

Algerian refugee students: cultural background profiles



Language

Arabic (official)
French and Berber dialects

Teaching in the classroom

In French colonial days, many children were taught primarily in French. However, at the time of independence in 1962, the Algerian government took over the education system and redesigned it to meet the needs of its population and has sought to increase enrollment. School is free and mandatory for children aged 6 to 15 years old. However, only about half of children within that range are enrolled in school. You may notice a variation in literacy levels among Algerians.

Family/school engagement

When greeting Algerians, it is common to see good friends of the same sex kiss on the cheek or shake hands with one another. For more formal interactions, handshakes are more acceptable as well as a simple nod of acknowledgment. However, it is unacceptable for some men and women to touch members of the opposite sex due to their religious beliefs. It is important to know this if a family member does not extend their hand to shake hands.

Algerian culture is otherwise informal and you will find that modes of speaking are generally relaxed. It is common to ask how the family is doing and inquire about general topics. The relaxed nature also applies to sense of time. People and relationships can take precedence over tasks and deadlines. Due to these priorities time may be viewed loosely in social and even business or classroom situations. Algerian students may be late to class while they adjust to the rules of the classroom.

Algerian communication styles are direct but non-confrontational. It is better to avoid public criticism, as it can bring shame to a student and his or her family. In this case,

indirect or polite feedback is more appropriate. It is important also to avoid discussing politics, sexuality, and religious issues until a bond of trust is established. General topics of conversation are better at first, including sports, family, music, food and culture.

Personal space amongst Algerians can be closer than the average interaction with members of the same sex, but greater than usual with members of the opposite sex. Light touching is acceptable only if you know someone well, so it is generally reserved for good family or friends. In the classroom, it may be best to remain more formal. However, eye contact is a sign of respect without being overly direct in nature. Making eye contact when speaking will let your students know you are listening. Wagging one's index finger is considered rude, so it is also better to use your whole hand rather than pointing with your index finger to draw attention.

Family ties are strong, and Algerians rely heavily on family support. It is common for Algerians to live with extended families due to the tightly knit sense of community. This means that families are closely involved in students' lives. Thus, when addressing any particular issue with students, it is normal to speak to family members to better understand the situation or seek insight into offering alternatives, solutions or ideas. Grandparents of Algerian students may be eager to engage in their education as well.

Culture, gender and family

The majority of Algerians are Muslim, but there are other less commonly practiced religions. The predominant ethnic group is Arab-Berber and a small percentage of European descent.

Algerians have acquired modern Western-style clothing, but traditional attire is also common. It may be common to see more traditional women covering their hair as a religious practice or Islamic garment. Most socialization in Algerian culture revolves around family, and men and women socialize less often together. The formality in interactions with the opposite sex has a religious foundation. These practices apply to personal life as well as the classroom.

Hierarchically, roles of men and women have evolved historically. While they were traditionally viewed in the past, now it is common for women to enter the workforce. Because of this ongoing shift, you will see varied expectations among families.