



Safety Handbook

AFS Intercultural Programs Switzerland

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Introduction

A primary objective of experimental learning programs such as those offered by AFS is to help participants 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 necessarily easy. Participants encounter complex situations along the way and there is a 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 to 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, AFS local committee members 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 question students may have about specific personal issues.

AFS suggests that students ask their host family about specific situations they are concerned or worried about, recognizing 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.

1. At home



Safety issues

Your host family will probably not know what you are concerned or worried about. So do not hesitate and ask them questions about safety, e.g. Can I go out alone at night? Are there parts I should not go to? Although there are common safety issues in Switzerland, they may still vary from region to region. So ask your host family about their particular situation.

General safety questions

- * What should I do if an emergency occurs? Whom should I call?
- * Where do you keep the emergency telephone numbers?
- * Do you have first aid equipment? Where is it?
- * Do you have a fire extinguisher? Where is it?
- * How do you secure the house?
- * Do you lock your doors and windows? When do you do that?
- * Am I going to have a house key?
- * What do you advise me about answering the door when I am alone?
- * How do I react when a stranger to the family is calling at the door?

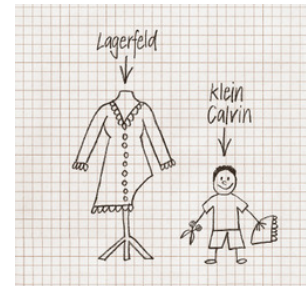


Answering the telephone

If you feel uncertain about answering phone calls especially because you have to answer in a foreign language, ask your family: How do I have to respond when answering the phone? What information should I give? What information should I not give?

Liability insurance

AFS Switzerland provides liability insurance for participants, meaning each participant is insured against damages caused by the participants to third parties. Nevertheless, 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 and other illegal offences.



2. Outside home



Public Transportation

There is a great variety of transportation ranging from the train to your own bicycle. Public transportation is very common and usually safe. Switzerland is, in fact, a very safe country. In the following section, we will indicate some suggestions to you when using any kind of transportation.

Walking

Walking outside home is usually safe. However, there are areas where you should be careful at night. Ask your host family about these specific areas, as they know best which places are safe and which are not. We encourage you to let your host parents know whenever you are concerned or frightened. When going out, inform your host family of where you are going and how you can be reached, and how and when you intend to get back home.

When walking alone late at night, try to walk in streets that are well lit and that have people walking in them.

In general, you should take your host parents' advice seriously and follow their recommendations.

Riding your bicycle

In Switzerland, you will see many people riding their bikes going to school, to work or just for fun. You will very likely have the possibility to borrow a bike from someone. Before you ride it in the streets, ask your host family about traffic regulations in Switzerland. They may be different than in your home country.

If you are not used to riding a bicycle, traffic can be challenging, especially in cities. We suggest that you ask a host family member to accompany you on your first attempts to conquer the Swiss streets with your bicycle.

Make sure that your bike has good brakes and a light that works. This is very important especially in winter because it gets dark very early. If you ride in the dark without a light, this is not only dangerous, but you can also be fined by the police.



AFS Switzerland recommends you to wear a helmet when you ride your bike.

Car

As you already know, AFS participants are not allowed to drive cars. Do not get in someone's car you do not know. Hitchhiking is strictly forbidden. Participants either driving or hitchhiking are dismissed from the program and must return home immediately.

Bus and train

It is very common to use public transport in Switzerland. Public transportation in Switzerland is very reliable and safe, so do not worry about taking the bus and/or the train.

However, be careful at night. Try not to be alone in a train carriage, rather try to look for compartments with other people in it. Also try to avoid being alone in train stations at night. Ask your host parents about the situation in your region, as they will know best.

Make sure that you always have a valid ticket. If you don't and get caught, you will get a fine of 80 Swiss Francs (approx. 90 USD)! Ticket inspectors are usually pitiless even if you start crying and tell them a moving story of lost exchange student who does not yet know how the ticket machine works.

