

Dear Exchange Student,

Congratulations on being accepted as an ECS foreign exchange student. You will become a son or daughter to an American family for several months, resulting in an experience of a lifetime for you.

We hope that you find the information in this handbook helpful. It should answer many of the questions you may have and offer ways to overcome some of the difficulties of being an exchange student. However, this book is only a guide.

We wish you a wonderful, rewarding, and fun experience in the U.S.A.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Robert Flamm". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial "R".

Robert Flamm  
Administrative Principal

## Table of Contents

Guidelines to Make Your U.S. Visit a Success.....	3
Expectations .....	5
Culture Shock.....	6
School in the U.S.A.....	8
Internet Use and Safety .....	9
Questions to Ask Your Host Family .....	12
Advice From Former Students .....	15

## Guidelines to Make Your U.S. Visit a Success

Your host family has accepted you into their home with the hope that you will become a new "son or daughter, brother or sister" within the family, and that a close relationship will develop during your stay here and last long after your return to your home country. Our school accepts you as a full participating member of the student body with the hope that you will study hard, learn much, and share in the activities of the school.

***Your Host Family:*** Your host family has volunteered to host you for your stay in the U.S. Most host families decide to host a foreign exchange student because they want to share American culture with you and learn about your culture. You will be living with an average American family who may or may not have the same standard of living that you are used to. **You should adjust to your American host family; your host family will not adjust to you.**

***Host Family Rules:*** You must follow the specific rules and responsibilities set by your host family. Your host family's rules and responsibilities will be different from your natural family and from other exchange students' host families. Every family has its own rules and responsibilities.

***Chores:*** It is customary for teenagers in the U.S. to help with household chores and responsibilities. As a member of your host family, you must also contribute to the family chores. This is a required part of the program. If your host family does not ask you to do chores, you should cheerfully ask if you can help, and ask often.

**Be Respectful and Follow Directions:** Students should be respectful toward all people, especially host parents, school teachers, and staff. These people want to help you and have your best interest in mind. You must follow all directions and decisions made by your host parents, school teachers/staff, or other officials.

**Helping Words:** Use helping words, not demanding words. Helping words include: "Please," "Thank you," "Is it okay?" "Can I...," "May I...," etc. Ask permission of your family and school teachers/staff to do things. Everyone will appreciate your thoughtfulness and courtesy.

**Saying "Thank you":** There are many people who will be working hard to help you have a fun and successful exchange program. It is common in the U.S. to say "thank you" often and to show appreciation in other ways. You should show appreciation to all the people who help you, and especially your host family.

**Adjusting to Your Host Family:** Remember that every family is unique and every school is different. You must CHEERFULLY accept things you are not accustomed to and adjust accordingly. Your host family will be making every effort to ease your adjustment and assimilation, and they will be doing many special things for you. Take advantage of these offerings, be willing to try new and different things, and immerse yourself into the culture. Please do not ask for extra favors from your host family or school (such as special food, transportation, etc.).

**School:** Don't expect extra help at school. Teachers are very busy and often don't have time to help students individually. If a teacher offers extra help, be very appreciative of their extra time and help.

**Ask and Discuss:** If you don't understand something or if something is bothering you, ask about it or discuss it with your host parent, teacher, or the ECS office! Americans are helpful and would rather you ask a question rather than pretend you understand. The sooner you understand something the happier you will be, the more successful your year in the U.S. will be, and the more you will gain from your time in the program.

## Expectations

In order to have a successful year in the U.S. and learn, have fun, and enjoy the experience, you must have reasonable expectations. You should forget what you may have seen on TV shows, as they are not reflective of average American life. Just as in your own country, very few Americans live in mansions with swimming pools, drive expensive sports cars, or have servants. These images of the U.S. are inaccurate and, therefore, your expectations should be adjusted accordingly.

**Host Family:** You should try to begin the program with as realistic expectations as possible. Realistic expectations of your host family may include becoming a member of their family, to learn about their lifestyle and culture, to share your culture with them, and to participate in family activities. You should not expect your host family to travel with you, allow you complete freedom, or to adjust to your way of living.

