

Welkom in België!

A guide for AFS participants hosted in Belgium Flanders



Please bring this booklet with you to Belgium.

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Important contact information

AFS Interculturele
programma's vzw
H. Consciencestraat 52
2800 Mechelen

Tel: 015/79.50.10
(on weekdays between 9am
and 5pm)

Host family

Name(s): _____

Phone: _____

Address: _____

Local liaison

Name(s): _____

Phone: _____

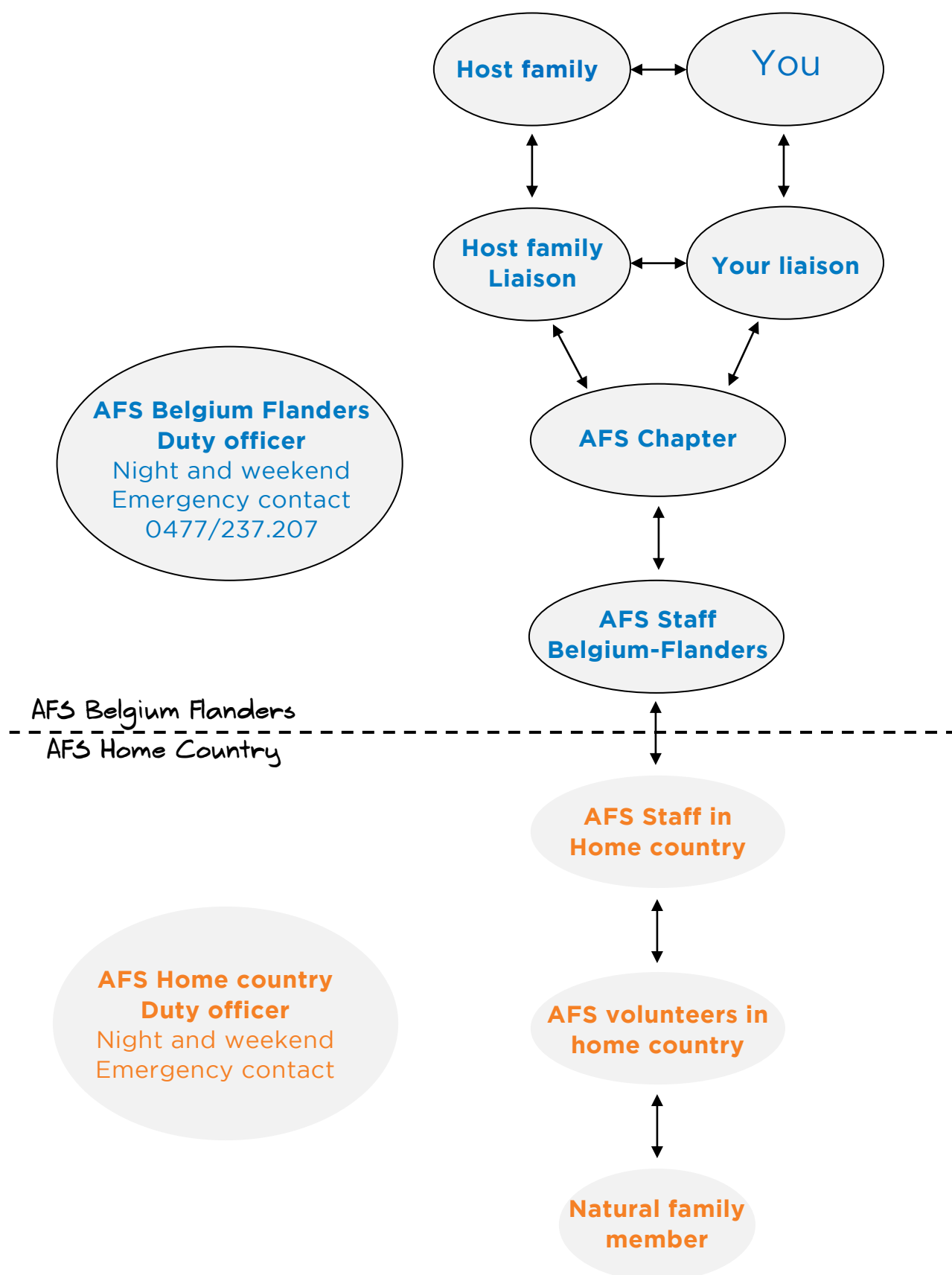
E-mail: _____

Emergency phone numbers:

AFS Emergency line	0477/237.207
National emergency line	112
Police department	101
Anti-poison centre	070 / 245 245
Doctor	

Please use blank lines for additional contact information.

AFS chain of communication



Introduction

The AFS volunteers and staff of AFS Interculturele Programma's vzw, are all looking forward to meeting you and we are happy to welcome you to our country and organisation.

Participating in AFS is something very special: you will meet people from all over the world and will learn more about their cultures, but also about your own. But more than just meeting people, our wish for you is that you will also integrate into our society, creating a unique opportunity to learn our culture from the inside out.

AFS and its volunteers will be there to help you turn this opportunity into a positive, unforgettable experience, but ultimately you'll be the one writing this unforgettable story.

We prepared this booklet for you to help you understand our culture better. Please read it carefully and bring it with you to Belgium.

We be waiting for you in the land of chocolates and fries!

Wishing you all the very best for your AFS-experience,

AFS Belgium Flanders

Preparing

What to bring

Documents

Make sure you have a valid passport and entry visa (if needed) to enter Belgium. You will receive all information concerning travel documents from your AFS office. **It can take several months to get a visa approved, so please start with your application as soon as possible.**

If you are under 18, you will need a **legalised parental authorisation** to travel as well! You will receive the necessary document together with the visa information. You will need this document if you want to travel in Europe, so don't hand it over to the authorities when you leave your home country but bring it with you.

Money

As in many European countries, the Belgian currency is the "euro" (€). You will need to bring some money for personal expenses (movies, concerts, gifts, transportation...). Approximately € 100 to € 200 per month should be sufficient, although this depends of course on your spending habits.

