



# Cross-Cultural Experiences

Tips and Guidelines for a successful  
Host Family/Student homestay

## Homestay Manual

Student Edition

ERDT enVision  
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# **STAGE 1 – ARRIVAL**

## **AIRPORT AND ARRIVAL INFORMATION**

1. Be flexible—anything can happen with flights and emergencies sometimes arise on arrival day!
2. Culturally, Americans like to give hugs. They may hug you when they first meet you. Don't be afraid to let them know that you are uncomfortable with this kind of physical contact.
3. Expect your host family to be excited. Don't be afraid to let them know that you are tired and may not feel too sociable or talkative.
4. Shortly after arrival, your host family may give you a tour of their home, your room, and the bathroom you will be using. They may show you how to use the bathroom—toilet and shower. Don't be afraid to ask your host parents to repeat instructions on how to use the shower, or home appliances.
5. Please let your host family know if you are hungry.
6. Many host families have a central heating and air-conditioning system to heat or cool their home. Please check to see if this is the case before opening a window. If your room is too warm or cool, let your host family know.

### **TOPICS FOR IMMEDIATE DISCUSSION**

#### **Jet Lag & Health Concerns**

- Take naps & expect irregular sleeping & eating patterns.
- Your stomach may become upset because of dehydration, including diarrhea or constipation. Your host family should be prepared to offer medication or advice that will help. Sometimes, these symptoms are brought on because of dehydration so, drink lots of water.
- If you have any medications (prescription & non-prescription) that you use, please be careful where you store them. Make sure that they are not within the reach of young children.
- Female participants, if you need assistance with feminine products after you arrive, please talk to your host mom. She may have some supplies on hand. **Ask what the proper disposal** of feminine product is.

#### **Silence & Conversation**

- Talking is the American way of being comfortable with strangers. The general rule is that the closer the relationship, the more comfortable Americans are with silence.
- Make sure you initiate conversation by asking simple questions like what your host father does for a job, what are the children's favorite subjects in school, etc.
- Share pictures from your home or ask to see family photo albums.

**Personal Space, Privacy & Property** - In the American culture, when you go to your bedroom and shut your bedroom door, it implies that you want to be left alone. Americans enjoy spending time with each other in the more public areas of their home, like the kitchen or family room.

- Try to spend minimal time in your bedroom and always leave your door open. Of course, you will want to close your door when you are changing clothes, want some privacy or go to sleep.
- Your host siblings are excited to have you as a new member of the family. They will want to spend a lot of time with you. If this becomes overwhelming, talk to your host

parents. They will understand and will help you know how to communicate your need for privacy to the host siblings.

- You may not know what a personal belonging is and what is meant for the entire family to use, such as: computers, toiletries, other electronic devices, and some foods. If you are unsure, please ask your host family. They will be grateful that you asked them before trying to use it.
- **Make sure that you keep all of your valuable documents and property locked in your suitcase at all times. This will protect them from inadvertent loss or damage.**

**Orientation to Your Home** – Many items work differently in the United States than in your country (showers, toilets, appliances, and electronic equipment, so you will want to make sure that you understand how everything works. Some key areas to focus on would be:

- The shower, toilet, bathroom fan.
- The stove – You may be used to a gas stove; on electric stoves the burners stay hot longer.
- Microwave Ovens (Cooking times are shorter; aluminum foil or metals can seriously damage the microwave ovens.)
- Clothes washers and dryers - Some of your clothes may not be dryer-safe. Make sure that you know whether they are or are not, before you try to dry your clothes. Your host family should show you how to use their specific washer and dryer, including how to clean the lint trap.
- Self-locking doors – There are certain types of doors that are self-locking. Ask your host family about the locks on the doors and how to use them.
- It is customary in America for guests to be told to “help yourself”, which means, when you want to have a snack or light meal, you can get the food without assistance without being considered impolite.

**Your Bedroom Area** – This is your personal area.

- Make sure that you make the bed each morning before you leave for the day. Please pick up all of your clothes and keep the room tidy and clean.
- If you are sharing your room with another student or host sibling, be sensitive to their need for privacy and their personal space.
- Before you take food or snacks into your bedroom, check with your host family. They may have family rules about eating in the bedroom.
- It is not appropriate or acceptable to entertain friends of the opposite sex in your bedroom.

**Pets** – Your host family may have a pet. Some pets are not allowed to go outside, and some pets are not allowed to come inside. Discuss with your host family about what liberties the animals have in their home. In some homes, pets are given access to furniture or beds. If you are uncomfortable with this pet behavior, please discuss this with your host family. Be sensitive to the fact that your host family may consider their pet to be part of the family. Being sensitive to this will be very important for a successful outcome in communicating this cultural pet behavior difference.

**Religious Practice** – Your family will discuss with you how their religious practices (if any) affect their daily life. We would ask you to be respectful of the family's religious practices, even if you do not wish to participate directly.

If your family says grace before meals, they should explain to you why they do this. If your family goes to church, they may invite you to come along. Church-going is an integral part of many American families' lives, and you may be invited to attend at least one church service with the host family to gain an insight into the role that religion plays in the cultural and social life of the United States.

