

Cultural background: GUATEMALA

(Guatemalan asylee, refugee and immigrant students)



Languages

Spanish (official)

Mayan languages (a total of 21 are recognized):
K'iche, Q'eqchi, Mam, Kaqchikel, others).

Do not assume that Mayans from Guatemala speak Spanish.

Teaching in the classroom

School for children is free and compulsory in Guatemala, in theory. There have been new programs and policies in recent years, resulting in increased numbers attending school and with passing grades. But not all Guatemalans have had access to education, and fewer than half make it to middle school, especially the Maya and those in remote rural areas.

There are many private schools due to the lack of public schools in some rural areas. The private schools are often run by Catholic organizations. If children have attended school regularly, they may speak Spanish and English. Other children may only speak their own Mayan language.

You may find illiteracy among parents and children. Parents may have trouble with paperwork, especially long forms. There can also be confusion caused by family members with different last names.

Students are taught to be obedient, to not question instructions, and generally not to behave disrespectfully.

Family/school engagement

Interpersonal engagement is characterized by formality and respect. Teachers are highly respected in Guatemala, and Guatemalan parents may not raise concerns or question you because of this. They may also be ashamed of their own lack of education or knowledge about the school system.

Elders are highly respected. Women are not treated as equals, however. There is a high rate of abuse of women. Many of the parents you meet will be mothers who have fled with their children to escape gang violence.

Personal space of two and a half to three feet space is considered normal, and touching between women is normal during a conversation, more so than between men or between women and men.

Making eye contact is a sign of respect and a critical way of showing interest. Speaking loudly is not approved of. It is common practice to shake hands between men and women, or for women to embrace one another with a kiss on the cheek. Men generally greet other males with a handshake, but it is not unusual for close friends and family male and females to greet one another with a kiss on the cheek.

Culture, gender and family

Most Guatemalans hold Roman Catholic or Protestant religious views and carry indigenous Mayan beliefs. Around 50% of Guatemalans are Roman Catholic, while around 40% are Protestant. The remaining 10% of Guatemalans practice a range of Mayan indigenous religions. The Mayan beliefs are centered on the worship of gods who control natural earthly elements such as weather and crops.

Guatemalans are usually identified between Amerindians and Ladinos. Ladinos are those who have adopted the Spanish language and culture and are classified as mestizos, or those of mixed Amerindian and European descent.

Male-female interaction is traditionally limited outside the family, and dating is uncommon until later on. A female Guatemalan adolescent's fifteenth birthday marks her adulthood and is celebrated by a traditional ceremony. For a male Guatemalan adolescent, his mark of adulthood occurs later on when he reaches the age of eighteen.

Formality between genders in this aspect remains throughout adulthood, but friend and family ties are often close. The extended family is generally involved in the nuclear family life and forms the foundation of Amerindian communities. Guatemalans are community-minded rather than individualistic.