VISA and MasterCard are widely accepted in Belgium. You could also open a bank account and transfer money to your Belgian account from your home account. Ask your host family to help you open an appropriate account. If you are a minor, you may need an official authorisation from your parents. If a bank gives you a hard time to open an account, just try a different bank!

Don't forget to bring some cash to cover the small expenses during the first days! However, we advise you not to bring too much money in cash, as you risk losing it during your travels.

Arrival orientation

You will spend the first few days in Belgium at the arrival orientation. Make sure you bring the following:

- **A tooth brush and soap, for the orientation days** (a towel will be given to you)
- **Some pocket money** for drinks and snacks

Other things to take with you

- Bring a camera if you own one!
- Info about your home town and country (pictures of your home, your family and your neighbourhood, your high-school yearbook, traditional recipes, the national flag, pictures of tourist attractions...)
- Some small presents for your host family. The best suggestion we can give is to use your imagination - try walking around in your favourite department store. Your family will love anything which is typical of your country.
- Sports clothes (including bathing suit) and sport shoes.

Language

Language is the key to integration. To help you, AFS will provide additional language classes during the first months of your stay. It is very important that you learn to speak Dutch as soon as possible.

During the first months of your stay AFS will organise **two language lessons a week with an experienced language teacher. Attendance is obligatory!** You will receive more information about the lessons during your arrival camp. If you want to follow any other Dutch classes apart from or following the ones organised by AFS, you will have to pay for them yourself.

To give you a head start, we will also give you access to **Rosetta Stone**, an online language-learning program. You will receive your login and an information guide in May. **We expect you to finish the first level at least before the start of the program.** This will take 20-30 hours on average.

Knowledge of Belgium-Flanders and your own country

Naturally, this booklet gives you only a very brief introduction to Belgium and Flanders. During the orientation camp we will give you more information, but please try and do some research before you arrive.

Make sure you also know enough about your own country. People will be very curious!

Lastly, don't forget pictures/objects about yourself, your family, friends and community, or some of your favourite local recipes, so you can proudly wave your flag.

Attitudes

On the whole, the success of your AFS experience depends to a large extent on your personal attitude. If you're motivated and you want to come to Belgium then this will be the first big step in getting to know our culture.

It is evident that you will have to learn to understand and accept habits and ways of thinking that are completely new to you. Yet with an open, non-judgemental mind you will go a long way. Feel free to ask questions and do not be afraid to make mistakes. And of course, never ever lose your sense of humour!

About Belgium and Flanders

Belgium: the country

Belgium's central location connects us with important cities of Europe - London, Paris, Rotterdam, Amsterdam, Köln, Bonn and Luxembourg - are all situated within a radius of 300 km around Belgium's capital Brussels.

Thanks to this central location the capital city of Brussels has become the headquarters of two major international organizations: the European Union (E.U.) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (N.A.T.O.). Many other international bodies and private companies are also represented in Belgium.

Political structure

Belgium has been independent since shortly after the Revolution of 1830. It is a federal state with a rather complex character. The present Head of State is King Philippe since 2013. He has largely a ceremonial function. The King stands above religions and ideologies, above political beliefs and debates, above economic interests. In this way he performs the role of an impartial arbitrator.

As Belgium is located at the junction of the Latin and Germanic cultures, there are three language communities in the country: the Dutch-speaking, the French-speaking and the German-speaking community. At the same time, there are also three geographical regions: Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia. Flanders is an integral part of the Dutch-speaking community. The small German-speaking community lives in the east of Wallonia, and Brussels is officially bilingual (Dutch and French).

As Belgium is a federal state, each region and community has a certain degree of autonomy. All of them can elect their own government and executive power, that can pass their own laws (on the items they are responsible for). The federal government has the following responsibilities: defence, economics, foreign policy...

If you would like more info about the complex structure of Belgium, the following video is a good start: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QlwHotpl9DA>

It is because of the political structure (the language communities are responsible for youth-related matters) that there are **two AFS organisations in Belgium: Belgium-Flanders and Belgium-French**. You will be in touch with staff and volunteers of Belgium-Flanders.

Flanders

You will be staying in the northern part of the country, Flanders. How is it best characterized? Its ancient cities, Bruges, Ghent, Antwerp, Mechelen, Leuven... are world famous- so are its chocolates and beers! Then there are famous painters like Van Eyck, Rubens and Brueghel; moreover we have a rich knowledge of tapestry, lace and miniatures...

Ever since the Middle Ages, Flanders has been at the crossroads of the great European trade routes. Flemish merchants swarmed out to every corner of the then known world. Foreign merchants and artists came to Flanders endowing the magnificent Flemish cities with prosperity and cultural vitality.

Flemish people speak Dutch, the language that is also spoken in the Netherlands. Sometimes however, their language will be referred to as 'Flemish'. Do not get confused, Flemish is a regional variant, but it is still Dutch. This means that there are some differences in intonation and accent, but that on the whole the language is the same. Indeed, The Flemish and Dutch read the same books and do not need a translator to communicate with each other! The degree of difference between 'Dutch' and 'Flemish' is similar to that between e.g. American and British English or Mexican and Peruvian Spanish.

Dutch is a Germanic language, related to English and German. It is spoken by over 20 million people in both Flanders and the Netherlands. Dutch is also an official language in Suriname and the Dutch Antilles and is still spoken to some extent in Indonesia, and a variation of the language (Afrikaans) is spoken in South Africa.

Many Flemish people speak English quite well. They often enjoy speaking a foreign language, and they may try to practice their foreign languages with you. However, ask your family and friends to speak Dutch with you from the very beginning, even if this takes a lot of time and patience from both sides. Especially English speakers may have a hard time trying to persuade their families and friends to speak Dutch.

Religion

Many Belgians consider themselves Roman Catholic but are not very religious. As a result, most of them do not go to church on Sundays. If your family does attend religious services, you are free to join them if you would like to. If your family does not attend religious services or if you practise a different faith, you may of course attend services of your own faith. Just keep in mind that your religion might not be widespread in Belgium and that there might not be a place of worship close to you, and that your host family is likely to expect you to be able to go there by your own.

