

AFS FINLAND SAFETY HANDBOOK

INTRODUCTION

General Advice by AFS International

A primary objective of experimental learning programs such as those offered by AFS is to help the participant learn through observation, question, dialogue, discussion and experience. From experience, AFS staff and volunteers understand that the opportunity to learn is great, but it is not necessary easy. Participants encounter complex situations along the way and there is potential for confusion, fear and misunderstanding. If students are left to their own devices, the consequences could be very distressing. For these reasons, with the help of host families, local community AFS contacts and school personnel, AFS has devised the system of "Program Support" for all participants providing a wide range of supportive activities and services. The purpose is to provide 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 asking appropriate questions.

It is not possible to try anticipate all possible situations pertaining to individual safety concerns. Many of these issues are specific to individual countries or parts of a single country. In general, AFS recommends talking with the host family, local AFS volunteers and staff from the host school soon after the student arrives into the host family home about any of the information in this guidebook and any questions students may have about specific personal issues.

AFS suggests that students ask their host family about specific situations about which they are concerned or worried, recognising that most of the information about the host country is prevalent in movies and in media publications, and that it may not be accurate for the country or the specific area in which the family lives.

Within this context, what follows are some topics and general suggestions.

PERSONAL SAFETY CONCERNS

In and around the home

In general, the family is not always likely to know what you are worried about, so you need to ask them about issues that concern you. For example, such questions as "Can I go out alone at night? Are there parts of town that I should not go to?" etc. are questions that the host family can best answer. Although there are common safety issues in Finland, they vary from region to region and from city to town or village.

Telephone

Host families will usually explain about making telephone calls, but may not realise that you may have concerns about how to answer the telephone, especially if you are not comfortable in using the host country language and are not yet familiar with the people who may be calling. AFS encourages you to ask your host parents how you should respond when answering the telephone. What information should you give? What information should you not give?

Electricity

In Finland the voltage is 220V which is very dangerous in cases of electric shocks. Never use electrical appliances close to water. And make sure to turn electric appliances off when you don't use them.

Gas

Some people use gas for cooking (especially in summer cottages). You should be very careful when using gas appliances. Make sure you never leave them on when you leave home or go to sleep.

Although still in some areas of Finland people do not lock their doors or shut the windows before leaving home, in most areas they do. So when leaving the house, make sure you have turned off the electric and gas appliances, blown out the candles, shut the windows and locked the door.

Some helpful questions that you should ask your host family:

1. Do you lock your doors and windows? Always? When?
2. May I have a house key?
3. Do you have a first aid kit? Where?
4. Do you have a fire extinguisher? Where do you keep it?
5. What should I do if an emergency occurs? Whom should I call?
6. How should I answer the phone? What information should I not give out to strangers?
7. Where do you keep the emergency phone numbers?
8. What should I do if I am alone and a stranger is at the door? What should I tell him/her?
9. Are there any appliances that could cause a problem and I should be aware of?

Outside the home

AFS encourages you to let your host parents know whenever you are concerned or frightened. Ask them what they recommend to help you feel personally more secure. When you are going out, AFS suggests that you always tell your host parents where you are going and leave them a phone number where you can be reached.

Your host family knows the most about their community and they are best prepared to give you advice about places, which you should avoid and how to get around. In general, you should take their advice seriously and follow their recommendations.

Finland is a safe country. There is no big difference between boys and girls when it comes to safety. But like any other country, you should be aware that there may be some places you should avoid, or avoid when dark.

In general, you should try to avoid being alone at train stations late at night, because in some towns (e.g. Helsinki) these places might be dangerous although this is usually not the case in most areas. When walking alone late at night you should try to walk in streets that are well lit and where there are other people. Also it is important to wear a reflector when dark.

When walking in crowded areas, you should take care of your valuables because pick pocketing is more common in crowded areas, especially in buses or market places.

Public transportation in Finland is perfectly safe to use. You should just make sure you know the time when buses and trains (or trams and metros) stop running at the end of the day if you are planning to return home later at night.

In Finland traffic keeps to the right - remember that when you cross the street or ride a bicycle. A lot of Finns, and especially students, ride a bicycle from April till November. When it is dark you'll need lights on your bike. Also remember to lock your bike when you are not riding it.