**School:** All high schools are different. You may find that academics at your American high school are easier or more difficult than you are accustomed to. You should make the adjustments necessary to be successful. If you find the academic level different from your own school, you should

Remember that there is much more to gain and learn on the program than what you learn from a book. School activities and clubs are great experiences for international students and a great way to make friends with similar interests.

**Social Life:** You may find that American teens don't make a big effort to include you in their activities. Americans are normally quite friendly, but you may have to make the first move. You can do this by introducing yourself or just saying "Hi" and by getting involved in school or other teen activities.

## Culture Shock

The most exciting, rewarding, interesting, challenging and sometimes frustrating aspect of the program for both host family and student is learning about cultural differences. These cultural differences will lead to what is called *culture shock* for the student. It arises in varying ways and at different times for each student, but ALL students will go through it.

### **What is Culture Shock?**

The term *culture shock* was first used in the 1950's by an anthropologist as a way to describe the anxiety and disorientation felt by those living for an extended period of time in a cultural environment different from their own. It comes from the awareness that one's own values, perceptions, beliefs, and customs do not "fit" into the new environment. This awareness, in turn, leads to the anxiety and disorientation that are at the center of culture shock.

Everyone reacts to culture shock differently, but typical symptoms include: too much or too little sleep, lack of

appetite or overeating, excessive crying, easily angered, criticism of the new culture and all in it (family, school, country, people, etc.), irritability, and negativity. Very few students experience the extreme symptoms, but it is common for students to sleep a lot or stay in their room for extended periods of time.

### **The Stages of Culture Shock**

#### ***Stage I - The Honeymoon:***

After arrival in the U.S., most students show excitement and interest in all the new and different aspects they find in the U.S. Everything is an adventure, and the student is often the center of attention.

#### ***Stage II - Problems:***

The excitement wears off, the student is no longer the center of attention, and problems start to arise in all aspects of the student's life. He or she begins to see trouble in school, language, family, food, shopping, television - everything! The student may view everything with negative blinders, becoming critical about everything around him or her.

#### ***Stage III - Recovery:***

Recovery begins as the student feel increasingly comfortable in the new environment. The fears and problems of the past are now gone, replaced by a feeling of comfort as the student begins to "fit in" with his or her new culture.

#### ***Stage IV - Adaptation:***

The student has now fully recovered and feels comfortable and confident in the U.S.

### ***Stage V - Reverse Culture Shock:***

Many students find that they become so adapted and comfortable in their new environment that when they go home they go through a form of culture shock again. This is known as *reverse culture shock*. Students expect to be able to return home and fit right in where they left off nearly a year before. However, once they arrive home they find that they have changed and have to go through a period of adaptation to their home culture. This form of culture shock can be worse than Stage II, as it is entirely unexpected.

### **How to Overcome Culture Shock**

There is no way to avoid culture shock. However, there are several things that can be done to help overcome it more rapidly. Spending hours alone or feeling bored will only intensify the effects of culture shock. If you are bored or spending lots of time alone, get more involved, make friends, and keep busy. This is the best cure for culture shock.

## **Some Special Notes About School in the USA**

Academics is an important part of the program. Students must do their best in school. A 2.0 grade point average is required and a passing grade must be received at semester's end in both English and the American studies course, or the student can be put on probation or released from the program and sent home.

It is normal for exchange students to feel "lost" during the first weeks of school. Most students do not understand the American school system or anything that teachers are saying in class. This is normal. It takes anywhere from a few

weeks to a few months to begin to think in English and to keep pace with various speeds and accents of the speakers. You should be relaxed and patient and allow time to become acclimated. You should NOT change classes due to the language difficulty. And, don't hesitate to ask other students questions; it will help you to get adjusted faster and a great way to make friends.

