Life Skill:
Working with diversity—demonstrate awareness of diversity; recognize the value of diversity

Asian Value:
Way of Golden Medium—treat people with respect; understand self and others; establish good relationships with others

Pillar of Character:
Respect—treat others with respect; be tolerant of differences

Success Indicator:
Youth will describe ways that Japanese customs and traditions are different from their own.

Materials:
None
Today we are going to take an imaginary trip to visit a new Japanese friend, Yoko, in her home to learn about Japanese customs. What are customs? Customs are beliefs or behaviors handed down from one generation to another. What customs does your family have?

As we make our imaginary visit to Yoko’s home, we will experience some Japanese customs that her family practices. Have you ever been a guest in an Asian home? Did the family have any customs that are different from your family? Describe the customs.

When we arrive at Yoko’s home, Yoko immediately removes her shoes. This is a common custom in many Asian homes. The shoes are neatly stored in the entryway to the home. Families then have slippers for themselves and guests to put on that are only worn in the home. This custom began centuries ago as a way to keep the home clean—to keep the inside of the home separate from the outside. Many Asian people feel that removing their shoes helps them to relax and be comfortable. As we begin our imaginary visit to Yoko’s home, let’s remove our shoes and store them neatly at the entrance to the room.

Next Yoko takes us to meet her parents. Yoko’s parents bow to us to welcome us to their home. Bowing is very important to Japanese people. Bowing serves many purposes and shows respect for the person receiving the bow. The Japanese people bow as a greeting, to give thanks, to extend an apology, and for many other reasons. It is impolite not to return a bow.

Let’s learn how to bow properly in Japan. The way you are bowing depends on the social status or age of the person you are bowing to. If the person is of higher status or older than you are, you should bow deeper and longer than the other person. To bow, bend from your waist. Men and boys usually keep their hands at their sides while bowing. Women and girls usually hold their hands side by side in front of them. Let’s practice bowing to each other. Choose a partner and practice. Remember, if you are bowing to a person who is older, you should bow deeper and longer. Now pretend you are bowing to Yoko’s parents.

In Yoko’s home, you notice a small shrine that sits on a shelf in front of a mirror. Flowers and pretty stones are also lying on the shelf. Yoko’s father asks if you know about Shinto. He explains that Shinto is an ancient native Japanese religion that believes in and worships kami, or gods. Kami can be spirits or beings that live in natural elements, such as animals, trees, stones, lakes, storms, or earthquakes. For that reason, Yoko’s father goes on to explain, the Japanese people respect and admire nature—when respecting nature, they believe they are respecting gods. They also believe kami are close to humans and respond to their prayers. According to the Shinto religion, kami can influence nature and human events and protect people from harm.

Because paper is made from the pulp of trees and other plants, it too has a spirit. Are you familiar with the ancient art of origami or paper folding? The paper is folded, not cut, because paper is made from the pulp of trees or other plants and therefore has a spirit. To honor the kami that lives in the paper, the paper is not cut.

The small shrine in Yoko’s home is a miniature model of a famous Shinto shrine. Yoko’s father goes on to explain that Japanese families often go to Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples when they want to say a prayer for their sons, daughters, or other family members. They also go to the shrines to buy o-mamori (meaning honorable protector), which are good luck charms, to ensure that their children pass their school exams. They might even attach the o-mamori to the children’s backpacks. When their children pass their exams, they go to the shrine again to give thanks.

While we talk to Yoko’s father, Yoko’s mother is preparing a traditional tea ceremony for us. In Japan, the process of making the tea is just as important as drinking the tea. Yoko’s mother works slowly and carefully as she makes the tea. Her movements are very graceful. She sits seiza-style on the floor and asks us to join her. Yoko explains that the traditional way to prepare, serve, and drink tea calls for us to sit seiza-style. Let’s follow along as Yoko tells us what to do. To sit seiza-style, kneel on the floor and fold your legs under your thighs. Lower your hips until they rest on top of your heels. The tops of your feet should be flat on the floor. Fold your hands in your lap or place them palms down on your legs. Keep your back straight but not stiff.

Yoko explains that it is not easy to sit this way, and it takes practice to make and hold the position. The more you sit this way, the easier it is to do it. Yoko tells us we can sit in a more comfortable—but respectful—position if needed.

As we finish the tea ceremony and rise to leave, once again we will bow to Yoko’s parents to thank them for inviting us to their home and sharing their customs. Let’s bow and say thank you.
**Preparation:**
Secure a space where youth can remove their shoes and sit on the floor in a circle.

- Use the dialogue in the Prelude to lead youth through an imaginary visit to Yoko’s home. Have youth follow along and practice the things they are learning.

- As youth are quietly sitting seiza-style, ask them to respond to the reflection questions. Give youth permission to move to a more comfortable position as needed, but encourage them to remain calm and respectful, just as they would during the traditional Japanese tea ceremony.
Reflection Questions

Share what you did:
• Was it fun to take an imaginary visit to Yoko’s home? Explain.
• How did you feel as you practiced some of Yoko’s customs?

Process what’s important:
• What are some Japanese customs you experienced?
• Why do we follow a family’s customs when we are visiting in their home?

Generalize to your life:
• What customs do you have in your family?
• Why do we have customs?

Apply what you learned:
• Why is it important to learn about other people’s customs?
• Will what you learned about Yoko’s customs change what you do when you visit other people’s homes?

Value Connection (to reinforce the content and the values highlighted in the lesson):
When learning about other people’s religions and beliefs, we may not agree with what they believe or how they worship, but we must not make hurtful comments about their beliefs. Even though they have different beliefs, we should still respect their beliefs, try to learn more about them, and understand why they believe what they do. Learning to accept and appreciate the differences in others is important to having good relationships with a variety of people. That helps us in school, in social settings, and at work.

More Challenges:
• Invite a Japanese person to share additional customs and beliefs.
• Read more about the traditional tea ceremony. Gather the supplies and equipment needed to prepare and serve the tea. Host a traditional tea ceremony for a group.

Glossary Words:

**Customs:** beliefs or behaviors handed down from one generation to another

**Kami:** Japanese word for gods or spirits that are part of nature and people

**O-mamori:** Shinto good luck charms

**Origami:** the Japanese art of paper folding

**Seiza-style:** a Japanese style of sitting that people practice at special occasions

**Shinto:** the native religion of Japan, which means “the way of the gods”

**Shrine:** a place of worship

References:


