



**AFS Interculturele
Programma's VZW**

AFS Interculturele Programma's vzw
Hendrik Consciencestraat 52
2800 Mechelen

Tel. 015 79 50 10
Fax 015 79 50 11
E-mail info@afsvlaanderen.be
Website www.afsvlaanderen.be

TIPS FOR PERSONAL SAFETY
FOR EUROPEAN AND NON-EUROPEAN PARTICI-
PANTS ON EXCHANGE PROGRAM IN BELGIUM
FLANDERS

Update: 25/10/2007





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1. WELCOME TO BELGIUM-FLANDERS !!!

You may think that a booklet giving some advice about your safety is not a very pleasant way to welcome people. Our purpose is certainly not to scare or alarm you. By giving you the following tips, we just want you to avoid any trouble or incident during your stay in Belgium and allow you to make the most of it. We still believe that Belgium is a rather safe country but people do not deal with the issue of personal safety the same way world-wide. These questions are specific to individual countries or even parts of a single country. So it is important that you read the following tips very carefully.

A primary objective of experiential learning programmes such as those offered by AFS is to help the participant learn through observation, question, dialogue, discussion and experience. This is also true in the field of safety. But from experience AFS staff and volunteers understand that the opportunity to learn is great, but it is not necessarily easy. Participants encounter complex situations along the way and there is potential for confusion, fear and misunderstanding. If participants were left to their own devices, the consequences could be very distressing. For these reasons with the help of host families, enthusiastic AFS volunteers, local AFS support persons and the project personnel, AFS has devised the system of “program support” providing all participants with a wide range of supportive activities and services. The purpose is to give you a “safety net” . . . a consistently supportive environment in which participants can ask questions, obtain advice and help.

AFS cannot supply all the possible answers, but through our support systems, we can help to guide participants towards appropriate questions. In reading this guide, you will see that there are some questions we encourage you to ask to your host family, AFS local volunteers or staff from your host project/company.

Of course, we can not anticipate all possible situations pertaining to individual safety concerns. AFS recommends that participants always talk about any questions they may have about specific personal issues. This dialogue and your trust in rules and advice given by the AFS staff, volunteers or by your host family or host project will surely be your best safeguards.



2. PERSONAL SAFETY ISSUES

2.1. In or around the home

Safety concerns do not only vary from one country to another but also from one region to another and more importantly from one family to another.

Here we mention just some general customs of Belgian families, but we insist that you speak with your own host family about their way to deal with safety.

In Belgium, people usually lock their doors and windows when they leave, except in some small and rural villages where everybody knows each other. In cities, most people also lock their front door when they are home. In case you lost your keys, families will very likely replace all the locks on the doors. You must be aware that this could be on your charge.

You will very likely receive a house key : needless to say that you have to be very careful not to lose it. In any case, don't keep this key with an ID card or any document stating your address in Belgium.

AFS suggests that you don't keep large amounts of money at home. If you don't have easy access to your own current account when you are abroad, you can easily open a new one in Belgium for your pocket money etc.

Here are some important points you should discuss with your host family :

- Do you keep the doors of the house locked at all times ? If not, when should the doors be locked ?
- Will I have my own house key ?
- In case of a problem while I'm home alone, or in case I've lost my key, who should I ask for help ? Neighbours ? Which ones ?
- Where are emergency phone numbers listed ?
- Does the family have a first aid equipment and a fire extinguisher ? Where are they ?
- Are there any appliances (gas stoves for example are quite common in Belgium) that might cause problems and I should be aware of ?

2.2. Outside the home

AFS encourages you to let your host parents know whenever you are concerned or frightened. Your host family knows their community and is best prepared to give you advice about places you should better avoid and how to get around. In general, you should take their advice seriously and follow their recommendations. Ask them what they recommend to help you feel more secure personally.

When you are going out, it's always good to leave at home the information about where you are going and, if possible, a telephone number of where you will be. For almost all families in Belgium it is important to know

-where you are going ?

-what time you expect to be back ?

-to be informed if, for any reason, you can not come back at the agreed time ?

This is not meant to check you the whole time but is more meant as a concern from the host family. You will see that host parents ask this information also for their own daughter or son. Also for emergency cases it's important to know where you are.

Most people nowadays have a mobile phone. We suggest that you get a Belgian phone number for your stay here.

If you do not want to buy a mobile phone and/or card, you can still use one of the many public phones in Belgium. You need a special card to use most of them, there are very few left that work with coins. We suggest that you always carry such a phone card with you. They are very easy to find (stations, newspaper-shops,...).

We suggest that at the beginning of the year you learn your home phone number by heart, or have it written down somewhere.

Pick-pockets and robberies are not very widespread but, mainly in cities or crowded areas, you should be cautious. In general, you should not carry large amounts of money or very valuable things. If you have opened a bank account, you will easily find cash machines to withdraw money from in cities and most villages. When going to parties, you should keep a watchful eye on your belongings (especially jackets) as there are unfortunately risks of theft.

Important points to discuss with your host family :

- Are there unsafe neighbourhoods or places in the area ? During the daytime ? After dark ?
- Is there public transport I should avoid late at night ?

2.3. Travelling abroad

In some cases you may want to visit some other country abroad with your host family or friends during your stay in Belgium. In such cases you first have to check with the embassy if you need a visa to enter that country. For non-Europeans, we would like to draw your attention to the fact that having a visa to enter Belgium does not imply that you can enter other European countries without needing another visa (even if Belgians are not required to have a visa to visit that country). You should be aware of the consequences if you do not adhere to the legal requirements when travelling to other countries: these could range from paying a fine to getting withheld by the country's authorities.

Please note that all expenses for travelling are for your own account. We ask that you give us an address of where you will stay (in case of emergency)!

Please note that you will officially get 12 working days of holiday from the organisation you are working for.

2.4. Questioning by the authorities

In most countries adolescent boys are more likely than girls to find themselves being questioned by the police or other civil authority officer. AFS advises that you show respect and co-operation



with authorities, even though you may be innocent of any crime and think you are being treated unfairly.

In such a situation, it is unlikely that you will understand what is being said by the authority figure. In general, the best advice would be to say that you do not understand what is happening and identify yourself as an exchange trainee or volunteer worker.

You must always carry your foreigner identification card, which you will get at the beginning of your stay. This is important not only in the event of being questioned by authorities, but also in the unfortunate event of a personal accident or if you become the victim of a crime and may not be able to effectively communicate.

2.5. At your project or work placement

You can ask your colleagues or your supervisor about the safety rules at your work placement. It can be that an alarm is set every evening. Then it is important that you close doors and windows when you leave the work placement. If it is necessary, they will give you an introduction on the situation at the start of your work period.

2.6. Illegal drugs, alcohol abuse

All participants are forbidden to use illegal drugs and substances. In Belgium, use or possession of drugs are strongly punishable by law. Explicit violation of this rule can be cause for dismissal from the programme and immediate return to the home country. It is very important that you remember this, should you find yourself in a situation where illegal substances are being used.

In Belgium you can drink alcohol from the age of 16 but this limit is not very strict. Besides, Belgium is well known for its various beers. It is very common for young people to have a drink in a pub. Exchange participants should be very cautious with this: Belgian beers are much stronger than regular beers. Getting drunk can lead to uncomfortable situations that some people might take advantage of. Besides, being drunk in public places is still punishable by law in Belgium.

When going out, you should always think about the way you are coming back: you should know the public transport's timetable because they stop running at night. If you intend to come back by car with a friend, make sure (s)he is not drunk.

We advise you strongly not to accept a ride from someone you don't know well.

We also remind that hitch-hiking is strictly forbidden for AFS participants (this is for insurance reasons).

In Belgium, many cities have special celebrations and festivals which sometimes even last for several days and bring about large gatherings. These celebrations are mainly about fun and joy but like in any crowd gathering, especially when there is a lot of drinking going on, some people can't refrain from excesses. Be very careful regarding safety, drinking... !!

