

# CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT AND HOSTING BEST PRACTICES

Welcome!

Welcome to the third and final module of AFS-USA's Host Family Orientation online course.

We'll conclude by introducing you to the Cultural Adjustment process that people typically experience when transitioning to life in a new culture.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Upon Completing this module, you will be able to:

- Identify ways your AFS Participant may need to adjust to a new culture
- Identify ways you and your family may need to adjust to your AFS Participant's culture
- List ways your family can prepare for cultural adjustment
- Identify some of the best practices for facilitating successful AFS experiences

## CULTURAL MISUNDERSTANDINGS

The purpose of some objects isn't always clear upon your first encounter with them. Watch the video below for a humorous example of cultural misunderstandings.

## NAVIGATING THE UNKNOWN

Take a look at the two objects below.



Can you guess their purposes? If you were required to use these objects, would you know what to do? How would you go about learning?



*The first object is a mango slicer, similar to an apple-corer you may already be familiar with.*

*The second object is a form for making onigiri, a common Japanese rice snack.*

Compare your experience trying to identify these simple objects to what an AFS participant experiences every day as he or she adjusts to life in a new culture.

Differences, both large and small, present constant challenges, especially in the first few weeks and months of the exchange experience. The more hidden aspects of U.S. culture are revealed over time, the more pressure the participant feels to make still more adjustments.

In addition to these challenges, participants also experience homesickness for family, friends and familiar surroundings. Learning to cope becomes that much more difficult without the familiar people and things that have provided support and comfort in the past.

## CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT CYCLE

Adjusting to a new culture can feel like a rollercoaster ride for your AFS participant.

Like a rollercoaster, there will be many highs and lows; and, most likely also many exciting and uncomfortable moments. This process is called the Cultural Adjustment Cycle.

## Step 1: Selection & Arrival

Prior to arriving, the participant feels anxiety over his or her selection changes; and later elated upon learning of acceptance and placement.

Arrival is a time of excitement.

## Step 2: Culture Shock

Upon arrival, the new participant experiences some discomfort due to visible and invisible cultural differences.

## Step 3: Surface Adjustment

Soon the participant feels more at ease with school, language, the host family, friends and has a tentative sense of belonging.

## Step 4: Mental Isolation

After more time, boredom, frustration and a pervasive sense of total isolation takes hold of the participant.

Deeper differences with others may emerge.

## Step 5: Acculturation

Slowly, the deeper currents of the two cultures are absorbed, accepted and even valued.

A genuine transformation begins to occur.

## Step 6: Return Jitters

As departure nears, anxiety and apprehension over leaving may occur.

The participant feels the closeness achieved with the host family and others, and may feel a little guilty over wishing to stay longer.

## Step 7: Resolution

Once home, the contrast of new and old cultures come as a shock. The returnee discovers others are not as interested in the details of his or her year abroad.

Final resolution involves shifting perspective and seeing both cultures as valid.

# UNDERSTANDING THE CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT CYCLE

In the first days and weeks after your AFS Participant's arrival, he or she might be delighted and curious one day... and then appear sullen and disinterested the next.

He or she might complain about all of the problems with American teenagers... and then be happy to make some new friends. Your hosted participant might be exhausted from trying to function in another language all day and spend a great deal of time alone or sleeping.

All of these are natural emotional reactions... part of the roller coaster ride of the cultural exchange experience. Keep in mind, any initial extremes in behaviors or moods will likely level off after a few days or weeks allowing you to get to know your student in a more authentic sense.

## CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT FOR THE HOST FAMILY

Just as an AFS Participant will go through a period of Cultural Adjustment, so too will the Host Family.

Introducing a new member of the family into your daily life may disrupt old routines, cause moments of discomfort for individuals or the entire family, and generally ask you to question yourself and your assumptions.

### Adjusting to your Participant

You play a very important role in helping your hosted participant through cultural adjustments.

However, you should be aware of your own adjustments. While you are not leaving your culture, you will be bringing another culture into your home.

Ups and downs are common throughout the experience.

## Reflecting on Your Own Feelings

Before your participant arrives, it's a good idea to do some reflecting about what you are feeling and thinking. Write out your feelings and finish these statements:

I feel excited about...

I feel nervous about...

During the experience I hope that...

I feel like this experience will be a success if...

One more step that you can take prior to your AFS participant's arrival is assessing your own goals and expectations.

Take a moment to reflect on and if possible discuss your discoveries with your family.