It is illegal in Finland for civilians to carry weapons. However, you should be careful though that some people own illegal weapons although they are very few.

UNCOMFORTABLE SITUATIONS

Laws, Illegal drugs, alcohol abuse:

All participants are forbidden to use illegal drugs and substances. Explicit violations of this rule is cause of dismissal from the program and immediate return to the home country. It is most important that you remember this, should you find yourself in a situation where illegal substances are being used. Similarly abuse of alcoholic beverages can be a cause for dismissal from the program.

In general, knowing the culture is usually the best preparation for knowing how to handle uncomfortable social situations. It is also good for your host parents to meet your friends and to know with whom you spend your free time. If you are invited to go to a party or other event such as a rock concert or soccer game and are not sure if it is safe to go, AFS recommends that you find out a little about the party or event, where it is being held and who will be there. Usually your host siblings, parents, friends or teachers at school can give you information about the event and the people expected to attend. Some host parents may also forbid students to attend certain kinds of parties, rock festivals, etc. Students should respect the parents' advice, even if other people he or she knows might be going.

Many countries have a 'legal drinking age'. In Finland that age is 18, so it is prohibited to sell alcohol in restaurants or stores to persons under 18. Though it is quite common that you find people under 18 drinking, remember to ask your host family about their attitude towards drinking.

Participants and their natural parents are fully responsible for damages caused by the participants to third parties and any cost involved in connection with such claims. AFS does **NOT** assume any legal liability for the participants, e.g. if a student hits a car when riding a bicycle or breaks a window by throwing a ball.

AFS students are subject to the law of their hosting country. Neither AFS nor the national government of the students' home country has the ability to protect the student from punishment with respect to drugs, thefts or other legal offences.

As an AFS student you are not permitted to drive. In Finland a person must be 18 years old to get a driver' s license. We suggest that the AFS students not get in any motor vehicle with an inexperienced driver or someone without a license or with someone who has consumed any alcohol. (In the Finnish law drinking and driving is strictly forbidden; also passengers in such a car are punished.) Also everyone in a car has to wear a seat belt according to the Finnish law. Remember: hitch-hiking is forbidden!

Sexual Harassment:

Cultures differ in their views of appropriate sexual behaviour and practices of 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.

You may be unsure in some situations if you are being sexually harassed or if a particular person' s behaviour would be considered normally friendly. An important source is your own instinct. Also often your host siblings/parents and friends will be able to advice you about normal behaviour of people you do not know. Other sources to whom you can turn to for advice or help are teachers at school and the AFS contacts within your community or at the national office.

Sexual harassment is likely to happen in any country. Females especially are subject to harassment. For example if guys whistle after a female student, she should avoid contact with them by not looking at them. If a car pulls up beside you, do not get in.

Young people might be subject to an assault (in crowded places). Try to avoid this by moving away from the person or by loudly yelling at the person to intimidate him. Also do not wear provocative clothing.

If you realise that someone is following you, try to go to a public place (a shop, a restaurant) and ask someone for help.

In the event of an actual assault, the student should first notify the host parents. Then the family can take over and notify the police, AFS and arrange for a medical check-up.

EMERGENCIES

The role of military or police authorities varies from country to country. Each country is different. 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 to authorities, even though you may be innocent of any crime and think that you are being treated unfairly.

In such a situation, it is unlikely that you will understand what is being said by the authority. In general, the best advice would be to say that you do not understand what is happening and identify yourself as an exchange student. In case of an emergency you should try to call your host family, the local contact person or the AFS office. The number of **AFS Finland office is 09- 666 644**. After office hours and during weekends or holidays you can reach the **AFS duty officer** by calling the mobile number **050- 376 6650**.

The general emergency number for ambulance, police and fire department is 112. Abuse of this number may be punished with fine.

In case of a national emergency, the student should follow the advice of the government or the local authorities. The national AFS office will immediately contact the students in order to provide necessary help.

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 and the local AFS contacts.
- Take seriously any concerns that your host family and school have expressed and follow their advice.
- As stated in the participation agreement you sign prior to leaving home, the national AFS office will make recommendations and give guidelines for physical welfare and security. Take this advice seriously and comply with these guidelines.