

TESOL Resource Center – Activity Submission

- **Title** American Culture Capsules
- **Author** Krista Bittenbender
- **Proficiency level** Intermediate
- **Grade level** secondary school - adult
- **Purpose of the activity** Enlighten students about certain elements of American culture including pets, fast food, and the changing American family.
- **Type of activity**

Includes a reading passage, discussion questions, and ideas for additional activities. Could be done as a whole class, small group, or partner activity. Any classroom setting and seating arrangement could be used.
- **Objective**

ESL Standards for Pre-K-12 Students: Grades 9-12: Goal 2, Standard 2
To use English to achieve academically in all content areas: Students will use English to obtain, process, construct, and provide subject matter information in spoken and written form
- **Duration**

One culture capsule reading passage and the corresponding discussion questions should easily be covered in less than a 50 minute class period, with some time left for the additional activities. There are 3 separate culture capsules included in this submission.
- **Activity**

See the next page for the culture capsules.

Americans and Their Pets: A Culture Capsule

To many Americans, a family is not complete without a pet. More than half of Americans have a pet. The most common pets include dogs and cats, but there are nearly as many possibilities for pets as there are people. Different types of birds, fish, and rodents, for example mice or hamsters, are frequently pets. American pets may also be exotic lizards, snakes, or even insects!

Americans treat their pets like members of the family. They usually spend most of their time inside the house. Sometimes pets are allowed onto the furniture, maybe even the bed! Most families pay their pets a lot of attention and talk to them as if they were people. Pets may even be included in a family photo.

If the household has a fenced yard, dogs may be let outside at different times throughout the day. Otherwise, a pet like a dog must be walked on a leash. Some cities have dog parks, where dogs can run around inside a fenced area with other dogs and their owners. Most pets need to have a license and be registered with the local county.

Americans worry about their pets' health. Pets must be taken to the veterinarian regularly to get the appropriate vaccines and medicines. Some pets need monthly treatments for parasites. Sometimes pets are on a special diet or take special supplements.

Americans spend a lot of money on their pets. In every city there are pet stores with toys, food, and special products just for pets. There are beds designed just for pets and fancy crates and carriers. Some people dress their pets in clothes or have them professionally groomed. There are fancy shampoos, lotions, and other products for the pets' hair, skin, and teeth. Most pet stores have aisles and aisles of toys for a pet's enjoyment. Even grocery stores have an aisle of pet products and the local convenience store will usually carry at least one kind of cat and dog food.

Some people do not like to leave their pets alone all day. There are pet sitters and dog walkers that will come take care of a pet while its owner is at work. Sometimes dogs are even taken to “Doggy Daycare” to spend the day with other dogs and people. Some Americans treat their pets as if they were their own children and may even refer to them this way.

Americans love their pets. They are an important part of the American family. They spend lots of money on their pets and stores are ready to meet this demand.

Questions:

1. Do you have, or have you ever had a pet?
2. Are pets an important part of your culture?
3. What differences are there in the way people treat their pets in America and in your home country?

Materials: Advertisements for large pet specialty shops (i.e. PetSmart), books about dogs and cats, ads for dog walkers and pet sitters, images of families with their pets, information on getting a dog license from the county, classified ads for pets.

Activities:

1. Use the internet and visit the American Kennel Club’s Web site to have students find the most popular dog breed.
2. Use the classified ads to list as many different pets that are for sale as possible.
3. Visit the PetSmart Web site to research how much a pet might cost for a month’s worth of food, treats, and treatments. Or have students calculate how much it would cost to provide everything a new pet would need.

Americans and Fast Food: A Culture Capsule

It is difficult to drive down the street in any American town without passing at least one fast food restaurant. They seem to be everywhere. Since approximately a quarter of the American population eats in some kind of fast food establishment each day, this should not be surprising. In this busy American lifestyle, getting food on the go seems essential.

When schedules are filled with everything from work to school to play to taking care of the household and its family members, there seems to be little time to stop and have a proper sit down meal. Fast foods can be a great convenience; they are just what the name indicates—fast. When someone is short on time, but needs to eat or feed their family, places like McDonalds can be an easy solution.

