



THE AMISH

Overview:

The Amish are one of the oldest and most unique minority populations in the United States, with many of them first arriving in this country from the region around Switzerland several hundred years ago. The Amish practice a traditional form of Christian fundamentalism that has changed little upon settlement in the United States. They are well-known for their preference to remain apart, by and large, from mainstream American society so that they may practice their traditional lifestyles. Iowa is one of a few states in the country that has an active, significant population of Amish in its rural communities.

The old-order Amish generally shun most use of modern technology, as they believe it draws people away from a more natural, simpler lifestyle that is closer to God. Therefore, health education programs should not incorporate telephones, driving, electrical equipment, computers, or other such technology with the Amish.

Language and Religion:

The Amish are usually not native speakers of English, but rather speak an old form of high German. Health educators will want to use an Amish translator for their work, unless the clients are familiar enough with English.

The Old Order Amish generally follow a very strict interpretation of the Bible, and are devout Christians. Do not conduct programs on Sundays or religious holy days with them. They will usually not celebrate non-religious holidays like the Fourth of July. Also, do not assign human or God-like traits to learning props, such as dolls or animal toys.

Family and Social Structure:

The Amish are a rural people, with very large families. Most marry young, and do not use birth control. It is not uncommon for Amish women to have 15 or more children.

The Amish generally intermarry only with other Amish, so most are related in some way to other Amish.

Gender roles are usually strong in Amish culture, with men serving as the head of household and being responsible for heavy farming and building duties, while women and children tend to the home and family garden.

The Amish will usually take care of their own elders and keep them active in the family unit. Many will build an addition to their homes so that their aging parents can live with them. Children are expected to be disciplined, and must obey and honor their elders.

Communication Style:

The Amish, in general, are a very stoic, decent, honest, hard working, devout, and respectful group of people. They tend to treat others with these positive traits, and expect the same in return. Health educators should maintain appropriate body space when working with them, and should avoid excessive physical contact with them.

The Amish typically do not like people to take pictures of them. In general, maintain a respectful distance and minimize touching, particularly between males and females.

Health educators should dress very modestly when working with Amish in order to respect their traditional values. Women should wear long skirts or dresses, with their arms, legs, and chests covered to a large extent. Muted colors are usually most appropriate.

The Amish typically study in one-room schoolhouses in Iowa, with all ages and both genders together through eighth grade. After that, they usually return to their farms as an agrarian people. Students will usually be highly disciplined and respectful to health educators, although potentially shy and passive. They generally prefer not to mix boys and girls together on teams. Literacy rates among the Amish will usually be fairly low, so health educators should rely more on face-to-face and visual learning.

Barriers to Care and Common Health Conditions:

Culture is the greatest barrier to care for the Amish. Most Amish willingly isolate themselves from mainstream American society, in an effort to maintain their culture. As such, they do not typically use western medicine unless it is absolutely necessary or if an illness is in an advanced state. The Amish do not have medical insurance. They pay for their care in cash, and not with credit. Large medical bills are usually covered communally through Amish financial cooperatives. As the Amish are rural dwellers, most also do not live near any health facilities and require transportation for medical care.

The Amish generally avoid going to the doctor unless it is absolutely necessary. For instance, most will not get prenatal care until the very end of a term, and most give birth at home after the first child.

Maternal and child health, infectious diseases, farm safety, and buggy accidents are among the most common health conditions they face. They typically are quite fit, with almost no obesity.

Bereavement:

The Amish are devout Christians. They generally believe that life on earth must be lived well and oriented to God, so as to enter heaven upon death.

The Amish usually do not embalm their dead. Instead, they typically bury them shortly after death directly into the ground.

Amish cemeteries, in keeping with their lifestyle, are plain and simple, and lack ornate decorations and detailed descriptions of the dead common in many American cemeteries.

In general, the Amish will be fairly reserved in their expression of grief and mourning. They tend to view death as simply a natural process that will ultimately bring them closer to God.

The Amish will usually work closely as a community to help the single head of household after the death of a spouse. Many will come together to help widows, in particular, with plowing, harvesting, and other difficult farm duties.

Traditional Health Practices:

A strong religious belief in fate is common, so health educators should make appropriate adjustments in their presentations to recognize this external locus of control value.

The Amish typically value the use of natural remedies like herbal medicines as their first choice of care, and generally do not want to take modern Western medicines or use vaccinations unless necessary. Many are reluctant to follow the medical advice of physicians, and prefer less invasive and more natural methods of treatment. Most Amish have a great interest in herbal medicines, and many women make their own remedies for their families.