visits and remember that for our immigrant families you are an ambassador for your school and for American culture.