AFS Belgium Flanders

The organisation

The local chapters

At the local level we have AFS-chapters which mainly consist of returnees and former host and sending families. Each chapter is divided into a youth chapter and a parent chapter. They are both headed by a chair(wo)man.

One member of the local chapter will be your **contact person/liaison**. You can talk to them whenever you encounter a problem, or even just when you want to let someone know what a great time you're having! (S)he is there to listen to you and to help you out if necessary!

The AFS office

The AFS office's main task is to help the volunteers doing a wonderful job. However, if you have any questions about the school program, feel free to contact us. We are there to help you out as well.

Of course the AFS staff also likes to know how our host students are doing. So if you keep a website or send your friends a regular newsletter, let us know! We'd love to hear about your adventures!

Please know that you can share any issue with us, it doesn't matter how small it is! The volunteers and staff have lots of experience and might be able to help you, or to make you see things from another perspective. Nothing makes us sadder than to discover that a student has been struggling with something but never attempted to let us know about it. Whatever you want to talk about, you can count on our discretion.

AFS-activities

There will be nationally organised orientations and a number of local get-togethers for all AFS students staying in Belgium-Flanders. **Presence at the national orientations is obligatory!**

Here are the dates of the nationally organised activities. Write them down in your personal calendar and make sure you keep these days free. You will receive the dates of the additional local activities from your chapter.

For AFS students coming on the year program:

- **Arrival orientation**, immediately upon arrival: **August 26 to 28**, 2016. !USA: Arrival orientation will be with the rest of the group but they arrive earlier!
- **Language lessons**, twice a week during the **first months** of your stay. The lessons will be held in your region.
- **Post arrival orientation**: **September 23 to 25**, 2016
- **Social engagement**: **2 weeks in December**, 2016
- **Midstay orientation**: **February 17 to 19**, 2017
- **End of stay orientation**: **July 3 to 5**, 2017
- Year program **ends** on **July 8 or 9**, 2017

For AFS students coming on the trimester ECTP program:

- Arrival orientation, immediately upon arrival: **August 26 to 28**, 2016
- Language lessons, twice a week during the **first months** of your stay. The lessons will be held in your region.
- Post arrival orientation: **September 23 to 25**, 2016
- End of stay orientation: **November 27**, 2016
- Brussels camp, **November 27 to December 1**, 2016.

For AFS students coming on the trimester SCHOOL program:

- Arrival orientation, immediately upon arrival: **August 26 to 28**, 2016
- Language lessons, twice a week during the **first months** of your stay. The lessons will be held in your region.
- Post arrival orientation: **September 23 to 25**, 2016
- End of stay orientation: **November 27**, 2016
- End of Program: **November 27**, 2016 (except for specific participants from Belgium French: **December 23**, 2016)

AFS national orientations

As you know, the orientations form an important part of the AFS programs. This is also why **all national orientations are mandatory**. On the following pages you can find an overview of the different national orientations during your stay in Belgium and what will be covered.

AFS BFL Hosting Orientation Framework (year program)

Arrival Orientation (August)

Personal Wellbeing



Participants get time to get adapted in Belgium. In this first step of the groupdynamic process time is invested in **getting to know other participants and volunteers**. Based on **practical tips and tricks** participants feel themselves able to spend the next weeks comfortably in their schools and host families.

Living in Belgium Flanders



Workshops in the category 'Living in Belgium Flanders' focus on the **integration** of the participant in three areas: **host family, school and language**. Participants know what they can expect of living in a host family and going to school in Belgium Flanders. In this orientation they'll have also a first introduction into the Dutch language. They realize that not only for themselves, but also for their host family and school it will be a unique experience. The everyday language at this orientation camp is English.

Intercultural Learning



Participants get **introduced to Belgium** and a few superficial aspects about our culture. They reflect upon the **image** they have about our country and about **who they are and which country they come from**, before getting to know the Belgian culture from the inside.

Personal Goals and Expectations



Participants reflect upon their **expectations** about Belgium, school, living in a hostfamily and oneself, but also upon expectations other people may have about them. They also **record their goals** for the next weeks.

AFS & you



Participants **know what they can expect from AFS**, on what support they can rely on, how AFS BFL works and which activities they and their host family are expected to attend throughout the year.

AFS BFL Hosting Orientation Framework (year program)

Post-Arrival Orientation (September)

Personal Wellbeing



Participants get **time to get to know each other** a little better. In addition, they'll have the opportunity to **express their feelings** and reflect together with other participants upon their first weeks in Belgium Flanders.

Living in Belgium Flanders



Participants **share their experiences concerning school and living in a host family**. They learn **how to deal with small conflicts and misunderstandings** at school or in the host family and how they can **give and receive feedback**. In addition they realize the **importance of integration** by reflecting upon their network, how they can enlarge it and what the impact can be of **social media**. There will be put also emphasis on language learning. The everyday language at this orientation camp is English.

Intercultural Learning



Participants know how to deal with **cultural differences and stereotypes**. They reflect upon who they are and how culture affect their identity. They know what a **culture shock** encompasses and which strategies can be used to deal with it.

Personal Goals and Expectations



Participants **reflect** on how they experienced the first month in school, in their host family and beyond. They **record their goals** for the next months and how they want to achieve these.

AFS & you



Participants **know what AFS expects from them**, by paying attention to rules and agreements.

AFS BFL Hosting Orientation Framework (year program)

Mid Orientation (February)

Personal Wellbeing



Teambuilding between participants and volunteers is important. In addition there is time to **express their feelings** and to reflect together with other participants upon their first months in Belgium Flanders. Living in another culture is not always that easy, so we'll also celebrate their successful experiences.

Living in Belgium Flanders



Participants **share their experiences concerning school, living in a host family and language learning.** Together they reflect on how they have dealt with **conflicts** and which approach was most successful. We'll pay attention to the importance of integration by reflecting upon their **network** and which actions they will undertake to create new relations or to strengthen ties they already have. The everyday language at this orientation camp is Dutch with English support if necessary.

