

Living with an American Family



ASSIST

Connecting America's finest schools
with the world's leading scholars

2019/20 Academic Year

The ASSIST Mission

ASSIST creates life-changing opportunities for outstanding international scholars to learn from and contribute to the finest American independent secondary schools.

Introduction

One of the most important parts of your ASSIST experience is becoming a member of a host or homestay family. These special people have invited you to be a part of their family, not a guest. That means you will learn how they work and live together so that you can fit in.

Remember that forming relationships is an evolutionary process that takes time. While some of you may feel comfortable immediately, others will have to work harder. The encouraging news? ASSIST students often report that they form lifelong attachments to their host sisters, brothers and parents.

Here are some suggestions to think about and talk over with your host or homestay family.

Living With Your Host or Homestay Family

Household Schedules

Every family has developed a routine for how they live. Each family's routine or schedule is different, depending upon how many family members there are, how many people work outside of the home, how old the children are, or what they do for recreation and fun.

It is important to watch and learn what your family does and at what time. Ask your family about the time they eat and whether everyone is expected to eat together. Learn the rules for when to bathe or shower, what to do with dirty clothes, how long or how often you can be on the computer, etc.

Respect your Personal Space

You may have your own bedroom or you may share one. Remember that even though you have some "personal space," your room is still part of your host family's house. You will be expected to keep your room, including your closet and dresser drawers, clean and neat. Making your own bed should become a part of getting up in the morning.

Privacy

Everyone needs to be alone sometimes. You will need privacy, and other family members will, too. Try to learn the times your host family is expected to be together and when it is all right for you to be alone. This is important. If you spend too much time in your room, your family will worry that you are unhappy or sick. You will also miss opportunities to share time with your family. Try to spend the "family times" with them. Family times may be dinner, immediately after dinner, or on weekends. Spending time together could mean eating together, just talking, playing games, watching TV, or going out together. On the other hand, your family will understand that you need time to read, study, listen to music, write e-mails, or connect with your family at home by digital means. Be aware of the whole family, not only yourself.

Household Chores

Home life in the USA may be very different from, or quite similar to, life in your own country. This means that all members of the family usually share the duties and jobs around the house. From a young age, most children learn to take care of their own rooms and help with little jobs ("chores") like emptying wastebaskets and washing dishes. Teenagers frequently have regular duties such as cutting the grass, washing the car, vacuuming, or helping to wash their own clothes. You will need to do your share when you live in an active family that must do all of the housework, as well as go to work or to school.

It is a very good idea for you to talk to your family about what household jobs you should do. Also, before you begin, ask how to do them, for example, how to use the vacuum cleaner or washing machine. Your host family may not know that your natural family has different systems or machines, and they may not think about explaining how to do things. It is better to ask before you try something rather than to learn later that it was wrong or to break a piece of equipment.

Finances

Please be aware that your host family is not being paid to host you in their home. They have volunteered to welcome you into their family, and are prepared for the additional expenses of feeding and housing you. It will be important for you to communicate with your host family about the most convenient way for you to manage your money during your stay with them.

It is expected that you will pay for clothing, sports equipment, school supplies, and any personal activities and entertainment such as movies, amusement parks, sporting events, etc. Be sure to plan ahead for upcoming excursions or activities so that you can budget for these events. You may also have to decline some opportunities in order to participate in more important ones if your budget is limited. If your host family offers to take you on a weekend trip or on a vacation, it is polite if you first ask what expenses you would be expected to cover, and then decide, along with your natural parents, whether or not the trip can fit into your budget.

Share Yourself

Your host family has invited you to live with them because they want to get to know you and learn about your country. They want to share their ideas and help you understand the U.S. and how Americans live and think. Spend time with each member of your family. If your host parents are home when you return from school, talk to them about your day and theirs. Talk to them about things you do not understand. Ask if you can help them with the chores in the afternoon.

We advise that you approach sharing cultures as a student first and as a teacher second. Listen and learn about American culture, and don't be judgmental in sharing details of your own culture. There is beauty in both cultures that will make itself known over the course of time.

At dinner time, join the family conversation so you can get to know your host family. Find out about your host parents' work and what family members do

for fun. Perhaps you can even share some hobbies, like bike riding, photography, tennis or hiking, or some event, like going to a football game with the family.

Make a special effort to spend time with the children in the family. It is especially important to show interest in host brothers and sisters your own age and those who are younger than you are. It is easy for them to become jealous because of the attention you receive. Try to teach them about your own customs while asking and learning from them about theirs. Respect their private times and their own friends. You will not necessarily be best friends with your brothers and sisters, but you should be friendly with them.