In the U.S., teachers regularly assign homework. This is not optional work - it must be done and returned to class as directed by the teacher. Teachers give grades for homework and these are included in the semester grade for the class. Homework not done (or done poorly or late) is given a failing or low grade. Teachers are normally understanding if students have difficulty doing all the assigned work during the first few weeks of school. However, students must tell their teachers that they are having difficulty. Teachers will often offer extra help, but they can only help if they know a student is having trouble. In the U.S. it is not shameful to tell teachers that you are having difficulty and need help. It is only shameful if you say nothing! Americans value effort more than result - if you are doing your best, your teachers may grade you according to your effort not your result.

## **Internet Use and Safety**

The internet is a wonderful tool for you to use for school work, keeping in touch with family and friends at home, and for entertainment. However, keep in mind that time spent on the computer takes away from getting to know new people and experiencing new opportunities in your U.S. community. It is important that you limit your weekly computer use and get involved with your host family and U.S. community.

If your host family has a computer at home, they probably have rules for its use and for accessing the internet from home. Like all other family rules, you must abide by these. You must also abide by all rules for computer use at school.

In addition to being an educational and communication tool, there are potential hazards in using the internet. Many students may not be aware of these potential hazards. Below is a list of basic rules and safety concerns that all exchange students must follow. Your host family may have additional rules.

1. First and foremost is to **NEVER** meet in person someone that you have met on the internet.
2. **NEVER** give personal information over the internet unless it is in an e-mail to someone you know (not someone you have met on the internet). Personal information includes: name, address, age, phone number, e-mail address, what you are doing in the U.S., your home country, etc.
3. **ALWAYS** keep your personal information protected and private. If you belong to an online social network (i.e. Facebook or MySpace), you must set your security settings so that your personal information cannot be viewed by people you do not know.
4. Be careful of the websites you enter. If you enter a site that is not appropriate, leave it immediately.
5. Regarding e-mails from strangers and junk e-mail: You should delete these types of e-mails immediately. You should **NEVER** respond to an e-mail from someone you do not personally know. And, you should never enter a website from an e-mail (e.g. junk email).

6. Students are allowed to have a personal computer or other electronic equipment as long as all rules are followed at all times. Failure to follow all programs or school and host family rules concerning use of the computer/equipment will result in the computer or equipment being taken away from the student and returned only when the student departs the program to return to their home country.
7. Excessive communication with family and friends from home is very disruptive to the student's adjustment. Therefore, communication by any means (phone, e-mail, internet, messaging, etc.) with family and friends from home should be limited to no more than one hour every two weeks. Further limitations in communication may be necessary for students who have difficulty adjusting to the host family, school, or community.

## **Suggested Questions to Ask Your Host Family**

We suggest you ask your host family the following questions, and any others you can think of, soon after you arrive. This is a good way to learn about your host family's daily routine and way of life. It is also a good way to begin to understand American culture, beliefs, and values. At the same time, you can tell your host family what the answers would be in your own family's home, so that they gain a better understanding of you and your culture.

1. What should I call you?
2. Will I have a set of house keys? What should I do if I get locked out?
3. Where are emergency phone numbers kept? Who should I call in an emergency?
4. Are there chores I can do?
5. What is the procedure for laundry? Where should I put dirty clothes until wash day? Should I wash my own clothes? Should I do my own ironing? May I use the iron, washing machine, sewing machine, etc. at any time?
6. Where should I keep my toiletries?
7. When is a good time for me to use the shower or bath?
8. May I use the toothpaste, shampoo, or soap that is in the bathroom?
9. What are the rules for keeping my room clean?

10. What time are meals?
11. What can I do to help with meals? (Set the table? Clear the table? Wash the dishes? Put the dishes away? Empty the trash?)
12. May I help myself to food and drink or should I ask first?
13. Are any areas of the house off limits? What does it mean if a door is closed or locked?
14. Where can I store my suitcase?
15. What time should I get up on Saturday and Sunday?
16. What time should I go to bed?
17. What are the rules for me to go out at night?
18. May I have friends spend the night or visit during the day? Where should I entertain at home?
19. What are the rules about using the telephone? Should I ask first? Can my friends call me? How late? How often? May I make long distance calls? Where can I buy a calling card?
20. What is the procedure for mailing letters?
21. Do my host parents have any dislikes, such as chewing gum, wearing a hat in the house, or rock music (how loud)?
22. Do my host brother or sister have any dislikes?
23. When is everyone's birthday?