Intercultural Learning



Participants acknowledge the importance of intercultural learning, by linking their own experiences to theory. They learn about **intercultural communication and conflict management.** In addition they deepen their knowledge about **Belgian culture,** by focusing on **norms and values.** They will be informed about the **school project** related to different intercultural topics.

Personal Goals and Expectations



Participants reflect on how they experienced the first months in school, in their host family and beyond. They reflect on what they want to achieve in the second half of their experience, in which **competences** they already grew and how they can develop other competences further in the next months.

AFS & you



Participants become acquainted with the mission of AFS.

AFS BFL Hosting Orientation Framework (year program)

End orientation (July)

Personal Wellbeing



Participants **take leave from each other** and from Belgium. The groupdynamic process is ended, so they are **prepared to go home**.

Living in Belgium Flanders



Participants are **prepared to say goodbye** to their host family and friends. They **reflect on what they will remember from Belgium, their school and their host family**. What were key moments in their experience? Which persons play a role in this? What was an **obstacle and how did they overcome these**? Which **information** should be **useful for new participants**? The everyday language at this orientation camp is Dutch.

Intercultural Learning



Participants **compare the image** they have from Belgium and Europe now with the image on arrival. They reflect on what they will remember from their life in Belgium and **how this newfound knowledge may impact their life in the future**. There will be a **follow-up on the personal school project**. They are prepared to re-integrate again in their own environment and they know how to deal with this **reinversed culture shock**.

Personal Goals and Expectations



Participant reflect on the path they competed and succeeded the past year. They **reflect on how they have been changed and how their environment at home will be changed**. In addition they think about what **competences** they trained and how they want to use these once back home to become active global citizens.

AFS & you



Participant **evaluate the support** they've got from AFS during their stay in Belgium Flanders. They also formulate points of improvement, so support can improve for host participants in the future. They also learn what are the possibilities to **become AFS volunteer** in the organization of their own country.

AFS BFL Hosting Orientation Framework (Trimester)

Arrival Orientation (August)

Personal Wellbeing



Participants get time to get adapted in Belgium. In this first step of the groupdynamic process time is invested in **getting to know other participants and volunteers**. Based on **practical tips and tricks** participants feel themselves able to spend the next weeks comfortably in their schools and host families.

Living in Belgium Flanders



Workshops in the category 'Living in Belgium Flanders' focus on the **integration** of the participant in three areas: **host family, school and language**. Participants know what they can expect of living in a host family and going to school in Belgium Flanders. In this orientation they'll also reflect on the progress they made learning Dutch through **Rosetta Stone**. They realize that not only for themselves, but also for their host family and school it will be a unique experience. The everyday language at this orientation camp is English.

Intercultural Learning



Participants get **introduced to Belgium and Europe** and a few superficial aspects about our culture. They reflect upon the **image** they have **from Europe, our country** and about **who they are and which country they come from**, before getting to know the Belgian culture from the inside.

Personal Goals and Expectations



Participants reflect upon their **expectations** about Belgium, school, living in a hostfamily and oneself, but also upon expectations other people may have about them. They also **record their goals** for the next weeks. They are introduced to the **ECTP booklet**.

AFS & you



Participants **know what they can expect from AFS**, on what support they can rely on, how AFS BFL works and which activities they and their host family are expected to attend throughout their stay

AFS BFL Hosting Orientation Framework (Trimester)

Post-Arrival Orientation (September)

Personal Wellbeing



Participants get **time to get to know each other** a little better. In addition, they'll have the opportunity to **express their feelings** and reflect together with other participants upon their first weeks in Belgium Flanders.

Living in Belgium Flanders



Participants **share their experiences** concerning school and living in a host family. They learn **how to deal with small conflicts and misunderstandings** at school or in the host family and how they can **give and receive feedback**. In addition they realize the **importance of integration** by reflecting upon their network, how they can enlarge it and what the impact can be of **social media**. There will be put also emphasis on language learning. The everyday language at this orientation camp is English.

Intercultural Learning



Participants know how to deal with **cultural differences and stereotypes**. They reflect upon who they are, what it means to be a **European citizen** and how culture affect their identity. They know what a **culture shock** encompasses and which strategies can be used to deal with it. They will be informed about the **school project** related to active and European citizenship.

Personal Goals and Expectations



Participants **reflect** on how they experienced the first month in school, in their host family and beyond. They **record their goals** for the next month and how they want to achieve these.

AFS & you



Participants **know what AFS expects from them**, by paying attention to rules and agreements.

AFS BFL Hosting Orientation Framework (Trimester)

End orientation (November)

Personal Wellbeing



Participants **take leave from each other** and from Belgium. The groupdynamic process is ended, so they are **prepared to go home**.

Living in Belgium Flanders



Participants are **prepared to say goodbye** to their host family, classmates and friends. They **reflect on what they will remember from Belgium, their school and their host family**. What were key moments in their experience? Which persons play a role in this? What was an **obstacle** and how did they **overcome these**? Which **information** should be **useful for new participants**? The everyday language at this orientation camp is Dutch with English support if necessary.

Intercultural Learning



Participants **compare** the **image** they have from Belgium and Europe now with the image on arrival. They reflect on what they will remember from their life in Belgium and **how this newfound knowledge may impact their life in the future**. There will be also a **follow-up on personal tasks related to European and Active Citizenship**. They are prepared to re-integrate again in their own environment and they know how to deal with this **reinversed culture shock**.

Personal Goals and Expectations



Participant reflect on the path they competed and succeeded during their stay. They **reflect on how they have been changed and how their environment at home will be changed**. In addition they think about what they have **learned** during their stay. Participants will be **prepared for the Brusselkamp** where they see their experience in a European perspective and reflect how they can use their competences once back home to become active global citizens.

AFS & you



Participant **evaluate the support** they've got from AFS during their stay in Belgium Flanders. They also formulate points of improvement, so support can improve for host participants in the future. They also learn what are the possibilities to **become AFS volunteer** in the organization of their own country.

