

Survival Topic #9: Religion, Holidays, and Customs

Questions to Ask:

What religion do you practice?
What other religions do people from your country practice?
What holidays did you have in your country?
How did you celebrate them?
What are your customs for birth, marriage, and death?
What is a polite way to greet an older person?
How are people treated differently depending on their age?

Topics to Share:

Discuss your own religious background.
Compare the way you celebrate your holidays to the way your mentees celebrate theirs.
Describe the special holidays in the United States or another country you are familiar with.
Discuss how your family celebrates births and weddings.

English Language Learner Tips:

Bring a calendar and mark both American holidays and your mentees' holidays together.

Bring pictures to show a range of activities for holidays. See if there are appropriate pictures or books in the library. Help them write a story using pictures and English words about their own holidays or traditions.

Customs and traditions surrounding the important transitions in life are always interesting to discuss. How do you celebrate a birth or a new child? What customs do they have for marriage and divorce? How do they commemorate a death? Each culture has its own unique way of celebrating and grieving.

Other Notes:

Learning about these kinds of cultural differences are often the most exciting part of working with refugees! It may be easier to approach these topics with those whose English skills are fairly proficient, but it may be possible to demonstrate some customs for speakers with less English.

One of the unique aspects of American religious life is the variety of religions practiced. Refugees might have trouble understanding the differences between the many Protestant denominations, or they may belong to or be familiar with one such denomination. Many refugee resettlement services are affiliated with religious groups so they may have a sponsor through their church.

It is important to remember that the religious beliefs of your mentees should be respected. Refugees are sometimes vulnerable to religious organizations that aggressively recruit them. Remind them that they have the right to say "no."

Refugees may sometimes welcome invitations to learn more about or join in on your religious activities or holiday celebrations. Be sensitive to their needs as newcomers when deciding to invite them.

Sharing holiday traditions with refugees can be rewarding and fun. As you establish a relationship with the family or individual, you may want to include them in your family holiday events. You can also invite them to participate in local celebrations to help them feel welcome in the community.