



# A PRIMER FOR HOST FAMILIES



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Hosting a Youth Exchange student from another country is a challenge — and an opportunity. Involvement with an exchange student challenges a host family to become familiar with another culture, while providing the opportunity to share a young student's hopes and ambitions. These challenges and opportunities promise to enrich the lives of every member of your family.

This primer contains general information about Youth Exchange, tips to help you prepare for the arrival of your exchange student, and a discussion of a variety of issues surrounding the experiences of exchange students and host families. Although the student's sponsoring and hosting Rotary clubs will be furnishing you with detailed information, this primer will get you started thinking about your approaching host family experience.

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## A Rotary Youth Exchange Program

Each year, local Rotary districts and clubs worldwide arrange thousands of international youth exchanges for high school-aged students. A primary goal of the program is to foster world understanding by way of intercultural exchange.

There are two principal types of exchanges:

- 1. Long-term exchanges:** These usually last an academic year in the host country, during which the student lives with more than one family (usually three) and attends school.
- 2. Short-term exchanges:** These vary from several days to several weeks; they often take place when school is not in session and usually do not include an academic program. Short-term exchanges usually involve a homestay experience with a family in the host country, but can also be organized as international youth camps, which bring together students from many countries.

## Student Selection

It is standard practice for local Rotary districts and clubs to screen young people interested in youth exchange using detailed applications and interviews. This process helps to ensure that only highly responsible and mature students are sent on an exchange. Program administrators in the student's home country generally assess an applicant's scholastic record, linguistic ability, and general adaptability, among other qualities. Disabled students are encouraged to apply for both long- and short-term exchanges.

## Youth Exchange Rules

While Rotary International offers support to local Rotary Youth Exchange programs through publications and suggested guidelines, Rotary districts and clubs run their programs independently of Rotary International. Therefore, each club or district program will have its own specific rules for students to follow.

Students accepted into a Rotary Youth Exchange sign and agree to abide by a list of program rules prior to their departure from home. While the student's



hosting Rotary club will discuss all program rules with both you and the student, you may wish to review the rules with the student yourself to be sure that everyone has a clear understanding of what is expected.

The rules generally consist of common sense stipulations, such as no driving of motor vehicles, and the need to obtain special permission for international travel while on the exchange. In addition, romantic entanglements are discouraged (although companionship in accordance with cultural standards is encouraged).

## **Preparing for the Arrival of the Exchange Student**

While the exchange student's sponsoring and hosting Rotary clubs will be taking care of most of the logistics of the exchange, there are some things you can do to prepare for the student's arrival. What follows are general suggestions for your preparation, as well as a description of some common Rotary district and club responsibilities. You may contact your exchange student's hosting club or district for more specific guidelines.



### **Suggestions for Host Parents**

It is advisable that the host family correspond with the exchange student and his/her parents as soon as names are known. As a future host family, you should extend a welcome to the student, including information about the composition of your family (i.e., how many members, their ages, hobbies, etc.), the type of clothing required for the climate if the student has not yet left

his/her home country, and so on. In short, ask yourself what you would like to know about a new home in a foreign culture and supply that kind of information.

It is not required that you provide the student with a private bedroom in your home; however, a single bed is essential. Additionally, it may be helpful to begin to think about the household rules you expect the student to follow while living with your family.

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## **Rotary District and Club Responsibilities**

The sponsoring Rotary club or district in the student's home country will inform the hosting club or district of the student's travel itinerary, and will arrange "outbound" orientation. The sponsoring club or district will also maintain contact with the exchange student and the hosting district and club during the exchange. The sponsoring club or district also will arrange suitable debriefing for the exchange student upon his/her return from overseas.