In this regard, monitor carefully how much time you spend e-mailing or texting friends and family back home. Spending all of your free time on the computer or mobile phone will prevent you from assimilating quickly into your host family and school community.

Show Appreciation

Very few things are more important in your home than thanking your family for what they do for you. It is not customary in the U.S. to give expensive gifts or big parties to thank someone. Small things that will make your family feel good include a smile, saying, "Thanks, Mom," willingly helping with chores, or cooking a special dish. Notice how often other host family members show appreciation and how they do it. Try to develop the habit of saying "thank you" routinely (ex.: for rides from schools, rides to other places, meals, special effort extended). It may be done differently in your own country, but appreciation is always important.

Obey the Rules

Many exchange students who come to the U.S. believe that families are very liberal and that students will be very independent here. Others find that families are more conservative. You should realize that all families have rules and regulations. One rule – called a "curfew" – is the time that teenagers must be back home at night. Your curfew in the USA may be different from what you are used to in your own country. However, you will probably be expected to follow the same rules as other teenagers in your family. If there are no teenagers in your home, your family will set rules similar to those of families with teenagers. Regardless of what you are accustomed to in your own family, you will be expected to follow the rules of your host family when you live with them. If you do not obey, it insults them and shows a lack of respect.

Look for the Positive

You are not going to like everything about your new family. That is natural. No one is happy about everything that happens in their own home, such as family expectations, some of the rules, some of the food, or maybe the way some family member behaves. There are always pleasant and unpleasant aspects of family life. Everyone is making an adjustment. Learn to ignore the small things that bother you and concentrate on what you enjoy. If you have difficulties, talk to your host family, and try to work them out.

Stay Healthy

Staying in good health will help you enjoy your exchange experience. This will require you to be intentional in an unfamiliar environment.

Try to eat food that is good for you, and avoid foods with too much fat, sugar, or caffeine. The American diet has a great deal of temptation in terms of fast food and fat-laden food. Sometimes, students become too concerned about food and think about food, eating, and their weight more than they need to. Talk to your family or school advisor if you are extremely worried about these things.

Exercise will help you stay healthy. Many Americans walk or run in their neighborhoods for exercise. Joining school or community sports teams or doing aerobic exercises or other physical activities with groups will keep you healthy and feeling good.

Sleeping regularly is important to good health. You may need more sleep than you did at home, because you get tired from concentrating on so many new things during the day. Research shows that teenagers need the most sleep of any age group, but often get the least.

Tell your host family when you feel ill, and they will help you decide whether or not to see a doctor. If you have medicine you should take, do not forget to take it. Also, be clear about how to use your medical and accident insurance so that your treatment is covered.

End of Year Plans

In most cases, your flight home has been scheduled in advance for the day after, or in some cases the day of, the conclusion of the school year. Please respect that your host family has agreed to host you until this day. In some cases they may specifically invite you to stay longer, but this invitation must be initiated by your host family, not you or your natural parents. In many cases, host families make their own travel plans following the end of the academic year, and it would be inconvenient for you to stay on.

Having a Successful Experience

Give, Respect, Learn, Be Patient

The success of your exchange experience depends mostly on you. The more you give of yourself to your new family, school and community, the more you will receive in return. Your host family members have opened their home to you, and they want to accept you as a son or daughter, as a brother or sister. You, in turn, have a responsibility to treat your new family with the same respect and kindness that you give your natural family. Learn their ways of doing things and discover your place in the family. Be as patient with them as you would like them to be with you.

Ask For Help

What happens when things do not function perfectly? How can you respectfully address concerns – and hear them from your host family? On the next page is a list of people who can help. Reach out early when you need help, and tackle issues while they are small. Everyone wants to help you, so do not hesitate to seek help to make this experience a good one – for you and your host family.

Concluding Thought

No manual can completely describe or predict your cross-cultural experience. You will find that the language and cross-cultural communication skills you develop will help you, no matter what situation you find yourself in. Be confident that thousands of ASSIST students before you have lived successfully with host families and formed relationships that last a lifetime!

What Skills Will Help Me?

Listening

Patience

Openness

Empathy

Flexibility

Sensitivity

Observation

Who Will Help Me?

My host family

My friends

My advisor

My school's ASSIST representative

ASSIST USA

My family

ASSIST is a nonprofit organization with tax exempt status and is incorporated in the state of Connecticut. ASSIST is designated by the United States State Department as an authorized Exchange Visitor Program. ASSIST is also able to facilitate the issuance of the J-1 visa under which our students study in the U.S. for one academic year on Exchange Visitor status.

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