Rules

International AFS rules

No drugs / No driving of motorized vehicles / No hitchhiking

These rules apply anywhere throughout the duration of the program. If you break one of these rules, you will be sent home.

Belgium-Flanders rules

Jobs

You are **not allowed to hold a paid job** during the program, except for small jobs like babysitting.

Visits

Relatives or friends may not visit you in your host country without permission from AFS. Such visits may severely disturb your process of adaptation and fitting in so you should discuss the possibility of such visits with AFS and request permission well in advance.

Program release / extended stay

Under specific conditions a program release will be possible. If you want to extend your stay, please contact the BFL office.

Travelling in general

- If you want to travel outside Belgium without your host parents or school, you will need approval from AFS, your host family and your parents back home. When you travel outside Belgium together with your host family or school, we need to be notified ahead of time of the address and phone number where we will be able to reach you during your trip.
- **You may not travel during school days** (except for school trips) or national orientations, even if your school agrees to your absence!
- Travelling with your natural family is not allowed.
- Keep in mind that you may need a visa to travel abroad, so always check beforehand with the country's embassy.

Travelling without host family or school

- You may travel for a total of **15 overnight stays** during the program, and **not before Christmas**.
- For every independent trip (= without your host family or school), AFS must receive a written authorisation from your natural parents via your sending office.
- Always send your travel plan to the AFS-Flanders office **at least 3 weeks beforehand**.
- The AFS-office can at any time revoke their permission for a trip.
- **Do not book anything before you have permission from the AFS Flanders office!!** AFS is not responsible for any trip you booked without our consent, so you may have to cancel your reservations if no permission is granted!

Everyday Life

Clothing

Belgian youngsters dress very casually. You do not need a wardrobe with a change of clothes for every new day. If you are in touch with your Belgian family before you leave, you could ask them for suggestions as they may want to take you to places or do things that require special clothing.

In general, you will need warm clothes for the cold and rainy winter months as well as light clothing for sunny spring and summer days.

Eating and drinking

Eating local food is part of the AFS-experience. Belgians eat a lot of potatoes and bread. Furthermore, main staples are bread or cereals for breakfast, soup, meat/fish, potatoes/rice/pasta and vegetables for lunch/dinner or bread with cheese, milk, cold meat and marmalade.

Breakfast is usually between 7am and 8am, lunch at around 12-1pm and dinner around 6-7 pm. **Most families consider eating together very important, especially at dinner.** Make sure you get to know your host family's eating 'rules' as soon as you can (e.g. what are the eating times? Can you start eating before everyone is served? Can you leave the table before everyone has finished?...). Watch your family closely and do not hesitate to ask questions!

It is not unusual for people to drink wine or beer with meals in Belgium. You might also be offered alcoholic beverages and you can accept this if your host family agrees, but if you prefer not to drink alcohol, you may of course refuse.

If there is something that you really dislike you can politely decline, but do make a sincere effort to taste everything. Also, do not take more on your plate than you can eat. It is better to take a smaller amount the first time and then ask for seconds. It is considered polite to finish all the food on your plate.

Famous Belgian dishes include: French fries, excellent steaks and delicious mussels, eel, beef stew. Belgian cuisine consists of fresh, fine food prepared with imagination and style! Flavours are often rather subtle than strong.

Transport

Belgium is small and has a reliable network of public transport that will take you almost anywhere. The most common forms of public transport are train and bus. Lots of youngsters go to school by bike.

As Flanders is the most plain part of Belgium, **the bicycle is a popular transportation mode.** Cycling is also popular as a leisure time activity in spring and summer. In the weekend you can see cyclists following one of the many cycling routes, mostly in rural areas.

Addressing and greeting people

Between friends and the wider family, there is a lot of handshaking – girls and boys alike. You shake hands when you are introduced to people or when you meet people you already know. You also shake hands to say goodbye.

Close friends and close family certainly the girls, usually kiss each other on the cheek when they meet. It depends on the region and on the circle of friends whether the boys also kiss or just shake hands. Just watch your friends closely and do as they do!

Ask your Belgian parents straight away what they would like you to call them. 'Mama en papa' (mum and dad)? Or by their first names? Do not feel obliged to call them anything you don't feel comfortable with.

One or three? Foreigners often get confused about the kissing habits of the Flemish. On normal occasions, people usually kiss each other just once on the cheek. On special occasions however, such as a wedding or a birthday, people will give each other three kisses starting on the right cheek.

Punctuality

Belgians are used to making appointments to meet up with friends. Social life and free time are rather organised. If you set a certain time to meet/visit someone, people expect you to be on time. We are punctual! Your family and friends will expect you to be on time as well and won't appreciate to be kept waiting. If you do run late for some reason or another, please inform the person(s) waiting for you as soon as possible.

Extra-curricular activities

In Flanders, there is an enormous offer of spare time activities outside school. Many youngsters are a member of a local youth movement or sports club, attend a music or art academy after school, do some kind of community service... Ask your host family or your classmates about what's offered in your neighbourhood.

We strongly encourage you to take up extra-curricular activities. It will enable you to integrate more quickly into the community, and you will get to know different aspects of Flemish society and social life.

Apart from participating in clubs and organisations, many people also do volunteer work.

Social life and going out

Your social life will probably centre on the family and/or a small group of friends. Do not expect to be on the go all the time. Some families are rather strict with regards to going out, others will give you a lot of freedom. Always **ask permission** to go out and tell your parents when, where, with whom and for how long you will be gone. Do not go out against your host parents' wish, even if you feel they are too strict.

If you think there is a problem, talk about it with your host family – open and honest communication is very important! When it comes to going out at night, many host families will feel more comfortable if the event is organised by a school, sport club, youth movement etc.

Many Belgians prefer to avoid uncertainty. This is why insurances are available for almost anything, why they schedule their social life but also why they often feel uncomfortable to start a conversation with a stranger, especially when there is no clear goal, like asking for directions. As a result, people in your host community are not likely to spontaneously start talking to you until they know you better. You may often have to take the first step to get to know new people.

