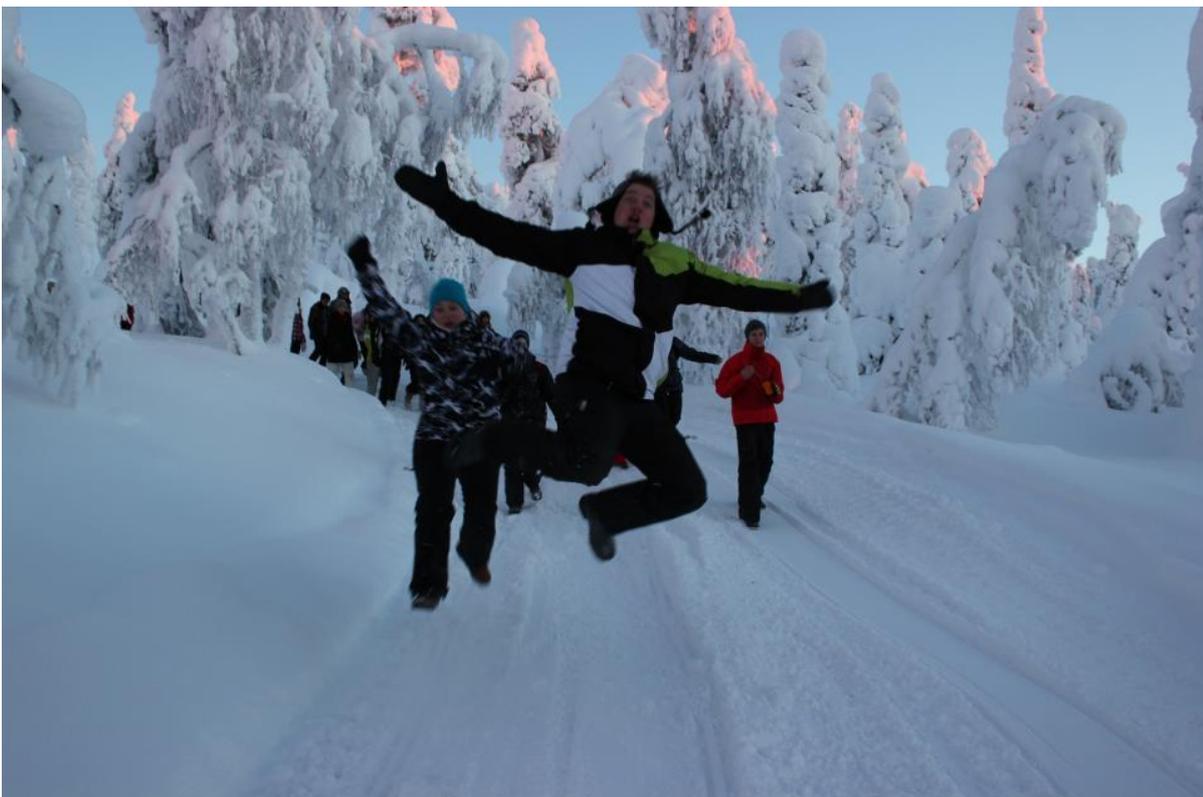




Connecting Lives, Sharing Cultures

Welcome to Finland

Your survival guide to your AFS-exchange in Finland



Contents

Welcome to Finland!	3
Some Facts about Finland.....	4
Attitudes and Values	7
Your Finnish Host Family.....	8
Your Spare Time	10
Finnish Food.....	12
Personal Hygiene	14
Clothing	15
Your Finnish Host School.....	16
Adaptation	19
AFS and You	20
AFS Activities.....	21
Safety Tips	22
Medical Assistance	25
Travel and liability insurances.....	25
Uncomfortable Social Situations.....	26
Rules	28
Travel Rules	29
Learn More about Finland	33
Learn Finnish – or Swedish!	33
Contact Information AFS FINLAND.....	34

Welcome to Finland!

We are looking forward to meeting you and welcoming you to Finland. This booklet is meant to accompany you throughout your adventure – read it carefully and take it with you to Finland. Perhaps your parents would like to read it too? We want to give you some information about Finland, and we hope this booklet will help you form a realistic picture about your experience in Finland and help you adapt yourself better to the Finnish way of life. It may also be a good idea to go through the booklet every once in a while when you are in Finland.

You will be facing many challenges and expectations: you will learn a lot about Finland, Finnish people and of course Finnish or Swedish. You will also experience a lot of new and different things, one of them being your new life with the Finnish host family. An exchange experience means both giving and taking, understanding and making yourself understood, talking and listening, crying and laughing. You have the tools to get the most out of it – your openness as well as willingness to try new things. It is entirely up to you to make your year in Finland a great and unique adventure.

We hope (and know!) that you will grow as a person, but most of all we hope that you will have plenty of nice moments in Finland and a lot of unforgettable memories to take back home with you.

Upon arrival you will be met by your host family or AFS volunteers and staff. All AFS students will travel directly to their host families. Domestic travel after arrival is done either with your host family or by train, bus or plane together with other AFS students. The orientation camp will be held about 2-3 weeks after your arrival. You will get more information about your camp after you have arrived to Finland. During the camp you will learn about the Finnish culture and family life.

We wish you a nice trip and welcome to Finland!

Some Facts about Finland

Geography

Finland is in a class by itself! Have you looked at the world map? Finland is the most northern country in the world: one quarter of its total area lies north of the Arctic Circle. The southern parts of both Finland and Greenland are at the same latitude, and at the same latitude as Lapland (the northern part of Finland) you can only find barren tundra elsewhere in the world. Yet, there is agriculture all the way to Lapland!

Finland is one of the Nordic countries, situated between Sweden and Russia. It is the 5th largest country in Europe by area. Finland is a country of lakes, forests and marshes; they cover over 80% of the total land area. There are over 187.000 lakes in Finland and over 98.000 islands in the inland waters. The Finnish natural environment is substantially cleaner than in most industrial countries. Around 80% of Finnish lakes are classed as good or excellent with regard to their water quality.