However, you are free to decline the invitation to attend church. You are under no obligation to attend religious services.

Also, please note that it is not appropriate for the host family to present you with religious materials (e.g., Bibles, theological tracts) for you to take home.

Similarly, host families should not present you with any political materials.

We welcome open discussions of religious and political views between the student and host family; this is part of the cross-cultural experience. This open discussion and exchange of views may not include any form of proselytizing or directly advocating for a particular religious or political cause.

**Personal Hygiene** – In some countries, it is customary to shower two to three times a day. In other countries, two to three times a week. Americans pay a lot of attention to hygiene, and they shower and use deodorant on a daily basis. Be mindful when using perfume, cologne or after-shave. Remember, odors we find acceptable, may be distasteful to others. While in the United States you should shower daily. Discuss with your host family when is a good time for you to use the shower and how long should your shower or bathroom use be.

## COMMUNICATION HELPS

- Language Fatigue – Speaking English continuously can be nerve wracking & exhausting. Be creative with the way you communicate if necessary. Drawing pictures, playing “charades”, or even writing things down will help you to communicate with your host family.
- Your host family may use contractions (slang) that you don't understand like “doncha – don't you”, “do you wanna – do you want to”, “yep or yup – yes”, “nope or nah – no”.
- Repeat important thoughts/rules back to your host family to make sure that you understand them.
- The use of foul language is not acceptable, and some words are inappropriate. You may be corrected if you say something that would be offensive to others.
- It's good to have a foreign language/English dictionary available for those difficult to communicate words.
- The foods will be different here. Don't be afraid to try new things. Always express gratitude for the meal that was cooked.
- Don't just give “yes” or “no” answers. Give answers with complete explanations.
- Mistakes are part of the learning process. Your host family will help you. You don't have to speak the language perfectly to be understood.

## TOPICS FOR LATER DISCUSSION

**Mealtime** – Let family members go first when food is passed around the table so you can follow their example of appropriate portions & how foods are eaten.

### **Safety Concerns:**

- Make sure that you lock the doors. Ask your host family if they like to have their outside doors locked all the time or just at night.
- Ask your host family about how & when to answer the door.
- You should never accept a ride from stranger!
- There may be certain places in the community that you need to avoid. Talk to your host family so that you can avoid those areas.
- Learn how to call the police, fire department, or ambulance in case of an emergency.

**Community Orientation** – Ask your host family about your new community and if there are historical points of interest that you could visit together. Remember that your host family is not a tourism agency. Be considerate of their time schedule before proposing any visits.

### **U.S. Money**

- Familiarize yourself with the denominations of our coins.
- Learn what sales tax is. Your host family will let you know how much it is and when you will be charged for sales tax.
- It is customary in certain industries to give a monetary “tip”. Your host family should explain when you should tip and how much. Restaurants and hairdressers are the two most probable areas where this will be an issue. The standard tipping rate is 15% of the total amount.
- Your host family will expect you to pay for:
  - a. Stamps
  - b. Toiletries
  - c. Snack foods (something of your preference other than what they have in their home)
  - d. Family activities – If your host family is planning an outing, be sure to ask how much it will cost you so that you can have the money with you BEFORE you leave the house. For long drive activities that are arranged exclusively for your benefit you may be asked to share in the cost of gas (fuel).
- Don't ever borrow money from your host family and do not lend money to them!

### **Health Insurance and Doctor's Visits**

- ALWAYS contact your coordinator first prior to going to the Doctor (In case of a life-threatening emergency use your best judgment for treatment and contact your coordinator as soon as possible.)
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- Doctor visit co-payments are due at the time of service; you must submit a receipt to your insurance company for reimbursement of the cost of the visit and medications.
- Bring your Health Care coverage information and sufficient money or a credit card to pay for services.

## **STAGE 2 – SETTLING IN** **DISRUPTION OF FAMILIAR FAMILY ROUTINES**

### **POINTS TO PONDER WHEN CONSIDERING YOUR “CULTURE”**

The following questions will help give you a glimpse of different cultural approaches to everyday situations you may encounter. They will also help you ponder on what your cultural rules are and how they may be different to your host family. Cross-cultural exposure, knowledge, and sensitivity are some of the components of an exchange program; part of this experience requires you to be flexible, adapt to new environments, and be able to interact well with others. Through the homestay with your American host family you will reach a deeper understanding of American society and way of life as well as being able to share your own.