Living in a Host Family

Adapting to your host family

The first important step you will have to take is that of becoming a member of your new family. It is possible that during the first days, you will be considered more like a guest even though we have asked your family to treat you like their own child.

If there is anything you feel uncertain about, do not hesitate to ask your host family. It is important that you try to solve any misunderstanding that should arise as soon as possible.

Generally speaking, Belgians communicate more directly than many other people. **Respect is an important value in communication, but honesty and sincerity are also important to Belgians. It is not considered rude to disagree with someone (even if that person is older), as long as you do so politely.**

For example: imagine that you really don't like fish, but your host mom didn't know and made salmon for dinner. When she asks you afterwards if you liked dinner, your reflex might be to not tell that you didn't like it, because you don't want to be disrespectful or hurt her feelings. However, your host mom will like to know that you don't like fish and will prefer you to be honest about it. A polite way to let her know could be: "The salmon was well prepared, but I don't really like fish in general".

Be aware that every family is different. **Show them that you are grateful, not by expensive gifts, but by frequent 'thank you's, by lending a helping hand, by showing enthusiasm and interest in what they have to offer.** Appreciation will help to build lasting bonds.

Ask your family right from the beginning about their 'house rules', such as curfews, making your own bed, helping with the dishes, etc.

It's also important to know that it's not common for Belgian families to have a maid, so most tasks in the household are shared by the several members of the family. Everyone has to keep his own stuff tidy and clean up after himself. You will be expected to do your share too.

Privacy

Individual privacy is highly valued in Flanders. Make sure you get to know how important privacy is for your host family as soon as you can. In some families, friends and neighbours can stop by the house anytime without calling on the phone first to see if it is a convenient time for a visit. Other families will not appreciate it if you bring a friend home without warning them beforehand.

Your host parents and siblings might allow you to enter their bedroom at any time, or they might expect you to knock before entering their rooms.

The importance of privacy also means that it is acceptable to spend time on your own once in a while, without people making remarks. Of course families also expect you to spend time together with them.

Keeping in touch with your family at home

Of course you will want to stay in touch with your family and friends at home. However, make sure you do not exaggerate: regularly talking, texting or chatting with your family and friends back home will only make it harder for you to settle into your host family.

Social media are very practical, but try to limit them to the people in your host country. Seeing everything you are missing out on back home will only make you feel homesick.

Keeping in touch with your family at home also has some consequences for your host family. Make sure you know the house rules regarding phone calls and internet use and respect them. Also keep in mind that spending a lot of time calling or skypeing in your native language may make your host family feel like you do not think they are good hosts. Tell them about what is happening at home!

Did you know that...

Belgians see themselves as good-natured, modest, individualistic, hardworking, tolerant, and family-oriented, with a good degree of common sense. Working hard (productivity is high), saving for the future (Belgians have the highest savings rates in Europe), then spending what is left with family and friends (Brussels has 4,000 restaurants for roughly 900,000 inhabitants) is the Belgian way of living.

Belgium is an extremely complex country, and this complexity causes her people to be very resourceful. There will be detailed consultation with all those concerned, which leads to slow decision making. Due to pressure to agree on collective goals, consensus will usually be achieved. As a result an initial “yes” may later become a “no”, or vice versa. Belgians are called the “plumbers” of Europe, good at short-term but very inventive fixes.

“A Belgian is born with a brick in his stomach”. Given that Belgian education is not focused on grooming leaders, Belgian workers generally want to be led. Belgians tend to believe in “security” and “stability” and are low risk-takers. Most Belgians are hard workers, big savers for “later”, and more tacticians than strategists. Bezint eer ge begint. “Contemplate before you start”.

Belgians tend to be good listeners, observers, and reflectors, and often will not have the urge to speak up. They usually feel uncomfortable giving their opinion in public, particularly if they have not been able to prepare what they have to say. Interpersonal communication is accomplished by inquiring about family wellbeing, engaging in small talk and face-to-face conversation in which people expect honest responses. Be prepared for personal “meandering” or “irrelevances” that do not seem to be going anywhere. Take time and remember “there are many roads to Rome”.

When Belgians speak up, they tend to be direct and even blunt with criticism. Schools do not place much emphasis on communication, assertiveness, or constructive feedback. Belgians have a preference for direct emotional responses, expressing their feelings in gestures, tone of voice, verbal interaction, and humour. They generally believe it is good to show emotions so others can understand their true feelings.

The Belgians are bricoleurs—do-it-yourself handymen. The house is the status symbol for most Belgians, especially the Flemish. Owning a solid, stand-alone house with a double garage and fenced garden is the dream. Building it with the help of relatives and friends, even over a period of years, is a favourite leisure activity. Belgians tend to show their personality through their houses. The interior decoration, the garden, and the upkeep of it all are also important.

School

Schools around the world are a place to make friends, learn and prepare for life as an adult. All have teachers, pupils, desks etc., but each country has its own way of educating its youngsters.

The AFS-program is a school program. This means that **going to school is mandatory**. You will be considered a regular full-time student, and just like the others, you will attend classes each day between 8.30 am and 4 or 5 pm. On Wednesdays, many schools finish at noon. According to your age and education level you will be assigned to one of the last three grades of high school.

School in Belgium-Flanders

Content, structure and organisation

There are four different types of education; pupils can choose a particular course of study:

- in general secondary education (ASO), the emphasis is on a broad general education, which particularly provides a firm foundation for going into higher education;
- vocational secondary education (BSO) is a practice-oriented type of education in which young people learn a specific occupation in addition to receiving general education;
- in secondary education in the arts (KSO), a broad general education is combined with active practice of art. After KSO, young people can carry out a profession or go on to higher education;
- in technical secondary education (TSO), the emphasis is particularly on general and technical theoretical subjects. After TSO, young people can carry out a profession or go into higher education. This education also includes practical lessons.