Climate

Finland's climate is relatively mild considering its northern geographical location. The main reason for this is the west winds from the Atlantic Ocean warmed by the Gulf Stream. The climate varies depending on the part of the country. There are long, cold winters in the north, but milder seasons in the south. It snows in late November or December in Southern Finland and in October in the North, and the snow stays on the ground until late April in Lapland. Due to low humidity levels, the climate is actually not as cold as temperature readings might seem to indicate. A lot of people consider winter the best season because it offers a chance for skiing and other winter sports.

Summer in Finland is bright and warm, sometimes even hot. To give you an idea of what is waiting for you, here are some examples of average temperatures: In Helsinki the warmest month is July and the coldest February, when the average temperatures are respectively about 17 C° (64 F) and -6 C° (20 F). The average temperatures in Lapland, 1000 km north of Helsinki are 14 C° (57 F) and -12 C° (11 F).

Politics

Finland is a western parliamentary democracy with a president as the head of the state and a 200-member single-chamber parliament. Finland is politically a neutral country. In conformity with this policy, Finland has established friendly relations with all European countries, as well as worked towards keeping good relations with both the West and the East. Finland is connected with other countries for example through trade, cultural relations and tourism. Since January 1995, Finland has been a member of the European Union.

People

Finns most likely descended from the original settlers who moved to the area after the Ice Age and immigrants from the Baltic region who started to arrive 2000 years ago. Because of our common ethnic background, we are quite homogenous-looking people: most Finns have blue or bluish-grey eyes and fair or brown hair. The population of Finland is about 5.5 million, which makes it one of the smallest countries in Europe. The majority of the population live in the southern part of the country. The northernmost part, Lapland, is sparsely inhabited.

Culture

Finns view themselves as egalitarian people whose culture is based on democratic principles of respect and interdependence. They like people for who they are and not for what they do for a living, their professional accomplishments or how much money they earn. They pride themselves on being honest and sincere in their personal relationships.

In Finland gender equality is very important in most families. So don't be surprised to see that both your host parents work full time, or that your host father is cooking dinner. Equal rights and duties are very important in Finland!

Based on stereotypes Finns are often said to be cold and difficult to get to know. Though some might need more time to "warm up" to strangers, you'll often see that once you get a friend in Finland it's for life. Just give it some time and show initiative!

Also – don't be surprised should you feel that your host family or classmates are very direct when talking to each other. In Finland you'll learn that a lot of people appreciate honest and straight forward communication. You might also notice a difference in how we address our elders, teachers and parents. We tend to use "you" or the first name.

Religion

The majority of Finns (about 80%) are Lutheran by religion, and a small percentage are Orthodox. Generally Finns are not very eager church goers; religion and the church do not play a big role in the community or family life. If you want to go to church, you may find that you have to organise it yourself since your family may not want to join you. This should not keep you from going. Many Finns do not belong to any denomination. Finns have been granted freedom of religion by law: one is free to make one's own choice and the choice is usually respected. However, you should note that while access to Lutheran churches is easily available, access to other denominational churches cannot be guaranteed.

Languages

Finland has two official languages. Finnish, related to Estonian and Hungarian, is one of the languages of the Finno-Ugrian group. It is spoken by 93.5 % of Finns. A minority of about 6 % of the Finnish people speak Swedish as their mother tongue. About 1.700 people in Lapland speak Sami. Both Finnish and Swedish are used for administration and education. In bilingual areas signs and street names are in both languages.

Since Finnish is the mother tongue of less than five million people in the whole world, it means that we Finns have to learn to speak foreign languages. English is the most widely spoken of foreign languages, although it is sometimes said that since Finnish is so different from Indo-European languages, Finns may be a little hesitant to practice foreign languages when speaking with foreigners.

Most students are placed in Finnish speaking families and go to high schools where teaching is done in Finnish, but yearly a few students have a Swedish speaking host family. If your host family speaks Swedish, you will also be placed in a high school where the teaching is done in Swedish. When you receive your placement information, remember to check if you host family speaks Swedish instead of Finnish!

Money

The currency unit of Finland is the euro (€) divided into 100 cents. Coins are: 5 c, 10 c, 20 c, 50 c, 1 € and 2 €. Notes are 5 €, 10 €, 20 €, 50 €, 100 €, 200 € and 500 €.

There is no problem exchanging currency at banks. Many international credit cards (for example Visa, American Express and Mastercard) are accepted in most restaurants, department stores and shops, and you can also withdraw cash with most of them in banks.

Life in Finland is expensive so AFS FIN advises all the students to bring at least 100 euro per month for personal use, e.g. for public transport or having a coffee with friends. If you need to buy winter clothes in Finland you might need to prepare to have more than 100 euro per month. Schools are also offering optional courses where there is often fees from few euros to hundreds of euros. Be prepared to pay some optional course fees in school.

Phones

In Finland everyone has a mobile phone. Usually children get their own mobile phone when they go to school at the age of seven. If you do not have a mobile phone that you can bring with you, you can easily buy a cheap one here or even borrow one from your host family. Most host families want their student to have a mobile phone so they can get hold of him/her. Few families have a regular phone connection at home, so everyone relies on the use of mobile phones. We recommend that once you are in Finland you buy a Finnish telephone connection. Finnish phone plans are quite reasonably priced. Most students get themselves a pre-paid phone/plan, which means that you will not get any unexpected bills.

Keep in mind the rules concerning how to use your mobile phone: at school mobile phones should be turned off, and also remember to turn your phone off at night so your family and friends back home won't keep you up when it is night time in Finland.

Attitudes and Values

All countries have some qualities they see as very important. Here are some values that you need to learn as an exchange student in Finland.

Appreciation (remember to say “**Kiitos!**” = “Thank you!”)

Your host family receives no compensation for hosting you. Show them that you are grateful – not by expensive gifts, but by frequent “thank you”s. You should also show your appreciation by smiling, helping them, and by showing your enthusiasm and interest in their lives and culture. Remember that they also have expectations – they also want something from this year! So let them learn about your culture by for example cooking them a meal that is typical from your country. “Kiitos!” (Thank you)” is the most important word and cannot be used too often!

Openness

You are in Finland to learn. LISTEN, listen and... listen. Take in all impressions and information you can. Do not hesitate to ask for advice from friends, your family or from AFS, and do not be afraid to be corrected. There is so much to learn and there is no such thing as a stupid question. If you feel uneasy about something, talk to your family about it.