## Expectations and Goals

As with exchange students, all host families have outcomes in mind when they decide to host a student. It is helpful if you are explicit about these goals and expectations as they will impact the experience.

Based on our experience in sponsoring exchanges, it is safe to say that what you gain from the experience may be somewhat or quite a bit different from what you expect to gain right

now. That is part of the beauty of people learning about each other and making connections across cultures.

## ADJUSTMENT STRATEGIES

### Overview

Now that you understand what both your family and your hosted AFS Participant will most likely be going through as your cultures come together, you may be asking “What can I do to make all of this more fun for everyone?”

By recognizing the symptoms of Cultural Adjustment as they are occurring, you’ll be better able to help yourself, your family and the AFS Participant cope and overcome moments of discomfort.

### Host Family Handbook

The AFS Host Family Handbook is the single most important document that AFS has provided to you. Please do take time to review it prior to your student’s arrival and please refer to it throughout the exchange. It includes many tips about cultural adjustment.

The Participant and Host Family Questionnaire is found in the Host Family Handbook. As was discussed in module #2 of this orientation, you will find it very useful to complete this

questionnaire within a week of your student's arrival and review it again a few weeks later.

## Straight Talk for AFS Host Siblings

Straight Talk for AFS Host Siblings is a brief brochure that can be found in the Host Family Handbook and contains great advice for host siblings as they adjust to having a new brother or sister in the home.

Some of the highlights of this handout include:

Be Yourself

Be a Brother or Sister

Be a Friend

Be a Guide

Be a Language Teacher

We encourage you to print and discuss this document with children in your family as you prepare them to become AFS Host Siblings.

It's not right. It's not wrong. It's just  
different

If you find yourself reacting to your student's behavior in a negative or judgmental way, step back and take a moment to

reflect on the iceberg and consider whether there may be cultural difference at play.

And remember the AFS motto, "It's not right. It's not wrong. It's just different."

## Additional Host Family Resources

Access these additional online resources prior to and throughout your hosting experience with AFS.

[Information for Host Families](#)

[Welcome to the USA](#)

[AFS Safety Tips for the USA](#)

[Hosted Student Immunizations](#)

[Online Safety Resources](#)

## HOSTING BEST PRACTICES

### Nipping it in the bud

Communicate! Communicate! Communicate!

Do not allow little problems to fester and become bigger problems. Talk regularly and often with your AFS participant,

especially at the beginning, about thoughts, feelings, concerns. Be open, honest and compassionate.

Simply hoping problems will pass is unrealistic and will not lead to harmony in your household. Don't hesitate to call your AFS Liaison about "little" problems. The role of the liaison is to be a neutral mediator, not to judge either party.

AFS would much rather help you work through a dozen small difficulties than intervene during an avoidable crisis.

## Following the Rules

The AFS rules are the rules.

The three most important rules (no drugs, no driving, no hitchhiking) are applied unilaterally and with no room for negotiation. Upon proof of violating these rules the participant will be sent home.

Other serious offenses, such as the use of alcoholic beverages, may also be cause for an early return and should always be reported to AFS.

The safety and well-being of the AFS participant is our highest priority. Turning a blind eye to these rules, regardless of the intentions, is not just unacceptable, it's potentially dangerous.

## Being a Member of the Family

From day one, treat your AFS participant as a member of the family, not a guest. Beyond normal adjustments and considerations such as jet lag, religious preferences, or medical conditions. The AFS participant should eat the same food, do chores, and abide by the same rules as the rest of the family. Within a week of your participant's arrival, please review the questionnaire in the back of your Host Family Handbook and again four to six weeks later, once he/she has had an opportunity to settle in and may feel more comfortable discussing certain topics. AFS's experience in working with thousands of exchange students shows that discussing these questions early in the hosting experience will help establish open communication and help prevent future misunderstandings.

While it is crucial that your participant is treated as a member of your family, it is also important to recognize that certain signs of affection or physical contact that may be typical for your family might make a participant from another country and culture uncomfortable, as physical boundaries and "normal" signs of affection differ from culture to culture. For example, it is common for a participant from France to greet someone with a kiss on each cheek. In contrast, a participant

from Japan, who may typically greet someone with a slight bow may be uncomfortable with or misinterpret such physical contact. It is important to keep these cultural differences, and your own participant's comfort level, in mind while integrating him or her into your family.

Furthermore, while your family members may feel comfortable with a foot, back, or shoulder massage after a long day at work, tough football or dance practice, etc., host parents and siblings should not request from nor give any type of massage to their participant in order to avoid any possible misunderstandings and/or discomfort.