The first school days

Before school starts or on your first day of school you should meet the principal or a teacher at your school and talk about your class schedule. Do take in account your interests and whether you need school credits. Make sure you have all the necessary documents for your enrolment in school with you. At arrival camp you will receive a folder to use at school, explicit expectations and explications about your school life are to be found here, do read this carefully.

As mentioned before, you will have to do an effort to get to know new people; Belgians are not likely to come and talk to you first. Finding your place in the class community and making friends will depend largely on your willingness and effort. Yet it is worth it: school is one of the best places to make friends and to integrate into Flemish society.

Try to do your best from the very beginning in each of your courses and try to do all assigned homework and prepare the lessons. Participate in all tests and show some study motivation. Your teachers will certainly appreciate this.

All AFS students will be asked to give presentations about their home country and culture at school or in the community. You might be asked to do this during the first weeks at school, as an introduction. Later it will surely be a more profound exercise, when you compare social/economical/political/... aspects from your home country to Belgium.

Everyday school life for the AFS student

Overall, the **level of secondary school is very high and demanding**. Each year pupils study 10 to 18 different subjects. It is very common that students have to study 2 to 3 hours in the evening, and that they also have to study during the weekend.

In December and June, maybe even before Easter as well, exams take place. The grades given are mostly in numbers or in letters. The values connected to the numbers and letters can vary slightly depending on the school you go to. Generally they are:

- > 80% or A = excellent
- > 70% or B = very good
- > 60% or C = good
- > 50% or D = fair
- < 50% or E = failing

A normal day in school starts at 8 - 8.30 am and ends at 4 - 5 pm. Each class takes 50 minutes. There is a break of approximately 1 hour at noon. There are also one or two 10 to 15-minute breaks during the day. Students usually stay in the same group of students in the same classrooms, and the teachers go from one classroom to another, yet groups do change classrooms too. Wednesday afternoon is free, and there are no classes on Saturdays and Sundays.

The school year starts on September 1st. There is a one-week holiday in the beginning of November, a two-week holiday around Christmas, a one-week holiday in February and a two week Easter holiday. The summer break starts on July 1st.

If your class is going on a school trip outside Belgium and/or on a trip for more than one day, you may of course participate in it, but **you will have to pay for this yourself**.

Community service

In December, your classmates will be taking exams. During this period, every AFS student in Belgium Flanders will do two weeks of community service. Indeed, at that moment you will probably not know Dutch well enough to take part in all exams together with the regular students. You will, however, have enough knowledge of Flanders and its language to help at a centre for the elderly, a kindergarten, the local Oxfam shop...

Community service also has the advantage that it will introduce you to another aspect of Flemish society. This too will be a great and truly intercultural learning experience. And who knows, you might enjoy it so much that you will want to do something similar in your home country!

However, if your school expects you to take part in exams, or if you need school credits, you will have to take exams together with your classmates.

School project

AFS will ask you to make a school project during the last semester. This project will give you the chance to share valuable information about your country with your classmates. You will have to compare a specific cultural aspect in Belgian culture with your home culture. During the mid-stay orientation you will get more information about this.

School Costs

AFS PAYS FOR :

- School-transportation
- Compulsory schoolbooks
Please take your time to search for your books.
Maybe you can buy them second-hand or borrow them from a classmate.
- The use of the refectory
- Sports day
- Day trip with school within Belgium
- Cultural activities with the school

YOU WILL HAVE TO PAY FOR:

- Registration fee (Most schools in Belgium do not ask registration money)
- Fee for activities outside the school
- School uniform and sports clothing
- Notebooks
- Pencils
- Drawing materials
- Dictionary, atlas, bible
- Meals and drinks at school
- Trips with school outside of Belgium
- School trips of more than 1 day

How to reimburse your costs?

First of all, it's important you make good agreements with your host family.

You can get your costs back after filling in all the required information in our **reimbursement forms**. You can find these forms on the following link:

<http://www.afsvlaanderen.be/onkosten/>

If you have any doubt concerning the costs, don't hesitate to contact your host AFS Flanders or your host family.

Tips for Personal Safety in Belgium-Flanders

The following tips certainly do not mean to scare you. On the contrary, we just want to help you avoid any trouble or incidents during your stay in Belgium and allow you to make the most of it. Belgium is a relatively safe country but people do not deal with the issue of personal safety the same way world-wide. Therefore it is important that you read the following tips very carefully.

AFS recommends that students always talk about any questions they may have about specific personal issues. This dialogue, together with following the rules and advice given by the AFS staff, volunteers or by your host family will surely be your best safeguards.

Personal Safety Issues

In or around the home

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.

You will very likely receive a house key; please be very careful not to lose it. Never keep your keys together with an ID card or any document stating your address in Belgium. In case you lose your keys, families will very likely replace all the locks on the doors. You must be aware that this could be on your charge.

It is best not to keep large amounts of money at home. Instead, you can open a local bank account and deposit your money. Your host family can help you to open an account.

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?
- What should I do if I'm alone and a stranger is at the door? Is it safe to open the door? What should I tell him?
- 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?
- How should I answer the phone? What information should I not give out to strangers?
- Are there any appliances (gas stoves for example are quite common in Belgium) that might cause problems and I should be aware of?

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.

Pick-pockets and robberies are not very widespread but be careful nonetheless, especially in cities or crowded areas. 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 ATMs to withdraw money from in cities and most villages.

Be careful in school as well and keep your valuables (wallet, cell phone...) with you at all times.

When you are going out, please let your host family know where you are going and, if possible, a telephone number of where you will be. Also tell them at what time you expect to be back, and let them know when you cannot make it back in time.

Always think about how you will get back home. Check the public transportation's timetable beforehand because they stop running at night. If you intend to come back by car with a friend, make sure (s)he is not drunk. **Do not accept rides from people you do not know well. Also remember that hitch-hiking is strictly forbidden.**

Important points to discuss with your host family:

- Are there unsafe neighbourhoods or places in the area? During the daytime? After dark?
- Are there public transportations I should avoid late at night?
- What should I do if I'm approached by someone I don't know? What's the best way to reply?
- If I'm at a party and I want to leave but have no means to go back home, will you agree to come and pick me up? Can I call a taxi?
- If I'm « stuck » somewhere, is there anyone outside the family I might call? What's his/her phone number?