24. How do I get to school, the movies, or shopping?
25. What are the rules about using the stereo, TV, or computer? How long?
26. What are the rules about going to church?
27. Would you like for me to phone home if I am going to be late?
28. When we go out as a family, should I pay for my meals, tickets, etc.?
29. What arrangements should I make for school lunch?
30. Is there anything else you would like me to know?

## **Advice From Former Exchange Students**

Below are quotes from former exchange students on how to have a successful and fun exchange experience.

1. Be ready for a big CHANGE.
2. Accept differences in life and traditions.
3. Talk and be nice to everyone, and you'll make friends in no time. And then live and enjoy every minute!
4. There's nothing really to prepare for, you just need to have an open attitude toward "strange" things and talk about differences with your family.
5. Think about what it is going to be like here. Anything can happen. You have to be strong and ready for the strangest, funniest, and happiest things. This is a dream from which you suddenly wake up, and it is real.
6. Forget your home-country way of life and open yourself up to a completely new lifestyle.
7. Be open-minded and very extroverted (there's no time for shyness!) and try to enjoy the experience from the first moment. Time goes by fast!

## **Advice On First Entering Family and School**

1. Try to become part of the family and be in the house as if it were your own.

2. Try to be as tolerant as possible. Be courteous, helpful and thoughtful in every aspect of family life.
3. Get ready for everything, bad and good. Don't stereotype a family. Be understanding and kind.
4. Your host family will have different views and rules that you are going to have to adjust to as soon as possible. Be prepared to change your way of life.
5. Have an open attitude and be ready to adjust to the host family. Treat the host family as your own. Be yourself.
6. Try to join several activities in or out of school (sports, youth group, etc.).
7. Don't be too concerned about certain problems at the beginning of the year - many take care of themselves.
8. Be patient.
9. Observe, obey, help whenever you can, smile, show you are happy, share your feelings.

### **Advice On Adjusting to Family and School**

1. Show your thankfulness and appreciation and make sure that the host family notices it! Always ask whether or not you can help. Make a deal with the kids or even with the whole family that everybody always deals openly and frankly when you bother him or her. Don't let resentments build up.
2. Read a lot of American books and be prepared for a strong interest in people, feelings, and local problems. You shouldn't dream all the time of being in

Manhattan or Hollywood because you may be in a rural area without many activities and the absolute necessity of a car.

3. Be prepared to be criticized, but don't criticize yourself too much.
4. Your family pays for you, takes care of you, and gives you rights. Expect to take on duties and chores.
5. The relationship can go slow and with some difficulties, but don't despair. Try to be always optimistic.
6. You need to study English. Don't be shy! Open your mind and try.
7. Try to make a little effort to help with your family; they'll give you almost everything you'll want. Sometimes, I hated my host sister and brother, but I got to know them better with time. Now I love them. I learned to be more open in the world and in the society by accepting new ways of life.
8. Don't have too high an expectation of your host family or the school. Don't be angry with your host family and think that they don't care if they disagree with you in some matters. Just be patient.
9. Learn to adapt to your host family's life, but don't try to change it. Let them help you when you need them but don't make them solve all your problems.
10. After a given time, life goes on normally, and you are not the stranger anymore.

11. Be open-minded, talk a lot, and stay with your host family as much as possible but without forgetting your friends. Work every day. Be yourself. Have patience, especially during the first couple of months. Remember that you are living in their house.
12. Communicate everything and appreciate everything the host family does for you. Sometimes get recharged with the patience to be able to put up with some children.

### **Always Remember**

1. Do anything, even if you don't like it very much, to understand your new situation, country, friends, and customs. This is going to last for a whole year and that is a long time to be displeased. There's so much to learn, to see, and discover. Try to enjoy every minute of its beauty and charm. Who knows when you'll be able to come again to the U.S.!
2. You cannot really say with words what this opportunity has been like. It is a once-in-a-lifetime experience that will affect you forever.