Accepting Differences

Not right, not wrong, just different! Heard that before? If we place values to the customs and traditions of others, we miss out on important learning. Many things are different without being better than the other. You need to see things from another viewpoint and not your own if you want to be able to hear what the other person is really saying. And sometimes, always comparing Finnish customs to your own can be misunderstood as saying “my way is better”. And after all – to truly learn the Finnish culture you also have to accept the differences.

Consideration

Showing consideration is important in everyday life. That means: Don't be late, and ask if your family needs help doing housework. Do not wait until you are asked to help. And, if someone has something he wants to say, take the time and listen! Be curious about the culture, it will be highly appreciated! Finns like to hear nice things about the nature, people, etc. If you don't have anything nice to say, why say it?

Humour

A laugh, a smile – they are an international means of communication. This includes laughing at funny situations you might get into due to misunderstandings. Being able to laugh at your own shortcomings and mistakes is vital when you are an exchange student – because you will make some funny mistakes! A good laugh will give you the strength to correct a mistake, and it is a lot more enjoyable than getting upset with yourself.

Honesty

Is one the most important, if not the most important, value in Finland. Finnish people take pride in being honest. Your host family will also appreciate you being honest with them.

Time

Finns appreciate being on time. If you have an appointment at 5 o'clock – be there at 5 o'clock! Of course it might happen that you miss a bus or get lost – but as a general rule being late is perceived as rude. If you know you'll be late, even by only 5 minutes, it is considered polite to let the other person know by calling them or by sending a text message.

The Finnish flag

The Finnish flag is always treated with respect. If you use it in a disrespectful manner you could be sentenced to a fine for defaming the flag of Finland. So we encourage you not to e.g. write the names of your AFS-friends on a flag, but to buy a T-shirt instead.

Your Finnish Host Family

AFS host families

AFS host families are like families everywhere. Each one is different!

There are different kinds of families: families with old parents or young parents, families with young children or teenagers like yourself, families with no children or with just one parent. It is impossible to describe a typical Finnish family, partly because people in Finland, just like in any other country, differ widely in their lifestyles as well as beliefs. One thing you should try to remember is not to compare your host family with your natural family. But there is one thing all host families have in common – their willingness to open their homes to an exchange student.

Please always remember that:

- Your host family wants you to live with them, and does not get paid. They want you to teach them about your home country, and to teach you about their way of life.
- Your host family wants to help you while you are in Finland. They want you to be a true family member, by sharing and engaging in the family life.

What can you expect?

Family and friends are important to Finns. Tolerance, kindness and independence are qualities that are highly valued. Finns like to see themselves as a nation close to nature. But, in reality, Finland's lifestyle is very much like any other industrialized western nation.

Families and friends get together on weekends; during the week, Finns are often quite busy. Husbands and wives consider each other equal in authority. Families tend to be small, and everyone shares the housework. Parents expect to know when their children are going out and where they are going.

What is expected of you?

As a member of the family, you will share the pleasures of the home, and also the work and responsibility. Finnish teenagers (boys too) are usually expected to do their share of housework, cooking and cleaning. You will have to keep your room tidy and clean. When you make decisions, you will have to take the family into consideration. It will be up to you to respect the family rules. Find out what they are, and try to discuss any family or house rules that are unclear. Find out who does what in the home. The parents are “heads” of the family. They make the rules. They are respected, but Finnish teenagers may disagree and discuss with their parents.

Here are some suggestions of things that will be good to talk about:

- What time should you be at home at night (both on weekdays and on weekends)?
- How are you expected to help at home (make your bed, vacuum, do the dishes, walk the dog etc.)?
- What will you call your host parents (“äiti” is mother and “isä” is father in Finnish)?
- When can you invite friends over?
- Does your family go to church and if so are you expected to join them?
- What meals are eaten together?

Equality

Please be aware that the mother in the family has the same, and often more, authority than the father in the house. Please treat both parents with the same amount of respect! Usually both parents have a full time job outside the home. Teenage children often make their own decisions when their parents are not available. They are brought up to be independent. It is considered positive that you have an activity during the week, and also during the weekend. Talk to your family about how much time they expect you to spend with them!

Physical contact

Many AFS students have noticed that physical contact as a sign of affection may not be so common in many Finnish families. This can seem to be a “cold” home atmosphere if you are used to hugging your parents often. This “distance” is not the same as lack of contact or love - since love and affection can be communicated in many other ways. We’re just not accustomed to show a lot of physical affection.

Family adjustment

Even if you try to approach everything in a positive and open fashion, there are bound to be some adjustments between you and your host family. Just by being there you bring a new element into the home, and this causes changes in relationships. Most of the time changes happen smoothly, but sometimes you will find that you are uneasy. You may not understand what has gone wrong, and your family may not either. The only way to try to resolve the uneasiness is to talk about it. Talk about it with the person involved or with someone else in the family. Try to find out the cause of misunderstanding and express to them how you feel and why you feel that way. The direct approach to the problem is usually the most effective, even if this is difficult at first. It may be a new approach for you and for your host family, but try it!

Host siblings

Many students expect their host brother or host sister to be a close companion. Yet sometimes this does not happen. Be prepared to make your own friends and pursue your own interests, without depending on your host sister or host brother. After all, many natural sisters and brothers live together without necessarily sharing all their personal thoughts or activities. Of course you will both have to make efforts and compromises to live together comfortably, but neither of you should feel forced to be someone you are not.

When something is wrong...

If difficulties do arise, and you feel unable to handle them within your family, or if you cannot approach your host family about something personal that troubles you, it is important to talk to your local AFS contact person or your local AFS chapter. Do not wait too long with a problem before you ask for support or help. If there are real misunderstandings, time alone cannot solve them. Keeping them to yourself will only prolong the concern, and doing this is really unfair to you and your host family.

Most importantly, the family is your primary source of help. They know what is “right” in your community and school and can explain many things. Be sure to give them a chance to help!

When you need support

If you become sick, consult your host family, see a doctor and inform AFS immediately if it is serious. In case of a serious illness or accident this should be done by telephone. AFS Finland in turn will inform AFS in your home country and your natural parents.

If you get homesick, get up and do something! Homesickness comes from missing people or things that are familiar. Make yourself familiar with your new surroundings!