The hosting Rotary club or district will meet the student on arrival; arrange enrollment, tuition and other educational matters with the local secondary school (for school-year exchanges); continue orientation; and organize some social and cultural functions for the student. For school-year exchanges, the hosting club or district will also appoint a Rotarian counselor and arrange a monthly allowance for the student. Through the Rotarian counselor, who is generally not a member of the host family, the hosting club or district will maintain contact with the student and the host family for the duration of the exchange.

## **Sharing Your Home**

The exchange student's year in your country is a time of excitement. What follows are general guidelines for meeting your student and making him/her feel welcome. Please note that some of these guidelines apply only to an exchange student's contact with his/her first host family.

### **Meeting Your Exchange Student, and Making Introductions**

Although a Rotarian from the hosting Rotary club or district will meet the student on arrival, the presence of a member of the student's first host family in the welcoming delegation is recommended. Please keep in mind that the student will likely be very tired upon arrival and will need time to recover from "jet lag."

In addition to airport greetings, many host families organize informal welcoming parties for the newcomer. The purpose of this type of party is to introduce the exchange student to some people in the community and family friends with whom the student will have contact. This party can be followed by the eventual introduction of the student to more members of his/her peer group, which

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will comprise the majority of associations during the exchange. Many hosting Rotary clubs have some sort of social event to start this process of introductions early in the exchange, especially if there are many exchange students in the vicinity.

### **Orientation and Adaptation**

As stated above, most exchange students receive formal orientation before and/or after arrival in the host culture. But no matter how thorough the orientation, the student comes into the first host family as a stranger in a strange land. The exchange may in fact be the first trip of any length away from home for the student. One way to ensure that the exchange student's adaptation flows as smoothly as possible is to realize that just as the student will not have a full understanding of your culture, you may be influenced by misapprehensions about his/her homeland. Please be aware that these misapprehensions can lead hosts to inaccurately attribute motives to the student's actions. Some Rotary districts offer intercultural orientation to hosts to address these issues.

Another way to aid in your visitor's adjustment is to share your culture with him/her as it exists in everyday life. This means that you need not arrange elaborate entertainment, but simply make the student a part of your family with the opportunity to share in the same aspects of your family life that most teenage students experience in your culture.

### **General Family Adjustments**

In addition to providing room and board for the exchangee, host parents are expected to exercise general parental supervision, as would the exchangee's natural parents. It is also the host parents' responsibility to notify the student's Rotary counselor if the student is encountering exceptional problems (such as serious illness, difficulty in adapting to the host family or school, or serious homesickness).

One of the adjustments to be faced is how the exchange student is to address adult members of the family. There is a natural reluctance to use "Mother" or "Father," since those words tend to be emotionally reserved for the natural parents. "Mom," "Pop,"

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“Mater,” or “Mamma” all have been used and a substitute term usually develops naturally.

What follows are some additional points of adjustment that will need to be addressed. Much of this information can be conveyed by tacit assimilation, but it is wise to avoid misunderstandings by discussing the following issues and household rules from the start:

- individual responsibilities for household tasks
- normal household routines: meal and retirement times, study hours, etc.
- curfews
- house keys
- explanation of emergency telephone numbers and procedures
- information about city transportation (maps are useful)
- religious practices

## **Some Primary Issues Facing Exchange Students**

While each individual exchange experience is unique, there are certain issues that most students face at some point during an exchange. The following are some of these general issues.

### **Language Proficiency**

During their initial days together, students and host family members will become aware of any language problems that exist. Most students will have studied the host country's language before arrival, sometimes to a considerable extent. However, the knowledge gained from books does not prepare one for daily language use. Be prepared for any slight misunderstandings and frustrations that may accompany communication with the student.

Every effort should be made to see that the student understands what is being said about house rules, geographical directions and so on. Keep in mind that the frustration of communicating in an unfamiliar language may lead



an embarrassed student to indicate he/she has understood something when indeed this is not the case. Conversely, hosts should be sure that they understand what the student is telling them, and they should not hesitate to ask for clarification. On occasion it may be necessary to seek help from someone fluent in the exchangee's native language — a teacher, interpreter, or a visitor from the student's home country.

