Colombia refugee students: Cultural background profiles

Language
Spanish and English

Teaching in the Classroom
Primary school is mandatory and free in Colombia. Schools are available in nearly all communities, although urban schools offer better supplies, more trained teachers, and are held in more modern buildings. About 85% of children ages 6–12 attend primary school. Secondary school is not free, so children from poorer homes are frequently unable to attend. After secondary schools, students can attend five-year university programs or can opt to go to technical school for 2 to 3 years. Primary and secondary schools mandate that children wear uniforms to lessen the distinction between social classes. Colombian children may be surprised to learn that they are free to wear what they please at school.

In 1975, Colombia implemented a method of teaching called Escuela Nueva (New School), which focuses on placing children in the middle of the learning process, rather than having them learn primarily by listening to their teacher. Students learn in small groups and are allowed to move at their own pace. The program is seen as a major success—it is used in over 20,000 schools and has expanded internationally to 17 countries. Colombian students in the U.S. are likely to thrive in group environments and will enjoy group discussion.

School frequently ends around noon, so Colombian children will not be used to the length of the American school day. It may be advisable for teachers to plan interactive activities for the afternoon, to help maintain focus.

Family/School Engagement
Women are usually the leaders when engaging with social issues, church functions, and education so will likely be enthusiastic about participating in school functions. Teachers
may consider suggesting that Colombian fathers become participants on parent advisory committees or PTA, as they are frequently in governance or decision-making roles within their families. 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.

Family is of utmost importance to Colombians and there is great respect for elders, who are expected to make important family decisions. If older members of the family come to school functions, they should be acknowledged and greeted first. Within families, the oldest child usually receives the most prestige and attention, so teachers should take care to give additional encouragement to younger siblings.

Colombians are very friendly, but initial meetings tend to be formal. When meeting someone for the first time, it is appropriate to shake hands while making eye contact. Colombians are indirect communicators, so it is important to be mindful of their body language and context rather than the words being exchanged. Teachers should be careful to not ask too many direct and personal questions during the first exchanges, so as not to cause offense or embarrassment. Colombians can become animated and raise their voice when speaking, but this should not be interpreted as aggression or agitation.

Colombians have a different sense of time from North Americans, and it is the norm to show up late to appointments, even if they are business-related. Teachers should iterate the expectation of punctuality in the United States, explaining that American sense of time is not event-based and their tardiness may affect others adversely.

**Culture, Gender and Family**
Households in urban areas usually contain the nuclear family while rural families may live with several generations. Both tend to live close to other family members and visit each other frequently.

Gender roles are clearly defined in Colombia, with the male frequently providing for the family financially. In upper and middle classes, it is more common for women to stay at home, while in lower classes and in rural areas, women may work out of necessity.
Violence against women is an issue. According to a recent national study by the non-profit organization Profamilia, 37 percent of married women have been physically abused by their husbands but rarely speak out.