If you feel unhappy, talk to your host family. They are there to help you and want you to be happy. Many minor difficulties can be solved with openness and tact. If you do not think your family can help you, please let us know immediately. There is no use in wasting valuable time by pondering your fate and being unhappy. We are here to advise and help you.

Your Spare Time

Your social life will probably differ from what you are used to. Do not expect to be “on the go” all the time – and be prepared to be bored at times. Of course social life will vary greatly according to your family and your community, but be sure to ask if you want to go out and to tell them when, where, with whom and for how long. Also, please do not forget to adapt to your sisters and brothers in this matter.

Smartphones and Internet

You might have a lot of spare time at your disposal, which will not be filled with organized activities. It is up to you to make good use of this free time and to spend it in a constructive way. You will notice that many Finns love the internet, and pages like Facebook. This can be a real challenge for you. Try to balance the usage of your smartphone and the internet in general, so that you don't spend your time in Finland chatting and looking at pictures of your friends in your home country. If you spend a lot of time on the internet, paying attention to your “old” life most of the time will make you very homesick, and your Finnish family will feel like you would rather be somewhere else. However, try to use internet so that you can communicate with your new Finnish friends!

Get to know your family

Find out what your family does. Join each member in his/her activities or his/her work, in order to really get to know them. One AFSer once said that he had the most interesting and valuable talks with his mother while doing the dishes, with his father in the sauna and with his brother while cleaning their bikes.

Get busy!

However, for your Finnish family, it will be important that you also have some activities that do not involve them. If you stay at home every night and weekend, they might think that something is wrong. Try to have an activity every week, and also try to get some Finnish friends. Go for a walk and get to know the community you are living in and its people. Read a Finnish children's book or a newspaper. Take up some new activity such as playing an instrument, doing sports or crafts. You don't have to be good at it!

Finns love nature. You can expect to go to the “mökki” (summer cottage) and for walks in the woods. A lot of Finns are very interested in sports. In the winter time, a lot of people ski (both cross country and downhill skiing are popular), skate or play ice hockey. When the summer comes, Finns start swimming, jogging and riding their bikes. Also soccer and pesäpallo, the Finnish version of baseball, are popular pastimes.

Finnish teenagers

Finnish youngsters are expected to keep themselves busy during their spare time. Many young people take part in organized activities like sports, scouts, etc. Your school will usually not provide this kind of organized activity. Ask your family or classmates to get a picture of what is happening in your local community. Taking part in an organized activity is a good way to meet people and make friends. Finns might seem reserved and you cannot expect people to take the initiative to get to know you. **You will gain much by taking initiative yourself.**

Once you get in touch with people and get to know them, you will find that Finns are open and keen on developing deep friendships. It is common that boys and girls are good friends without being a couple. Boys and girls are regarded as equals when it comes to rights and duties in Finland. There are very few things considered to be boy things or girl things.

Weekends

Most active evenings are Friday and Saturday evenings when people like to go out. Teenagers usually go out with friends: to someone's home, to the movies, or to a coffee shop. They may also go for a walk around in the city and people who have their driving licence go "cruising around". In every place where there are people there is always a certain place where young people get together to talk and socialize. In bigger cities this is normally a park or a shopping mall, and in smaller places it can be a gas station, for example.

Young people go around in groups of girls and boys, but if you go out with just one friend, you should keep in mind that it is not polite to let your date pay for everything. Normally both pay for themselves.

Involvement in your local community

Like your host family and school, your new community will be unique and different from your community at home. Whether it has a population of 1000 or 500,000, there will be much for you to learn, and the way to do this is to be interested and involved.

As a broad generalization, contact with neighbours might not be as close as you could imagine, even in the smaller villages. As for your status in the community, it is possible that apart from your family and their friends, few people will know about you or be acquainted with AFS. Actually people will be glad to get to know you, but the first steps towards establishing contacts must often be made by you.

Finnish Food

While it has been said of the French that they live to eat, it has been said that Finns eat to live. Everyday food tends to be simple but nutritious and mealtimes are less formal than in some other countries.

Finnish cuisine is based on meat, fish, potatoes, bread and dairy products. As can be expected in a country of over 187.000 lakes, there is an abundance of different kinds of fish available, especially along the coast. In the fall some families eat game meat and you may get to taste reindeer. Most Finnish food suits every mouth—it isn't very spicy or so different that you couldn't try it, even once out of courtesy if not out of adventure!

Most families eat breakfast but it varies from family to family, like all meals. Porridge, cold cereal, yoghurt, and bread with cheese and/or sausage are quite typical. Coffee or tea is served at breakfast. You will also notice that coffee is served between meals. Finns are real coffee drinkers and even some kids drink coffee! You won't be able to miss coffee and "pulla", a Finnish pastry; it is almost a Finnish institution!

Lunch is usually served around noon. In schools it can be earlier, but office and business lunches may often be later than that. Quite often the lunch "hour" is only 30 minutes, reflecting the eat-to-live-philosophy. Lunch consists of anything that could also be served at dinner—some kind of meat or fish with potatoes/rice/pasta and vegetables. Most places have fresh salads or salad bars.

Dinner is usually served at about 5-6 pm, depending on what time everyone gets home. A lot of Finnish households rely on the microwave oven. Family members may be busy with hobbies and long working hours, including mothers, and therefore family members often warm up their own meals. A lot of families have dinner together, especially on weekends. Dinners are normally basic and simple. Beef, pork, chicken and fish are common ingredients of the main dish. Potatoes are the main starch component of dinner, but rice and pasta are common, too. Casseroles and soups are also well liked.

Fresh salads are common in our daily diet. Food low in cholesterol and fat is popular nowadays, mainly for health reasons. On special occasions, there can be big celebrations with plenty of delicious regional or traditional specialities, which are worth tasting.

Dessert may simply be a fresh fruit or fruit soup made of frozen berries, for example.

Forks and knives are used with the left and right hand simultaneously—it's not acrobatics, so with a little practice and patience you will master eating the Finnish way.

Dos and Don'ts with food

Do – Try everything! If you don't try, you will not know if you like it!

Do – Eat the same food as everyone else! In Finland, most families eat the same food at meals together, and it is considered inappropriate for individuals to request special foods or to prepare separate dishes for themselves.

