



Refugee Welcome
Collective

Cultural Considerations

There are many considerations when engaging in cross-cultural work as a community sponsor group. Along with some of the specific areas mentioned below, groups should approach their interactions with newly arrived refugees with cultural humility.

Cultural humility: The National Institutes of Health (NIH) defines cultural humility as “a lifelong process of self-reflection and self-critique whereby the individual not only learns about another’s culture, but one starts with an examination of her/his own beliefs and cultural identities”

- Allows the client to be the teacher
- Recognizes cultures are not a monolith and leaves room for intersectionality
- Incorporates considerations around inherent power dynamics and privileges
- Encourages self-reflection and critique
- Choosing humility instead of humiliation allows for growth
- Values flexible and responsive
- Ensures differences are valued. There is no assumption of right or wrong, only difference.

In Communication

Greeting customs may vary between cultures. They may incorporate factors such as age or gender. Take your lead from the newcomer and feel free to express your own personal boundaries as well.

Conversation style and responses may vary between cultures. While individuals the U.S. generally answer questions and tell stories in a linear fashion, newcomers may use more cyclical storytelling. While not always direct or convenient with respect to time, there is value and meaning to be gathered in their narrative.

The automatic “yes” is something to be aware of when working with newcomers. Some may not feel comfortable directly saying ‘no’ to a question or suggestion for fear of



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appearing rude or disrespectful. One way to engage with this difference may be to ask open-ended questions or ask a question multiple times allowing the newcomer to know it is ok to say “no.”

Non-verbal cues and tone do not always have the same meaning between cultures.

In Society

Relationship to time may vary between cultures. Individuals from the U.S. often value punctuality and productivity when it comes to time and scheduling. Some newcomers may have a more relaxed relationship to time; one that values quality time for rest and scheduling social events with more flexible start and end times. It is important not to associate tardiness with rudeness or disrespect.

Religion is often a key part of culture. You should be mindful of how a newcomer's religion may impact other areas of their lives. Their religion may incorporate dietary restrictions to be mindful about. It may also be important to be aware of days of religious observance when scheduling activities and services.

Gender roles may vary between cultures. It is important to respect these differences even when they may conflict with your own values or assumptions. Gender may become a consideration when delegating members of your group to a specific service or task.

In the Home

Family roles, especially parenting, may be a key cultural consideration for your group. Be mindful that while youth may learn English and U.S. culture quicker than their parents, the role of the parents should be respected by ensuring youth are not used as interpreters or cultural brokers in adult matters and responsibilities. Parents should also be empowered to navigate and make decisions about things such as the education system. Newcomers may also have cultural expectations surrounding who in the home should work, etc.

Home etiquette may vary between cultures. Hospitality practices such as providing tea or snacks should be acknowledged. Cleanliness practices such as the removal of shoes in the home should also be considered.

Fiscal management considerations and priorities may also vary between cultures and should be taken into consideration if you are assisting with newcomers. For example, many newcomers may prioritize sending money to their family overseas, even as their budget is tight.



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As you encounter and navigate cultural differences, feel free to reach out to the local resettlement agency who have considerable experiences and resources. One such excellent resource for learning more about the different culture groups that come through refugee resettlement is [Cultural Orientation Resource Exchange](#). Remember, while these backgrounders may give you an idea of cultural considerations, you should not assume everything you learn will apply to a newcomer.