1. **Do you believe that acknowledging individual achievement is good?** In the former Soviet Union that is not the case, teens strive to be part of a group.
2. **When having a conversation with a friend, what is the optimal physical distance you should stand from the other person? What do you do (or feel) when someone moves too close to you?** This “comfortable” distance varies in different areas of the world.
3. **What is the proper way to hold a knife and fork when you cut food and eat it?** In Europe you hold the knife in your right hand and the fork in your left hand. It is even common to use a knife and fork to eat pizza and sandwiches.
4. **How do you greet family members, close friends, and acquaintances?** In France you “kiss the air” on either side of someone’s face. In the Far East you bow your head slightly. In Germany you shake hands. In most Spanish speaking cultures, you kiss on the cheek.
5. **Upon joining or leaving a gathering of friends, do you shake everyone’s hand?** In the Far East, this is the acceptable way of doing things. In Germany, when leaving a large, seated group it is acceptable to “knock” on the table instead of shaking hands.
6. **When do you usually have your main meal of the day?** In many areas of the world, the main meal is eaten at “lunch” time.
7. **Ladies, do you shave your legs/underarms and use deodorant?** In many cultures, women do not.
8. **How often do you shower/bathe?** In some more hot/humid countries, taking 2 or 3 showers/day is normal. In other areas, showering every day is considered wasteful and unnecessary.
9. **When you start to count using your fingers, which finger do you start with?** In Europe, they start with their thumb.
10. **Are showing someone the “ok” sign using your thumb & pointer finger, or “giving someone the finger” acceptable to you?** In Brazil, the “ok” sign is an obscene gesture, while in Scandinavia showing someone your middle finger isn’t considered obscene.
11. **Do you help with household chores?** In some countries, the main responsibility of children is to do well in school. Their “job” is to study hard and do well in school and are not accustomed to do household chores. In other countries it is common to have maids to care for the house cleaning.
12. **Do you eat potato chips, corn on the cob, lots of meat & cheese on a sandwich, and individual salad dressings?** In many cultures, potato chips are snack foods only, not to be eaten with meals; corn on the cob is “pig food”; and salads are prepared and served with a vinegar & oil dressing already on.
13. **Do you have a “top sheet” on your beds?** Not if you are in Europe. They use duvets only, the covers of which are removed and laundered frequently.

14. **How often do you say “thank you, excuse me, I’m sorry, & have a nice day” to people?**  
Many other cultures think Americans use these expressions superficially, although to Americans it is extremely important to use this mannerism frequently.
15. **Is it acceptable to invite teens of the opposite sex into their bedroom and close the door?**  
In Europe it is.
16. **Do parents expect to meet the friends of your children?** Hong Kong teens would never invite their friends’ home to meet their parents.
17. **Do parents attend the games/musical performances, etc. of your children?** In many cultures, parents are not as actively involved in their children’s lives.
18. **Do children have a curfew?** In many European countries, it is ok for teenagers to come home close to sunrise after a night out with friends.
19. **Do teenagers watch the news & read the newspaper every day?** In many European countries, teenagers are very politically aware. They can intelligently discuss what is happening in the world.

## **POINTS TO PONDER WHEN CONSIDERING HOUSEHOLD RULES**

### **CHORES**

1. Ask for clear guidelines of your host family’s expectations in this area. Ask your host mother what a “clean room” means to her and what specifically you can do to help with household chores.

### **BATHROOM ISSUES**

1. Where may you keep your toilet articles?
2. Are there any special rules for bathroom care, such as wiping down shower walls or the bathtub? Should the shower curtain be open or closed when you are done taking a shower? Is the bathroom door to be left open or closed when it is not in use? Should you be sure the door is locked while in use for privacy?
3. What should girls do with used sanitary products? Be sure to clearly understand what shouldn’t be flushed.

### **FOOD ISSUES**

1. What may you take for school lunch? Who will make the lunch? When should it be made?
2. May friends be invited for dinner?
3. May you snack whenever you want, on whatever you want? (i.e., ice cream, soda, chips...an hour before dinner so they are not hungry for dinner?)
4. Are there any foods in the house that are saved for special meals, etc., and how will you be able to identify them?

### **HOUSEHOLD ISSUES**

1. Public vs. private areas of the home (i.e., may you enter host parent’s bedroom, children’s rooms without permission?)
2. What is the particular protocol when a door is closed? Do you knock before entering?

Dear Participant,

On behalf of Educational Resource Development Trust (ERDT) enVision, we welcome you to our Language Immersion and Cultural Exchange Program. This program is a great opportunity for you to experience firsthand the culture and diversity that the United States has to offer. As a valued participant, you are among the hundreds of students from around the world serving as your country's citizen ambassador in the United States. We want your experience to be both positive and rewarding.

As a participant in this unique research course, you will be learning about our culture, while living with an American host family who has opened their home and hearts to welcome you to the United States. We know that with a positive attitude and respect for others you will achieve a close and successful relationship with your host family.

We understand that you may have concerns about leaving your family and friends at home to come to the United States and those are very normal concerns to have. I want you to know that your decision to participate in our program is important to us and that your health, safety and well-being are our highest priority. It is essential that you notify us with any questions or problems you might have, especially if you find yourself in a circumstance that threatens your personal health, safety and well-being or a situation that makes you uncomfortable.

We are truly appreciative of your flexibility, kindness and generosity in making this educational and cultural experience possible. We look forward to sharing this adventure with you!

Sincerely,

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Exchange Program Coordinator



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Tracy M. Gautier  
Director  
ERDT enVision