Eating on the go is a very common happening in America. It is not uncommon to see people driving by while eating a sandwich or drinking a coffee. “Drive thru” windows are designed to get people their food as quickly as possible; they do not even have to get out of their cars. Even sit down restaurants have picked up on this trend: they often have pick up windows or curbside service as well.

However, with all this convenience does come a price. Americans are increasingly becoming more and more obese. This trend is leading to an increase in poor health and disease. Heart disease, diabetes, strokes, and even cancer are linked to obesity. The problem with fast food is that most of it is extremely high in calories that have little nutritional value.

Fast food tends to be more reasonable than other healthier foods and it is also very satisfying. People feel full after eating it. Unfortunately, that fullness is due to high levels of fat and refined carbohydrates. Much of the food served in fast food restaurants is high in sugar, causing blood sugar levels to spike, only to come crashing down later, causing headaches, low energy, and food cravings. In addition, the portion sizes tend to be much

bigger than a healthy serving, causing people to overindulge.

It is important to remember that even though fast food can be convenient and may taste good, it can have negative long term effects on your health. If people in America continue to eat fast food at the rate they eat it now, there may be a health crisis. Until Americans figure out how to take more time for cooking healthier meals, this will be a difficult challenge to overcome.

Questions:

1. Do you like to eat fast food?
2. Do people eat lots of fast food in your culture?
3. What are the differences in the way people eat in America compared to your home country?
4. What are some of the problems associated with fast food?

Materials: Advertisements for fast food, Fast food Web sites, the food pyramid, excerpts from the movie *Super Size Me*, fast food menus, nutritional information for fast food products

Activities:

1. View print and television advertisements for fast food restaurants, to determine what features they have in common. (fun, thin, or happy people, cheap prices, tempting pictures and descriptions of food)
2. Use fast food menus and nutritional information to calculate how many calories and fat are in a meal. Compare this to the daily federal recommendations.
3. Visit fast food Web site to research how many fast food establishments are within a five mile radius of your school.
4. View parts of the movie *Super Size Me*, and discuss as a class.

The Changing American Family: A Culture Capsule

Most people envision family in a traditional sense of the word. For Americans this used to mean a married mother and father and two or three children living together in a household. But in America today, the face of the American family is changing.

More and more children are raised in single parent homes, sometimes this is the result of divorce, but may also be due to a single person simply raising a child alone. Often parents remarry, combining families and adding prefixes like “step” and “half” to siblings and parents. In some states gay couples are adopting children or raising their own in households with two parents of the same gender. Sometimes children are raised by an aunt or grandparent because their birth parents are unable to take care of them.

The American family has been small and nuclear in fashion since the colonial times. In a country that was founded by those leaving their homelands, the size of the average family was naturally small. However, even today the size of the American family is shrinking; an average family size used to include more than three people, according to a recent US Census report that number is now closer to two.

In addition, extended families consisting of aunts, uncles, cousins do not necessarily live in the same town or even the same state as the rest of the family. Grandparents often move to a new place to retire or live in an adult community. It is relatively uncommon for families to all live near each other, especially in the urban areas of the country.

Another feature of the American family is working mothers. While in the past women may have stayed at home with their children, since the 1950s this has been changing more and more. It is also becoming acceptable for the father to stay home with the children, when it makes sense for that family. Today it is most common for both parents to work, often leaving children to be taken care of by day care programs and baby

sitters. In single parent homes, it is essential that the parent is employed.

American families certainly are changing and are different from families in other parts of the globe. No family is better than another, and what works for one family may not work for another. The way family is defined is simply a matter of perspective and may include a great variety of people.

Questions:

1. What is your family like?
2. How is family valued in your culture?
3. What are the differences between American families and families in your homeland? What are some similarities?

Materials: Images of a variety of families, US Census Web site, PBS *American Family* Series, people from different family backgrounds to interview

Activities:

1. View pictures of different families and discuss how that family may be similar or different to your own.
2. Have a class discussion about what defines a family.
3. Interview American students about their families. Find out who they live with, who they are closest to, how many siblings they have, where there extended family lives, and other features of their family.
5. Research the average family size in 5 different cultures and compare that to American families.
6. Use the US Census Website to research differences between family size in different regions in the United States.