



## Syrian refugee students: Cultural background profile

### Language

Arabic, Kurdish, Armenian, Aramaic, Circassian, French, and some English.

### Teaching in the Classroom

The war in Syria has displaced 12 million people since 2011. Before the war, Syria was developing a strong education system. School was compulsory and free for grades 1–9. Literacy rates were at 95% for 15–24 year-olds. Schools were strict in discipline and old-fashioned in teaching methods, with rote learning. School was taught in Arabic, with French or English being the most popular foreign languages. Children who had the opportunity to study foreign languages will have an easier time reading and writing due to being familiar with the Roman alphabet. Currently, most children in Syria, however, no longer attend school. Since the beginning of the conflict, school attendance has plummeted due to structural damage, lack of teachers, and insecure conditions. In some parts of Syria, only 6% of children are at school.



The summary of a 2015 report from the Migration Policy Institute explains that, among refugee children, “Approximately half were not enrolled in school in mid-2015; enrollment rates may be as low as 20 percent in Lebanon and 30 percent in Turkey. Even when they do enroll, Syrian children are more likely than their non-refugee peers to receive poor or failing grades, or to drop out. Children may struggle to bridge gaps in their learning after substantial educational disruptions, particularly when contending with language barriers or new curricula. Syrian refugee children are also at risk for a range of mental health issues, having experienced very high levels of trauma ... almost half displayed symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)—ten times the prevalence among children around the world.”

It is likely that Syrian students coming from camps will not have had access to education. It is important for teachers to give the children time to adjust, as the children have lacked structure in their lives for some time. Teachers can help assimilate their interests by using technology in their curriculum. Young Syrians tend to be very technologically savvy, especially with social media.

### **Family/School Engagement**

Syrian parents will likely be very interested in being a part of their children's education, as it is their belief that poor behavior or grades reflect poorly on the family at large. Syrian children will likely feel fortunate to have the opportunity to go to school at all, and will be enthusiastic about engaging with their new environment. It is important to keep in mind that many refugees do not know how to drive or lack access to a car, so transportation to school events will be a challenge even if parents want to be involved.

Syrians do not have a strong sense of personal space. Individuals of the same sex may hold hands, touch, or kiss without sexual connotation. Strangers may bump into each other on the street or cut in front of others when standing in line. Gesticulating and talking loudly is common and should not be thought of as aggressive. Punctuality is not thought of as important so Syrians may be late to events or meetings. Teachers should take the time to emphasize the importance of being on time by explaining how tardiness may affect their child or other parents. Syrians likely have strong opinions about the ongoing conflict in their country so discussion of political or religious views will be sensitive.

### **Culture, Gender and Family**

Syrians are extremely family-oriented, and a lot of homes are multigenerational. Family members feel a duty to take care of each other; if one family member does something improper, it is thought to bring shame on the family.

Syrian food is a social activity and food is shared with one's eating companions. Men pay when eating outside of the home, and it is considered impolite to split the check. Coffee and tea are consumed often. Smoking is common although women do not smoke in public or in front of men.



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Syria is a largely patriarchal society where it is the duty of the men in the family to protect the females. Gender roles within families vary according to economic class and location (urban vs. rural). In most rural and semi-urban homes, it is the duty of the woman to do the housework and child rearing. It is more common in urban homes to have hired help while the woman works outside of the home. In middle- and lower-class homes, women either do not work or are expected to leave their careers when they become mothers.

Religiously conservative families (Muslim and Christian) place emphasis on women staying home and discourage socializing with men in the outside world. While some men and women chose their partners, marriages are frequently arranged by families. Polygamy is not uncommon; about 9% of urban men and 16% of rural men have more than one wife.