2.7. Health Precautions

Belgium can be wet and cold in winter. If you are not used to this kind of climate, make sure you take enough warm clothes.

There are no vaccination requirements to enter Belgium. Tap water and food are generally very safe, also in small restaurants and stalls. However, it is advisable to have the usual vaccinations (MMR, tetanus, polio, Hepatitis A and B...)

If you have sexual intercourse, protect yourself and your partner against pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) such as HIV-AIDS, Chlamydia, genital herpes, gonorrhoea... STDs are common in Belgium too and can have irreversible consequences! You can buy condoms in any pharmacy or supermarket in Belgium. Make sure you consult a doctor as soon as possible if you suspect you may have been infected with an STD.

2.8. Social attitudes towards sexuality

There are different attitudes. Some adults don't talk about sex or sexual education with their children. Other families, still a minority, are very open to talk about the subject. Among teenagers there is less taboo. Be prepared that your host family and siblings might seem more liberal or at the contrary very close about sexuality. If either attitude makes you uncomfortable, talk about it.

2.9. Sexual harassment

Cultures differ in their views of appropriate sexual behaviour and practice for young people. Often clarification of attitudes may be necessary and here, again, the advice of people you have come to know and trust is very valuable. Knowledge about the people you socialise with is important, and this is acquired best through increasing knowledge of the culture. Equally important are your own values and beliefs regarding your behaviour. In societies where some young people are sexually active, there are also many who are not. You should not compromise your own personal values and beliefs regarding sexual behaviour.

In some situations it may be unclear to you if you are being sexually harassed or if a particular person's behaviour would be considered normally friendly. An important resource is your own instinct. Also, often your host siblings/parents and friends will be able to advise you about normal behaviour of people you do not know. Other resources to whom you can turn for advice or help are the AFS contacts within your community or at the National Office.

Exchange participants should be careful about the message they may be sending by dressing provocatively or by having a behaviour that could be understood as provocative. You will have to learn these "rules" and "practices" by observing people and by asking questions to friend, family siblings...

Sexual harassment and rape are likely to happen in any country. Women especially are subject to harassment and rape risks. We would like to draw their attention to the following advice:

- Girls have to be careful to enter unknown places (parties, bars, events) alone or with people they don't know very well.
- They should avoid isolated places and never accept a ride from someone they don't know well.
- In a crowded place, when feeling harassed by someone, they should move away, try to make contact with or get the attention of other people or loudly yell to intimidate him.
- When they think they are followed, they should try to go into a public place (shop, restaurant,...), or even knock on the door of a house and ask for help.

3. EMERGENCIES

Always keep the phone-number of your host family with you. In case of an emergency, you should try to contact your host family, an AFS local contact person (we suggest you write down numbers of AFS local contacts from your chapter) or the national office:



National AFS office:

015 79 50 10 (from 10.00 AM to 5.00 PM)

After hours, the answering machine will give you the emergency line number in case you need assistance immediately.



Emergency line AFS Belgium-Flanders :

0477 237 207 (from 5.00 PM to 10.00h)

This number can be called 24/24 h in case of an emergency. Please be careful to use it for emergencies only. The staff person carrying the emergency phone is not in the office, and cannot help you with administrative issues.

There are also some emergency no-charge services available from any public phone or home telephone; you should keep them in mind:



General Emergency numbers in Belgium:

- 100** emergency medical help
- 100** fire brigade
- 101** police

4. CONCLUSION

The best general advice AFS can recommend regarding issues of personal safety are :

get to know the host culture well through questions, dialogue and discussion with your host family, peers, the AFS local contacts.

take seriously any concerns that your host family and project have expressed and follow their advice.

do not ignore your own instinct in any given situation or feel you have to compromise your own personal behavioural values and beliefs. These are valuable resources in making decisions about what to do.

try to be cautious without becoming paranoiac, try to keep an open mind without being naive and **make the best of your stay in our country.**