## Not Expecting Financial Contributions

Don't require financial contributions for household expenses. Asking your AFS participant to pay for anything, other than his or her own personal expenses, is not allowed. Examples of personal expenses that are the AFS participant's own responsibility include activities such as movie tickets, paying for songs on iTunes, or purchasing new clothing above and beyond what is necessary.

As a host family you have agreed to treat your child as any other member of the family. Requiring your hosted son or daughter to contribute for meals when dining out, groceries, or contributing to the household bills is not acceptable.

If you find yourself a situation in which your AFS participant would like to participate in an extra-curricular activity that neither you or the student can afford, please contact your AFS Liaison. Your local AFS organization may be willing and able to cover some or all of the associated costs.

## Facilitating Friendships

Help your hosted AFS participant in the process of making new friends.

Encourage him or her to participate in allowable extra-curricular activities that will help him or her establish friendships with American teens.

Remind your participant of the importance of taking the initiative to introduce him or herself to classmates and suggest and/or arrange opportunities for your participant to meet and interact with other U.S. youth, especially early on in the experience.

## Not Forcing Friendships Between Host Siblings

Don't force constant companionship. Your own teenaged son or daughter (aka Host Sibling) should not be forced to be the AFS participant's constant buddy/twin/cab driver/best-and-only friend. Let the connection between any teen siblings in your family and the AFS participant grow naturally over time.

Sometimes strong friendships develop; and sometimes they do not. In either case, it's fine provided your hosted AFS son or daughter ultimately feels like a family member.

Do not expect your teen children to provide all transportation for the AFS participant or make your teen child responsible for their new hosted sibling's social life.

A little jealousy on the part of your natural teenage son or daughter is normal, even understandable.

## Being Culturally Curious

Treat the student's culture with interest and respect. Above all else, the successful AFS experience is defined by mutual respect between you and your AFS son or daughter.

Ask questions about your student's country, family, culture. Showing interest in where they come from demonstrates your respect for their story and where they come from. This models the right kind of curiosity about other cultures AFS seeks to foster in all participants.

## Not Seeking Religious Conversion

Don't attempt to convert your hosted AFS son or daughter to your religion.

While AFS encourages host families and participants to share and discuss their religious and other beliefs, attempting to convert your participant is not allowed and could result in removal of the student from your home.

As stated in our core values, "AFS seeks to affirm faith in the dignity and worth of every human being and of all nations and cultures. It encourages respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms without distinction as to race, sex, language, religion, or social status." AFS activities are based on our core values of dignity, respect for differences, harmony, sensitivity, and tolerance.

Proselytizing runs counter to this and your participant should not be subject to this at time, either by you or members of your religious community.

## Attending & Trying at School

School attendance and effort is fundamental to a successful and satisfying AFS experience.

Please reinforce the message to your student that their performance, attitude and effort in school is extremely important. While it is not necessary for every AFS participant to be an "A" student, they must pass their classes and demonstrate they are making genuine efforts to do so.

Individual schools make decisions about whether or not to enroll a student from a country and/or a program based upon the performance of previously hosted students.

At first, school may be a real struggle for the AFS participant. Experiencing some difficulty with adjusting to the necessary hours of homework each night is not unusual in the first month.

## Sensitive Situations

There are circumstances that our participants may find themselves wherein they are apprehensive about others' reactions, due to cultural norms or otherwise, and would prefer to keep the situation to themselves or within the host family until they return home (e.g. certain medical conditions, being a victim of harassment, etc.). Participants may be unaware of the resources and support AFS can provide them in these types of circumstances. It is important to know that AFS liaisons undergo in depth training so that they are well equipped to support our participants and host families under such circumstances. If you find yourself in a position in which your participant is dealing with a sensitive situation regarding his or her personal safety or well-being and he or she has asked you to not share it with others, it is important that you share this information with your liaison who has the resources

and discretion to provide or obtain the appropriate support for you and your participant.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Access these additional online resources prior to and throughout your hosting experience with AFS

[Information for Host Families](#)

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## SUMMARY

Congratulations! You have now completed the third and final of AFS-USA's Host Family Orientation online modules. You should now be able to:

- Define the concept of culture and identify how cultures may differ
- Describe the difference between cultural generalizations and stereotypes in cultural learning

- List some of the factors that influence our perceptions of culture
- Access resources to assist with the facilitation of cultural learning between you and your exchange students