Family Life

The Senegalese household is typically comprised of parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins, and children. It is becoming more common for both parents to work outside of the home in Senegal, however traditionally it is the man who is the main financial provider for the family. Traditionally, the father has the primary authority in the home; however, it is becoming more common for both parents to share the authority.

Teen Life: If a Senegalese teen has something, it is generally his or her own, and not understood to be the shared property of siblings. This includes clothing. When siblings want to borrow something from each other, it is generally understood that they must ask first. Teens are not given allowances however their expenses are covered by an adult member of the family. While it is important to always be respectful, many Senegalese teenagers interact informally with all of their family members.

Responsibilities: In Senegal, it is considered respectful to allow family members, individual time for themselves, to pursue their own activities, socialize with friends or to simply relax. Teens participate in household chores, mostly girls who cook and clean. Families in Senegal typically eat together out of one dish and most meals are presented and shared on the floor. Meals are cooked for the entire family by the women of the house.

Parental Involvement: Internet at homes depends on where students live. In the capitol Dakar most teens would have Internet. Teens depend on and learn from their peers more so than US teens. Parents are typically in direct contact with their teen’s school and are kept aware of their academic progress. Teens in Senegal are largely dependent on their parents.

Pets: Families have animals for more utilitarian reasons: guard dogs, cats to deal with rodents, sheep to keep for Eid al-Fitr celebration, etc. Most Muslim families will not keep dogs in the house.

School

Classes: In Senegal, students are evaluated on written assignments and exams in addition to oral exams for languages (English, Spanish, Portuguese, and German) for the national exams. At high school students can choose language class between Spanish, Arabic, German, Russian, Portuguese (English is mandatory) otherwise it is a standardized curriculum and everyone across all high school classes in the country take the same classes. Students remain in one classroom throughout the school day and the teachers rotate. The majority of schools in Senegal are mixed gender and boys and girls can sit side by side.

School Relationships: In Senegal it is a formal relationship. The teacher is called Mr. or Mrs. and students "are not friends with their teachers' but see teachers as an authority.

Extracurricular Activities: There are clubs at school such as English Club, Spanish Club, Science Club, (that is, academic clubs). There are state wide academic contests such as, general knowledge; scrabble; essay; English speaking club; presentation and plays. There is soccer, basketball and track, but the games are played between classes at the school, not with other schools. With respect to making friends, neighborhoods organize soccer matches between neighborhood teams. Generally students make friends in class, as unlike in the US, the students stay with the same class during the academic year and it is up to the teacher to change rooms, not the students. There are exceptions such as the for international private schools such as, International School of Dakar and the Dakar Academy and the American Track at the Senegalese-American Bi-lingual School (SABS).

School Rules and Attire: Many Senegalese high schools have a “zero tolerance” policy regarding cell phone usage, and fighting. These activities are generally not allowed at all in school and the penalties for engaging in them vary by school. In general, students wear school uniforms.

Returning from Exchange: In Senegal, generally students do not repeat a class, as parents expect their children to continue with their studies. The social pressure is great and thus students take “reinforcement classes” (summer school) when they return to make up for the year they missed. This is stressful and challenging for students but until now all YES alumni have been successful in continuing onto the next class.
Mixed Gender Socializing: Mixed gender socializing is generally frowned upon in Senegalese culture except at school during classes and occasionally as a group.

Friendships: Teenagers socialize in groups and one-on-one, generally by the same gender. Senegalese teenagers meet most of their friends through common activities, and from family/neighborhood connections. It is not uncommon for teens to share money with each other when they have it. Friendship is very important in Senegalese culture, and the bonds between friends are strong.

Communication Styles: Senegalese culture is active listening, that is its indirect communication with the responsibility on the listener to understand the message; unlike in US culture where the onus is on the portrayee of information. Therefore, subtle cues are utilized as direct communication, especially to an elder, is considered impolite.

Eye Contact: In Senegalese culture, eye contact with an elder is not encouraged, even between younger and older adults.

Cultural Norms: With the peers, teenagers speak freely and directly, with parents and other elders in the family they will generally not be frank and direct about negative feelings. A teenager in Senegal would be quite bothered and uncomfortable calling an elder by their first name. In Senegal a formal title is given to a relationship with an adult, where aunt, uncle to all those older or Madame and Monsieur. Age is of utmost importance in Senegal and a meaning distinction deserving more respect the older you are.

Religion: Attending religious services is often a family event in Senegal, and the community aspect of the service is often very important in addition to the religious aspect.

Holidays: In Senegal, both Christian and Senegalese holidays are observed and shared between the two religions. That is, during Eid al-Fitr, Senegalese Muslims will bring their traditional meal to their Christian neighbors and vice versa during Christian holidays. The most important holiday in Senegal is Tabaski (Eid el-Kabir), this is the holiday that students will most likely miss the most, as sheep are sacrificed and shared with the community. Celebrations can last up to three days. New clothes are bought and families visit their neighbors, other family members, etc.

Guest Culture: It is expected that a guest decline at least 3-4 times before saying yes to food or drink. However, the guest is usually not asked and as soon as they arrive the host brings food and drink to the guest, without asking and with an expectation that the guest will partake in what is provided to them.

Lunch and Diets: Generally Senegalese eat around the bowl, so depending on how many people are at the bowl and how much food is available will determine how much someone will eat. Depending on the school, where students live, and what grade level (primary school students always go home for lunch), students will eat at school (at high school level) but there is no formal cafeteria, there are small boutiques that sell sandwiches and drinks that students can buy. Students do not bring lunch to school, as it appears to be socially unacceptable. Eating leftovers is not common but Senegalese do eat left over food between immediate family members.

Personal Hygiene: Senegalese teenagers generally take a quick (5 minute) shower twice a day and as Muslims wash before praying. Teenagers in Senegal are expected to keep their bathrooms clean and dry after using them (towels are hung up, and hygiene products are put away). It is generally thought to be unclean in Senegal to wear the same clothes two days in a row or to wear them twice before washing, how-ever the income level of a family can impact this.