Do – Eat without worrying too much about your weight. The food is a big part of a country's culture, and you have to try it all! You are only in Finland one year, and you should not waste it thinking about how much you weigh. Most students gain some weight during their exchange, and they usually lose it very fast when they get back to their home countries.

And last – but not least (actually it's the most important):

DO - Say "Kiitos!" This means "thank you", and should always be said when you are done eating and are leaving the table.

Don't – Say "I don't like this" or "this doesn't look good". This will in most families be considered rude, and an offense to the cook. If you really don't like the food – and you get the food every week – it's OK to say in a nice way that it is not your favourite. And - don't say you really like something if you don't.

Don't - Take more on your plate than you can eat. Finns do not like to throw food away. It is much better not to take enough the first time and then ask for seconds: something that delights mothers – and fathers!

Don't - make burping sounds, smack your lips a lot, or make other loud sounds during meals. It is usually considered impolite.

Don't – Leave the table before everybody is finished.

Personal Hygiene

Finns usually shower **once a day** and change their underwear **every day**. Talk to your host family about when it's OK to take a shower, how often and for how long. Don't waste water! Do not keep the warm water running for a long time. E.g. when you shampoo your hair, you are expected to turn off the shower and turn it on again when rinsing the shampoo.

In Finland you're also expected to shower after Physical Education class at school, with the rest of the boys/girls from your class.

Most teenagers change their outfit every day – it's not very common to wear the same t-shirt/sweater to school many days in a row. However, pants are often used several days at a time. Not all clothes are washed after a short use.

NB: In Finland we throw the toilet paper in the toilet. Don't put the toilet paper in the trash can. The toilet is only for the toilet paper, not for sanitary tissues or tampons.

The Finnish SAUNA

One of the first things you might be asked here is whether you have already been to sauna and how you liked it. You have to understand that people don't intend to pry; they simply are curious and want your opinion on such an important issue as the sauna. Almost every Finnish home has a sauna or at least access to one. Most Finns go to sauna once a week, often on a Saturday night. The traditional sauna is wood burning, but in modern houses saunas are usually electrically heated.

Sauna is a part of the Finnish way of life, our philosophy. Sauna's effect is not only cleansing, but also relaxing and calming, and the feeling of well-being that comes with it is really worth experiencing. Sauna also has a healing effect. We have a saying "If sauna, tar and spirit don't help, the disease is fatal".

Families with children usually go to the sauna together, but adolescents prefer to go with either their mother or father. Sauna can be a part of social life, and it's not uncommon to go to the sauna when friends come over. You may have something to eat and drink before going to the sauna or vice versa. Either way, it is an occasion to enjoy good company and to relax with or without clothes on. Don't worry if you feel uncomfortable to be totally naked.

Nobody will pressure you to do anything you do not want to do. It is all right to wear a bathing suit in the sauna. Perhaps within time you feel "Finnish enough" to act as we Finns do. There is absolutely nothing mysterious or unnatural to be "natural" in the sauna!

Hopefully you will be able to experience a summer cottage sauna by a lake in the peace and quiet of the countryside. Feel the tingling sensation when your body touches the refreshing water!

Clothing

Clothing habits vary a bit from place to place and also from family to family. Follow your family's advice. They will know what to wear for different occasions.

Daily wear

Both girls and boys wear pants of various types (jeans being the most common), and a sweater/blouse/shirt/hooded sweater. Girls wear almost exclusively pants to school. Occasionally girls will wear a skirt to school. In Finland we do not wear school uniforms.

Sports clothes

Bring some sports clothes. You will have Physical Education ("Gym") at school every week. In your gym class you will usually wear training pants or shorts, a t-shirt and tennis shoes or trainers.

Outdoors clothing

In Finland there is a famous saying (you will hear this many times): *There is no such thing as bad weather - only bad clothes!*

Here is what you need to be prepared for the weather in Finland: For outdoors activities you will need clothes that are easy to move in, like a light rain/wind-proof jacket, and also boots of some kind. You might want to consider buying rain boots or winter boots in Finland as they are heavy to carry in your luggage.

Winter temperatures can be very cold: you may experience temperatures of -30 degrees Celsius! You need a couple of heavy sweaters, a knitted/warm hat, mittens or gloves, a warm scarf, long underwear and other winter clothes. If you have a warm winter coat, bring it with you, or have it mailed to you. If you do not have one, you should plan to buy one in Finland. Our Semester students do not necessarily need a warm winter coat - temperatures usually only start to get very cold in January and February. You should ask your host family for advice, as average temperatures vary a lot depending on your placement.

For summertime bring spring type clothes, like a summer dress, shorts, a skirt and a swimsuit. There are relatively few days when the temperature reaches +25 degrees Celsius, so do not bring too many summer clothes!

Shoes

People in Finland walk a lot, so you will need a pair of sturdy walking shoes. In Finland the custom is that you always take off your shoes when you enter a house.

Semi-formal occasions

For teenage parties you can usually wear the same types of clothes as you would wear to school, but this depends on the group of people. The best way to be sure is to ask your family what the custom is. For family gatherings and various other meetings you should consult your family. Most boys wear nice pants, a sweater and a shirt. Girls might wear a skirt and a blouse, a dress or a nice outfit.

Formal occasions

Girls will need a dress and boys will need nice pants and a jacket or a suit. Formal occasions are usually for confirmations and weddings, some families might dress up for Christmas and/or New Year.

Our Year Program students have a chance to participate in a formal ball/prom in February. High schools students in their second year (in which most exchange students are placed) have a formal ball called "vanhojen tanssit" (the old dances), where girls use a full length dress and boys a suit. Finnish students usually either borrow or rent the outfit for the day, and you can do the same.

Your Finnish Host School

You are in Finland on a school program!

School is in fact a major part of every student's AFS year. The AFS program could not exist without the support of schools and teachers. You may find that this school year will be a challenge. Not only because of the struggle to learn and understand the language, but also because you may feel isolated and useless during many school periods.

What does AFS expect from you?

Every AFS-student must attend school (and have at least 25 hours a week) due to visa requirements. You cannot skip school. AFS also expects you to do your best. We do not expect you to get good grades, or learn the language after only some months, but we do expect you to work hard, and represent your country and AFS in a good way.