At school

Generally speaking, schools in Belgium are very safe but like in many countries, drugs sometimes circulate in high schools. Whenever you feel uncomfortable, there are always people ready to help in your school. It could be your homeroom teacher, a teacher you feel comfortable with, or the principal of the school. Most of the time, students do not have a locker at school. Avoid taking valuable items with you to school.

Illegal drugs and alcohol

Illegal drugs and substances

All participants are forbidden to use illegal drugs and substances. In Belgium, use or possession of drugs are punishable by law. Any violation of this rule is cause for immediate program termination. It is very important that you remember this, should you find yourself in a situation where illegal substances are being used.

The same applies to situations when an AFS participant is *involved* with drugs. It is important to understand that *involvement* not only means actually using drugs, but also having drugs in personal possession, frequenting places where drugs are used or knowingly associating with persons using these substances.

Alcohol

In Belgium, the legal drinking age is 16 years for beer and wine, and 18 years for spirits. Belgium is well known for its various beers but exchange students should be very cautious with this: Belgian beers are often much stronger than regular beers. Avoid getting drunk because this could lead to uncomfortable situations or you could be taken advantage of. Being drunk in public is also a punishable offense and host parents as well as most teenagers do not approve of people getting drunk.

Having a drink together for teenagers in Belgium is not only socially acceptable but is also fairly common. However, many young people do not drink, and you never have to feel obligated to drink alcoholic beverages, even if someone insists you do and pretends to take it badly if you don't. **AFS expects you to have a responsible attitude towards alcohol. Abuse of alcoholic beverages could be cause for early return.**

If you're invited to a party or a special event and are not sure if it is safe to go, AFS recommends that you find out a little about the party or event, where is it being held and who will be there. Usually your host siblings, parents, friends or teachers at school can give information about the event and the people expected to attend. Your host parents may also forbid you to attend certain kinds of parties or events. You should respect the parents advice, even if others you know are going.

If you find yourself in a place where you're not comfortable, because drugs are being used or because you are not at ease with the people, you should never be ashamed to leave. If you don't want to hurt people's feelings, you might say you have to go because you're tired or not feeling well.

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 and especially if there is a lot of drinking going on, some people can't refrain from excesses. When attending public celebrations, we strongly suggest you not to go alone or only with exchange students and to be very careful regarding safety, drinking,...

Sexuality

How do Belgians deal with the issue of sexuality: are they open or is it a taboo? There are different attitudes. Some adults don't really talk about sex or sexual education with their children. Other families, 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 more conservative about sexuality. If either attitude makes you uncomfortable, talk about it.

If you decide to have sexual intercourse, **always use protection**. Condoms are widely available in pharmacies and supermarkets and other contraceptives are also fairly easily obtainable.

In Belgium, boys and girls may go out together without meaning that they are engaged or boy/girlfriends. There is no chaperoning for young people. This doesn't mean that everything is socially acceptable or meaningless. Exchange students should be careful about the message they may be sending by dressing provocatively or with behaviour that could be understood as provocative. You will have to learn these unwritten rules and practices by observing people and by asking questions to friends, family, siblings...

Sexual harassment

Because of differing cultural perspectives on sexual harassment, it is important for you to be aware of what is considered to be proper behavior. Below are a few tips:

- Treat everyone you meet with respect.
- Listen to what people are saying to you, and act accordingly. In other words, if someone says no, you should assume he or she means it!
- Get to know your AFS Liaison and other respected people in your host community. They will be able to provide you with valuable information about what is and what is not acceptable.

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

- AFS girls should not go to 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 or a drink 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 being 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.

Don't be afraid to stand up for yourself. Listen to your intuition and follow your best judgment. Have the confidence to **say NO if anyone makes you feel uncomfortable** about anything. And remember, it is never too late for you to tell an adult if anything is bothering you. If someone – anyone – touches you in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable, you have the right to say no. Whether it is peer pressure about sex, drugs, or doing something that you know is wrong, be strong and stand your ground. Don't be afraid to make your feelings known.

LGTBQ

Belgian society is in general rather accepting towards the LGBTQ (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer/Questioning) community. Belgium was the second country in the world to legalise same-sex marriage (2003) and one of the first to legalise same-sex adoption (2006). Reflecting society, AFS Belgium Flanders has a growing number of openly LGBTQ participants and same-sex host families, and of participants who grew up in a same-sex family.

Public displays of affection (kissing, holding hands...) are allowed and generally acceptable for heterosexual and same-sex couples alike, although just as with any other matter, some people will be more accepting than others.

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.

As in most countries, adolescent boys are more likely than girls to find themselves being questioned by the police. AFS advises you to show respect and co-operation with the authorities, even though you may be innocent of any crime and think you are being treated unfairly.

If such a situation were to arise, it would be unlikely that you would 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 student.

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 communicate effectively.

In case of security issues or terrorist alert

Belgium is generally speaking a very safe country. However recently there is an elevated threat of terrorist attack by ISIS militants. We ask hosted students to follow the instructions of police and authorities. AFS may change the policy for independent travel for your security based on the advice of authorities.

In case of a terrorist attack it is wise to inform your host family that you are safe. Always carry their contact information with you. You can contact AFS 24 hours, 7/7 on the emergency phone. Carry the number with you at all times (+ 32 477 237 207).

AFS Belgium-Flanders monitors the safety of all of you immediately. We contact AFS in your home country to let them know about your situation. In case of worry, your parents can always contact AFS office in your home country and they will be in touch with our office.

Insurance

We very strongly recommend you and your parents to take out a **third party liability** insurance that covers you during your stay in Belgium. This kind of insurance covers damage you might incur to your host family's property, for example if you accidentally break an expensive vase, break a laptop... Every year we have students who accidentally break something and this can be very costly for the host family and/or the student. So please, make sure that you are covered!