As there are so many trains and buses in Switzerland, most host students are a bit overwhelmed at the beginning. Every year, some of them get lost at some point because they take the wrong train. For this reason, make sure you have your host family's phone number with you when you start taking trains on your own. Don't be embarrassed to call them when you are lost. They will be able to guide you home safely.

Public places

Going to public places and walking around outside the house is usually very safe. As stated before, you should try to avoid being alone at night in train stations. There are also some other areas you should avoid (e.g. certain areas in Zurich). In general, you are safe if you do what the locals do. Therefore, take your host parents' advice seriously and follow their recommendations.

Weather

Skiing, hiking, climbing etc. in the mountains is very popular and it is certainly an interesting experience. However, the weather in the mountains is a factor you have to take seriously. It can change surprisingly fast: In a very short time a blue sky can be replaced by fog, snow or rain depending on the season. So remember, the weather in the mountains is quite unpredictable and it is therefore dangerous to risk anything and get lost.

When in the mountains, try not to be alone, but rather with your host family or with local people. They know best where and when you have to be careful. Always have your cell phone with you.

Theft

Because Switzerland is generally very safe, this might give you a false sense of security. But theft happens here as it does everywhere in the world, so it is wiser to be careful:

- Ask your host family, the school contact person or your school mates about the situation in your school and your host community.



- Make sure you always lock your bicycle. Unfortunately, bicycle theft is very common in Switzerland.
- Beware of pickpockets, especially in crowded places.
- Do not to leave your wallet, money or other valuables unobserved in school. The best thing is not to take things of great value such as jewellery to school at all.

Authorities and emergencies

Occasionally, the police may check and question people in the street. If this happens to you, there is nothing to worry about. Show respect and cooperation with authorities, even though you are innocent of any crime and think that you are being treated unfairly.

If you do not understand what is being said, tell the police and tell them that you are an exchange student. Always carry your residence permit for foreigners with you. This is important not only in the event of being questioned by authorities, but also in the unfortunate event of a personal accident.

In any kind of an emergency (accident, crime etc.) the best is to call the police first. Below, you will find the most important emergency numbers (any abuse of these numbers will be punished with a fine):

Police	117
Fire brigade	118
Ambulance	144



Also call your host family, the local contact person or the AFS office to inform them. The number of the AFS office is 044 218 19 19. In case of an emergency, your host family can also reach AFS 24 hours via emergency phone under 079 358 84 56.

In case of a national emergency you should follow the advice of the government or the local authorities. The AFS Switzerland will immediately contact the students and host families in order to provide necessary help. However, Switzerland is a very peaceful country and such a case is very unlikely to happen.

3. Other important issues



Drugs

Unfortunately, drugs have become common in certain schools, especially marijuana. The availability of drugs, whatever their names, does not change the fact that they are illegal and dangerous.

The two most important pieces of advice that AFS Switzerland can give you regarding this issue:

- If someone offers drugs to you, say no. AFS has a strict no-tolerance policy regarding marijuana and any other kind of illegal drugs. Usage of or involvement with drugs results in dismissal from the program and immediate return to the home country.
- If you are worried that a friend might have a drug problem, talk to an adult you trust. Share your concerns with your host parents, a local AFS volunteer or a teacher



Alcohol

The legal situation is simple: Teenagers are not allowed to buy wine and beer before they turn 16, and for hard liquor one needs to be 18 in order to buy it. There is no law that forbids the consumption of alcohol.

But despite this liberal approach, don't forget that alcohol is a drug. Too much alcohol is dangerous:

- Your ability to judge situations adequately is affected. You might do things that you regret afterwards. You can also easily be taken advantage of or even become a victim of a crime or sexual transgression. And alcohol can make you over confident so that you take part in dangerous activities.
- You cannot control your movements anymore. The risk for accidents increases.
- You put your health at risk. Alcohol intoxication is dangerous. You may need medical attention, and if worst comes to the worst, it can even kill you.