The more involved you get in your school, the easier it will be to make friends there. You may not understand a lot at first but don't despair. Learning the language and trying to follow teaching can be difficult at first. It will be appreciated if you show interest, do as well as you can and do your homework to the best of your ability. Remember the good thing school has to offer—an opportunity to learn about the culture, a place for you to talk about your country, maybe a chance for you to study subjects that have not been available to you before, and last but not least it is a great place to meet people.

Your participation in school and positive relationship with students and faculty is a big reflection of you, your homeland as well as AFS. It also affects future generations of AFS students.

Structure of the education system in Finland

The education system in Finland is composed of comprehensive schools, upper secondary schools, vocational and professional education institutions and universities.

Compulsory education consists of a nine-year comprehensive school starting at the age of seven. It is free of charge for the pupil. After completing comprehensive school, students are free to continue their studies in an upper secondary school, in a vocational institute or in a commercial college. Some of the pupils enter working life after completing comprehensive school.

Upper secondary school is academically oriented and about 50% of the age group attends it. Most upper secondary schools are run by the municipality and only a few by the state or privately. A national matriculation examination (a nationwide student exam) taken after the three years of upper secondary school is usually required for entry into a university.

The school year

School work begins in mid-August and ends in the beginning of June at the latest. In addition to a summer vacation (from June till mid-August), students have a Christmas break, a Winter break in February or in March) and a short Easter vacation (a long weekend in March/April). There is no school on Saturdays.

Practical information about schools

Most AFS-students are placed either in the first or the second year of upper secondary school. The final year would probably be too difficult but also less fun because students in their last year concentrate on studying for the matriculation exam and therefore have less free time. It is recommended that a member of your host family will take you to school on the first day.

Most subjects are compulsory, but there are also optional courses. AFS reimburses the books for the compulsory courses. If you choose optional courses you will need to pay the possible fees yourself. Be prepared that the fees from optional courses can be anything from few euros to hundreds of euros. The fees depends the content of the optional course. You should have at least 25 hours of school per week. You will have several subjects, but you will study only a few of them intensively at a time, then continue to other subjects. This is because our school year is divided into five or six terms and the weekly schedule is different during each term.

At the end of each course the pupil's work is graded. One has passed the course if she/he receives a pass mark (5 being poor and 10 being outstanding). Usually each period lasts 45 minutes or 75 minutes, and there is a 15-minute break between classes.

All teaching with the exception of foreign languages is done in Finnish/Swedish. In the beginning, you may find it hard to follow teaching in class, but as you learn more Finnish/Swedish, school will become more interesting, so be patient!

School itself, as well as lunch, is free for you. If your trip to school is over 3km AFS will pay the costs of public transport to school. School books are expensive and as you need one book for a short period of time, you should try to loan school books from your host siblings, your contact teacher, the library or the AFS office. AFS Finland covers the cost of regular school books by lending those books to students. Make sure you return those books to the AFS office once you don't need them any longer.

AFS does not reimburse any other school costs such as material fees, excursions, entrance tickets, school trips, school photos, calculators, pens or notebooks. These expenses are the responsibility of the student.

All the exchange students coming to Finland need to bring a laptop with them. Many schools requires the students to have their own laptop and AFS can't reimburse that.

Many schools are using a platform called Wilma in internet. From Wilma you can find daily notifications from school and it's a channel for school communication. The school will explain you how the Wilma works and you can ask advice from the fellow students in your school.

Your contact teacher

At the beginning of your school year, you'll meet your contact teacher who wants to help you in all matters concerning your school. She/he may already have decided in advance with the principal which classes are the most suitable to you. She/he introduces you to your classroom or tutor and to your class.

The contact teacher will help you to plan your schedule. At least in the beginning of the year it is possible that you take some courses with other class levels, for example more Finnish, art or music. You will decide about your schedule with your contact teacher.

Your contact teacher is also in contact with your host family, other teachers, the AFS office and your own school if needed. You should talk with her/him if your own school accepts some of the courses that you pass in your Finnish school during the exchange and if your school gives you credit for them. You should tell your contact teacher when and why you are absent.

Whenever you have something to ask, don't hesitate to go to your contact teacher or any other teacher. Some teachers may feel that their language ability is not good enough to speak a foreign language—but they appreciate that you go to them and ask for help.

Adaptation

10 tips on how to adapt to a different culture

Though many hidden factors can make it difficult to get insight into another culture, it is not impossible. The following tips may help you better understand and adapt to a new culture.

1. **Be cautious:** Don't always think you understand everything – remember that you are among new rules and customs that may be unfamiliar to you.
2. **Learn the language** and use it: Even though you can't speak perfectly, the fact that you try to speak Finnish –or Swedish if placed in a Swedish speaking family– will be appreciated. Making an effort at learning the language shows people that you really try to adapt.
3. **Don't judge** situations too early: Especially in problematic situations it is important not to arrive at conclusions until all sides of the story have been heard.
4. **Avoid value judgements:** The natural tendency to right away label everything you see as “good” or “bad” may be a serious obstacle to understanding a new culture. Observe and describe, and most importantly accept other people on their own terms.
5. Show **empathy:** To show empathy means to identify you with somebody else's feelings. It is to put yourself emotionally in the place of a different person, and see the situation from their point of view. Remember that there are different ways of seeing the same situation.
6. **Listen and observe** with caution: Intercultural communication is not easy; there may be many factors that complicate mutual understanding. To be observant about verbal and non-verbal signs, and to place them in the right context, is a great challenge that demands time and patience.
7. Learn to **express yourself** correctly: Communication happens on many levels, it is necessary to be aware that every culture has its own pattern for expressing thoughts and feelings. Try to adapt to this pattern – both verbally and non-verbally.
8. **Check meanings:** If you are in doubt, double-check that you have understood correctly. Both words and body language can have different meanings in different cultures.
9. Accept that it is **natural to be insecure:** Cross-cultural communication is not easy, there are many stress factors involved in communication between people from different cultures. Openness, willingness to take chances and the ability to laugh at your own mistakes may help you to handle your insecurity in a positive manner.

Last but not least;

10. **Share** with others as much as you can: Show your ability to participate, to try out new things, and to learn about your hosting community and the culture there.

