

On being an AFS Exchange Student

In an old story of a long-running war between two kingdoms, the kings agreed to a peaceful exchange. Each agreed to send his son to live with the family of his enemy, to be cared for in the other kingdom as if he were the son of that family. Each put his faith in the other to care for his son, and committed in return to care for the other's son as if he were his own. These sons also came to understand and became attached to the new kingdom, making it impossible from then on for either of them to raise war against the other.

(This first paragraph, as well as the ones that follow, are extracts from The Exchange Student Survival Kit by Bettina Hansel¹)

As we look at the troubled times we live in at the beginning of the third millennium, it is hard to imagine that student exchange programs can have much of an impact. People enjoy an unprecedented familiarity with what seems to be a global culture, but the divisions between “us” and “them” –however that is defined- seems stronger than ever. [...] we still see that self-interest dominates our decision making for the most part, and the concerns and problems of those in other cultures are seldom brought to our consciousness.

How, then, can an exchange student be part of a peace-building effort? It is not fair to presume that a teenager bound for a year or a semester abroad is going to be able to solve the problems of the world. But virtually everyone who has participated as an exchange student will tell you about how they changed during their time living abroad. Some of these changes are personal: they became more independent, or they became more self-confident. But above all, exchange students change their perspective as a result of their experience. They understand their own country and culture in a new light, and they know firsthand what it means to live every day in another part of the world with a different reality from the one then knew growing up.

What can you expect to gain from spending a year or a semester living in a new country with people you don't know yet? Research on this topic has shown that the biggest gains, nor surprisingly, are in learning the language, understanding the new culture, and in the development of a more international perspective. It is also an excellent opportunity to learn about yourself and to develop the kind of personal skills and relationships that will be useful to you in the years to come. It is an intense learning experience that involves you totally. [...] You will still be the same “you”, but you will have a new understanding of where you have come from and who you are becoming.

Whether you are one of the selected few or one of a big group of exchange students leaving home from your community, your status is still special. This is not a vacation you are taking. **You are participating in an educational and challenging experience inside of another culture and society.**

Your Role in the Family

You are placed in a host family for two reasons. The first is because the family is the heart of a culture, and you will learn the most in this setting. The second is because the family can offer you support as you try to cope with the many changes you'll face during your year abroad.

What will your role in the host family be? [...] Frequently students and their families begin their experience by trying to fit each other into the roles that are familiar to them. Most of these roles are inappropriate. Here are some of the things that you are not.

You are not a houseguest. When you are a houseguest, the family you're visiting prepares special meals for you, takes you sightseeing, and otherwise tries to keep you entertained. The normal family routines are altered. [...] While the rules of hospitality vary from culture to culture, in no culture should a host family and their exchange student maintain this sort of relationship for an entire year together. In the early days of your stay with them, you may discover that your host family treats you as they would a houseguest, but it is important to leave that role behind as soon as possible so that you both can feel more at home.

You are not a boarder. Exchange students sometimes take the attitude that the fees they pay for the exchange program include room and board with a family. Because they think of themselves as paying guests, they do little to participate in the life of the family. This attitude defeats the purpose of the exchange program, which is to provide the opportunity for intercultural learning and can leave the host family, who generously volunteered to welcome the exchange student into their home, feeling like servants.

You are not a housekeeper or babysitter. While you will probably be asked to do your share of the household chores and may, from time to time, be asked to take care of any small children in the home, you should not be doing more work than is expected of the other members of the family.

Are you a member of the family? In many ways you *are* like a member of the family. The host parents assume responsibility for your basic well-being. They are concerned about your health and your adjustment to school. They are interested in you, and ultimately they will worry about you.

In other important ways you are not fully a member of the family. You have not shared their experiences and do not share their memories, even though they will likely tell you stories about things that have happened to them in the past and show you photos or videos of some of these events. [...] More important, you have another, real family which is ultimately responsible for your well-being. The host parents are very much aware of their obligation to your parents. They may be more protective of you than their own children for this reason. At the same time, they may give you special privileges or may hesitate to impose their rules on you because they know that your own parents have established different rules. (It is important for you to also respect the rules of your new host family.)

Most host families also have children of their own, and you may wonder what relationship you will have with them. Your feelings about your host siblings are not likely to be the same as your feelings for your own brothers and sisters. They may not be prepared to accept you right away in this role, either. [...] not all host siblings are upset by the attention of the position that the exchange student has in their family, but your arrival does change the dynamics in the family, especially among the children. [...] With your arrival the oldest child in the family may now be you! Or simply because of the different experiences you have had, you may be more mature in some areas than the brother or sister of the same age. Or perhaps you are neater with your belongings, or more interested in your studies, or you like to read more than the children in the family. Suddenly, you are the shining example for the other children, who may feel that their parents were perfectly content with their behavior until you came along.

Exchange students sometimes feel great pressure to win the approval of the host parents, but it is often the relationship with the other teenagers in the house that can make the family experience either satisfying or uncomfortable. Of course, this doesn't mean that your relationship with the parents is unimportant. It does mean that you also need to form direct, personal relationships with the children in the family and be sensitive to their feelings and needs.

For the most part, your host brothers or sisters will be eager to spend time with you and introduce you to their friends, but you should also plan to find friends of your own in the community. Even though you may get along very well with the children in the family like being with them, your host brothers or sisters are probably not going to be your best friends, and it will be better if you are not totally dependent on them.

Your role in the Community

[...] It is not possible to predict the reception you will have in your school or community (...) You will probably be asked many questions about your life at home, some of which may sound rather stupid to you, especially if the people in your host community tend not to be familiar with your country. [...] When people you meet ask questions about your country, the best strategy is to answer such questions directly and seriously, no matter how ridiculous the question seems to you. (...) The person who asked the question may not know much about your country now, but in some way you have sparked his or her interest and curiosity.

Sometimes your role as an exchange student in the community can overwhelm you. (...) The attempt to act the part of the perfect exchange student or the perfect "junior ambassador" can be exhausting. You need time to just be yourself and not always on display.

Being an exchange student *does* mean sharing yourself with people. It is important to remember that you don't have to become someone other than who you are. The role you play in the family and the community is unique, and you and your unique personality have a large part in creating it. It is only by remembering this that you can find the best way to fit into the host community and to create a role that is right for you.

¹ Hansel, Bettina. The Exchange Student Survival Kit. Intercultural Press, second edition. (2007) Boston, USA. Pg. 1-13