Alcohol is not tolerated at official AFS events. However, alcohol is part of the every day culture in Switzerland and will probably be offered to you on many occasions. It is, for example, quite usual to have a glass of wine for supper. Therefore, it is very important that you know how to deal with this situation. If you drink, drink moderately. **For your own safety, excessive alcohol consumption is forbidden during the AFS program. If you don't respect this rule, you risk that you will be sent home early.**

Be careful: Teenagers are more sensitive to alcohol than adults. At the same time, they often overestimate themselves and this increases the risk that they drink too much and lose control. The following guidelines will help you to stay on the safe side:

- If you want to try, that's fine. A glass of wine or beer at a party or during a dinner is ok. But don't exaggerate.
- If you don't want to try, that's fine too. Never let anyone talk you into drinking alcohol.
- No hard alcohol. Don't touch vodka or other hard liquor, also when mixed with soft drinks.
- Don't drink more than once a week and not more than one or two glasses.
- Never drink when you don't feel well.
- Never drink when you have taken medicine (no matter if prescribed or over-the-counter).
- Look out for others: Tell your friends to stop if they exaggerate. If you think that a friend has an alcohol problem, share your concerns with an adult you trust.

If you have any doubts or questions regarding this issue, please talk to your host family, a local AFS volunteers or a staff member at the AFS office.

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 socialize with is important, and this is acquired best through immersing yourself into your host culture. Equally important are your own values and beliefs regarding your behaviour. Do not compromise them, especially not regarding your sexual behaviour. **Have the courage to say no!**

Especially at the beginning of your exchange, you may be unsure how to interpret certain situations. You may ask yourself if you are being sexually harassed or if a particular person's behaviour would be considered just as friendly by Swiss standards. **Trust your own instinct and feelings.** If something makes you feel uncomfortable, it is important that you take your feelings seriously and share them with your host siblings/parents and friends. In many cases, they will be able to help you understand if



someone's behaviour is adequate or not and give you useful advice. Other resources to which you can turn for advice or help are teachers at school, local AFS volunteers or the AFS staff at the office.

Unfortunately, sexual harassment can happen in any country. Females especially are subject to harassment. If guys, for example, whistle after a female student, she should avoid contact with them by not looking at them. If a car pulls up besides you, do not get in. If you realize that someone is following you, try to go to a public place (e.g. shop, restaurant) and ask someone for help.

If you experience a situation that makes you feel uncomfortable, the most important thing is that you share it with an adult you trust. Rest assured that AFS volunteers and staff will take you seriously, so don't be embarrassed or afraid!

AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (STD)

AIDS means "Acquired Immunity Deficiency Syndrome". Until now, there is no medication to cure this illness. AIDS is transmitted by sexual contact. AIDS is NOT transmitted by other contacts such as drinking or eating from somebody else's glass or plate, touching, kissing etc.

Sexually active participants should use condoms. Condoms are highly effective in preventing the sexual transmission of HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. In addition, consistent and correct use of condoms reduces the risk of other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). The contraceptive pill is NO protection against AIDS.

For further information, there are many associations in Switzerland that can give you advice. Here are some addresses:

- * Aids-Hilfe Schweiz, Konradstrasse 20, 8005 Zürich
Tel. 044 447 11 11, www.aids.ch, aids@aids.ch
- * Point-Fixe, Av. Gare 17, 1003 Lausanne
Tel. 021 320 40 60, www.pointfixesida.ch, info@sida-vd.ch

Weapons

For civilians, carrying guns is prohibited unless they have a special licence. However, just about every Swiss man doing military service has a gun at home. And every year, these Swiss men have to practise their shooting abilities in a shooting range. So, whenever you see a man with a gun on his back, you do not have to be afraid.

Conclusion

The best advice AFS Switzerland can give you regarding issues of personal safety is the following:

- Get to know your host culture well through questions, dialogue and discussion with your host family, peers, AFS local contacts, AFS camp leaders etc.
- Take any concerns seriously that your host family and school have expressed and follow their advice.
- And remember: Express your concerns!

Have a safe stay in Switzerland!