When you think about this advice you will realize that they do not only apply to Finland and AFS, but that they are important everywhere.



AFS and You

As you probably already know, AFS is a volunteer organization, but every country has an administrative office. AFS Finland has an office located in Helsinki, and the staff is there to make sure the local chapters have everything they need and organize the different programs. Remember, the AFS-volunteers you will meet in Finland don't get paid - so show them your appreciation!

Contact with AFS Finland

It is important both for AFS Finland, your chapter and your contact person to know how you are doing. If you are ever in Helsinki, you are welcome to come and visit. The office is open from Monday to Thursday 9-17 and Fridays 9-16. During non-office hours AFS Finland has an emergency phone, so you can get hold of us at any time. You will find all contact info towards the end of this booklet.

Contact with your AFS local chapter ("paikallisyhdistys" or short "PY")

Most AFSers in Finland belong to a local chapter. The local chapter consists of former AFS students, their parents and families who have hosted students from another country. They are volunteers, and are not paid for their work. The volunteers make the AFS program possible. Depending on the activity level of your chapter, they may arrange social gatherings, weekends and orientations.

Your AFS contact person ("yhdyshenkilö")

In your host community there will be an AFS contact person who will be working with the local AFS-chapter. The contact person has the special job of keeping in contact with you and your host family, knowing how you are doing, helping you if problems should arise, and being a friend. It is important that you are able to discuss freely with your contact person, even alone without your host family present. If you, for one reason or another, experience difficulty in communicating with your contact person, contact your AFS chapter or the AFS office in Helsinki.

Reimbursements from AFS

During the exchange program in Finland AFS-FIN reimburses for the students the following:

1. The trips to school if the distance between host family home and school is over 3 km.
2. Regular, obligatory high school books.
Books and expenses of any optional courses you need to pay yourself as well as notebooks and pens etc.
3. Medical costs that are covered by the AFS insurance.
4. The AFS arrival orientation camp and the end-of-stay camp.
5. AFS FIN supports your Finnish/or Swedish studies for up to 80 euros.
All costs over 80 euros you need pay yourself.

AFS Activities

There are two mandatory orientation camps that AFS Finland organises during the year. They are compulsory for all students to attend. This also means that the travel expenses for them will be reimbursed by AFS.

Your first AFS activity in Finland is a **post-arrival orientation**. It is organised regionally, and it takes place on a weekend 2-3 weeks after your arrival. At the orientation you will learn more about Finland—the society, culture, family life and school. You will also get information about AFS Finland.

Some chapters arrange mid-stay orientation camps during January.

The **end-of-stay orientation** is held in May, or right before departure for semester students. It is organised regionally, except for semester students nationally. The purpose of the orientation is both to look back to your exchange experience and share memories with other AFSers, but also to make you think about the future and to prepare you for returning home.

Many of the AFS chapters are quite active, while some consist of only a couple of motivated people who are dedicated AFSers. Chapters may have evening or weekend activities or happenings for students and host families. We try to make sure that every student has a chance to be involved in some chapter activity.

Your involvement in AFS

Remember that during your stay in Finland you are an ambassador for your country, your family and AFS. You have to be prepared to give some speeches about your country and about being an exchange student during your year in Finland. You will also have to be prepared to help out in promoting AFS in different ways locally and during AFS gatherings. This is usually lots of fun and some of you will be interviewed by local newspapers or a local radio station.

Safety Tips

General safety tips and rules from AFS

Get to know the host culture well through questions, dialogue and discussion with your host family, peers and the AFS local chapters. Take seriously any concerns that your host family and school express and follow their advice.

As stated in the agreement document you signed prior to leaving your home country, the national AFS office will make recommendations and give guidelines for physical welfare and security. Take this advice seriously and comply with these guidelines.

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

Follow national law

AFS students are subject to the law of their hosting country. If an AFS student hosted in Finland breaks the law he/she will be sent home. Neither AFS nor the national government of the student's home country has the ability to protect the student from punishment with respect to narcotics, thefts or other legal offences.

Safety in your new home

In general if you are worried about something, your host family is not likely to guess what you are worried about - ask them to inform you. Here is a list of questions you should ask your host family:

1. Is it safe to walk around outside after dark?
2. Do you lock doors and windows in the house? All the time?
3. What should I do if I am alone and a stranger is at the door? What should I tell him/her?
4. Will I receive a house key?
5. Who can I call if you arrive home without a key or there is no one in the house?
6. How should I answer the phone? What information should I not give out to strangers?
7. Do you have first aid equipment? Where do you keep it?
8. What should you do if there is a fire? Do you have a fire extinguisher? Where do you keep it?
9. What should I do if an emergency occurs? Who should I call?
10. Are there any appliances that could cause a problem and that I should be aware of?

Outside the home

Let your host parents know whenever you are concerned or frightened. Ask them what they recommend to help you feel personally more secure. When you are going out, AFS suggests that you leave information about where you are going out or the telephone number of where you will be at home. Your host family knows the most about their community and is best prepared to give you advice about places that would be best for you to avoid and how to get around. In general, you should take their advice seriously and follow their recommendations.

Finland is generally a very safe country. There is no big difference between boys and girls when it comes to safety. But like any other country, you should of course be cautious and there might be areas you should avoid.

1. In general, you should try to avoid being alone in parks, train and bus stations late at night. In some areas (Helsinki) these places **might** be dangerous, although this is usually not the case in most areas. If walking alone at night, you should try to walk on streets which are well lit and have other people walking in them.
2. When walking in crowded areas you should take care of your valuables.
3. Public transportation in Finland is perfectly safe to use. You should make sure you know the time when buses and trains stop running at the end of the day if you are planning to return late at night.
4. In Finland traffic keeps to the right, remember that when you cross the street or ride a bike. A lot of Finns, especially students, ride a bike. When it is dark you will need lights on your bike.
5. When dark – ask your host family for a reflector, “heijastin”. This little shiny piece of plastic will make it safer for you to be out walking, as drivers can see you more easily.
6. Most families in Finland lock their doors and windows before leaving home and at night (although many leave the bedroom window open during the night – for fresh air).
7. Electricity: In Finland the voltage is 220V. You should be very careful when using electrical appliances. Do not leave them on when you are not at home or when you are at sleep, etc. This goes for your PC and cell phone charger as well.