### **Homesickness**

Language problems, if present, often co-exist with a phenomenon that nearly all exchange students face sooner or later: homesickness. After the novelty and excitement of the early stages of an exchange wear off, the student may suddenly feel alone in a strange place. Individuals with homesickness may consider many day-to-day problems insuperable and look nostalgically toward home. This experience can be devastating to a student. The best remedies to acute homesickness may include contact with someone who speaks the student's native language, and a full program of activities. A side trip

to some point of interest or simply a social event can help, as well as encouraging the student to build hobbies and join in other community functions. For long-term exchanges, the student's Rotary or school counselor can help if the homesickness persists.

### **School Concerns**

As stated previously, most long-term exchanges include schooling for the exchangee. While hosting Rotary clubs make the necessary tuition arrangements with the local secondary school, host parents should see that the student gets started on the right foot. The exchangee's first host parents should consider visiting the school counselor with the exchange student to arrange the study program. Be aware that exchange students often feel obligated to assume an almost impossible academic load. As a result, the student should be advised against taking too many classes while adjusting to the new school.

The exchangee may need your guidance to become acquainted with school procedures, particularly if he/she is accustomed to a



radically different school system. Host brothers and sisters can help the school counselor to provide assistance in this area. Please be sure that the student knows how to get to and from school, and how to get lunch off school grounds if needed.

### **Changing Families**

As mentioned above, most long-term exchange students live with three different host families over the course of the school year. It is important that both the hosts and the exchange student realize at the outset the limited duration

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of each stay with a host family. The first change of families will probably be the most upsetting for the student, as he/she will have established a good rapport with the family that helped him/her to overcome the initial culture shock.

Words of sympathetic understanding, couched in terms of a broadening of opportunity, should be offered to the student if he/she is having difficulty changing families. Counseling from the Rotarian counselor, an understanding teacher, or a minister of the individual's religion can be a way of smoothing the transition. The exchange student should ideally be introduced to his or her next host family *early* in the exchange.

### **The Exchange Student's Rotary Obligations**

Hosts are encouraged to help their exchangee meet Rotary obligations, which usually includes attendance at Rotary functions such as club and/or district meetings. Attendance at these meetings may involve the delivery of a speech. The student's sharing of

the exchange experience with the hosting club or district is an important feature of the exchange, and it contributes to the student's ambassadorial role.

Hosts should be aware of Rotary obligations from the start and should factor them into the student's overall adjustment process. For example, hosts should be aware that the student will need time to adjust to the new culture and language before being required to speak at a Rotary function. It is a good idea for the exchange student to attend Rotary club meetings early in the visit simply as part of the familiarization process so that he/she will feel comfortable speaking at these meetings later in the exchange.

Students should not be permitted to decline speaking at Rotary meetings with the excuse that he/she is "not a public speaker." The student is not expected to be an experienced orator. Audiences are interested in seeing the student and hearing his/her reactions to the culture — not the polished delivery of a speech.

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## Summary

The responsibility of hosting an exchange student can be summarized in a few simple precepts:

- Meet your exchange student on arrival in your country, and make him/her feel at home as part of the family.
- Help the student achieve language mastery.
- Involve the student in obligations similar to those established for your own family members.
- Guard the student from outside demands to allow him/her time to accept Rotary obligations.
- See that the student meets other young people.
- Be tolerant of differences and be willing to change your own ideas.

All of this information may make it seem that the job of hosting an exchange student is extremely complicated. It is not. However, hosting does require tact, sympathy and patience. The rewards of hosting an exchange student through your local Rotary Youth Exchange program are great in terms of widened views and understanding, and the development of long-term friendships. Congratulations on your decision to enrich your life, while making a world of difference in the life of an exchange student.



Rotary International  
One Rotary Center  
1560 Sherman Avenue  
Evanston, IL 60201 USA