Internet usage

Here are some tips to help you use the internet in a safe and appropriate way while you are in Finland:

- Never give out personal information like your name, address, or phone number
- Keep your password private!
- Stay away from pornographic pages!
- Remember that nothing you write on the Web is completely private. So be careful and think about what you type and who you tell.
- Facebook: **Don't write about your host family in a negative way on Facebook – even if it is in a different language. It is easy to translate through Google.**
- Blogs: If you have a blog – that's great. But do not write personal texts about your host family and your feelings. People can be offended, even if you didn't mean it that way. Ask someone to help you write in an appropriate way. Remember that it is easy to translate blogs as well!



A SOCIAL MEDIA GUIDELINE FOR THE EXCHANGE STUDENT

Internet is a big place known for its good memory. We guess you already know that, but just in case, we put together some basic guidelines to help you in doubt!

WHAT I CAN DO:

- Share my life in social media or blogs
- **Post about a positive or a negative experience.** The exchange year is a rollercoaster of emotions – it's made of good and bad experiences. When posting about a negative thing you can think *Is there a way to say this in a reflective touch, not judging* (for example: what did I learn from this experience though it was uncomfortable or stressing). When life gives you lemons – learn to make lemonade out of them!
- Be respectful, considerate and accurate – use your common sense

WHAT I CAN'T DO:

- **Share photos or content of my host family, friends etc. without their permission** – Delete content related to them if they request so.
- **Insult or mock someone on your or someone else's post:** We all get upset sometimes, but take a moment before publishing a post – once done, there is no return – Internet will know (even if your profile would be "private").
- **In Finland, an insult at worst is a civil offence and results in a fine or a defamation suit**

PLEASE REMEMBER:

- The AFS rules prohibit hitchhiking, drugs, alcohol, school negligence and driving any vehicle. Please remember that on your posts.
- You are participating in a school based program, so posting about "slacking" at school is not cool

Also, feel free to use these #hashtags in your posts! That way more people can find and check out your experience!

#AFSfinland #AFSfiilis #AFSvaihtari #AFSeffect

Medical Assistance

AFS has a secondary medical insurance for all hosted students in Finland. Full medical expenses due to an accident or illness during your stay in Finland will be paid for by the AFS medical insurance.

AFS insurance does not pay any bills connected with previous injury or illness, dental care, eye glasses or routine medical examinations. Your natural family will have to cover these costs if they occur. Any medication which you may bring with you must be in original containers and labelled so that the people at customs know what it is and doctors are able to tell what it is to be used for. In case of an accident or an illness, your host family has to notify the Finnish AFS office as soon as possible so that your natural family as well as the AFS office in your home country can be informed.

Travel and liability insurances

Students need to have a liability insurance when coming to Finland. Travel insurance is optional depending on student's own needs. Make sure to purchase your own liability insurance prior coming to Finland. Check from the insurance companies from your home country what they provide.

In case of emergencies:

CALL: 112 (Ambulance, Police and Fire)

AFS FIN Duty Officer: 050-376 6650

Uncomfortable Social Situations

Social gatherings

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

Alcohol and smoking

In Finland the legal age for buying alcohol is 18. It's quite common that you find people under 18 drinking, so remember to ask your host family about their attitude towards drinking. Most host families will not allow under-age drinking. You must also pay attention to the fact that drinking habits vary from one family to another.

Become aware of what your host family thinks of drinking alcohol. We suggest that you will not drink alcohol while in Finland. This is partly because the consequences affect not only you but also your host family and friends. Show respect for your host family's rules and community attitudes. Do also obey the law—serving alcoholic beverages, tobacco or snuff to anyone under 18 is illegal in Finland. Those over 18 are allowed to have beer and wine occasionally and moderately. If you get drunk during the AFS program, you risk being sent home.

Many people strongly object to smoking, especially at their homes. Most **families expect you not to smoke**. Of those who smoke, many go outside to do it. If you smoke, please find out first what your family thinks of it. Be polite to people who do not smoke and avoid smoking in places where it would affect other people. Smoking is prohibited by law inside all public areas.

Sexual harassment

Cultures differ in their views of appropriate sexual behaviour and practices by 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 best acquired through increased knowledge of the culture.

Equally important are your own values and beliefs regarding your behaviour. You should of course not compromise your own personal values and beliefs regarding sexual behaviour.

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

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

Unfortunately anywhere in the world there is a possibility for sexual harassment even though the sexual harassment is highly unacceptable. In those situations the following is important to keep in mind: You do not have to be physically touched for sexual abuse or interference to occur. Any behaviour that makes you uncomfortable is not okay and should be reported to your host family, contact person, AFS hosting support person, or the AFS duty officer outside office hours.

Emergencies

If you find yourself questioned by a police officer, or another authority, the best advice would be to identify yourself as an exchange student. In the case of an emergency you should try to call your host family, your AFS contact person or the AFS national office. Remember that AFS is available at any time in case of emergency.

Rules

Follow the national law

When you are in Finland, you are a natural subject of the Finnish law. If you violate it, neither your family, AFS nor your embassy can help you. Beyond this, AFS requires you to respect a few rules. These rules are based on international AFS rules and the participation agreement. If you break the Finnish law you will be sent home.

International AFS Rules

If the participant breaks any of these rules, the student will be immediately excluded from the program and sent home.

1. No use of illegal substances

All participants are forbidden to use illegal drugs and substances. Explicit violations of this rule cause a dismissal from the program and an immediate return to the home country. Similarly, abuse of alcoholic beverages can be a cause for dismissal from the program.

2. No hitchhiking

3. No driving

As an AFS student you are **not** permitted to drive. In Finland a person must be 18 years old to get a driver's license. An AFS student must not be a passenger in any motor vehicle with a younger driver or someone without a license, or with someone who has consumed alcohol (under Finnish law this is strictly forbidden)! If you find yourself in such situation, you should contact the police, your host family or someone from AFS. They will tell you what to do.

Rules for AFS Students in Finland

School

AFS students are accepted by Finnish schools on the basis on an application from AFS on the condition that the student will follow school rules and decisions. If a student does not follow these school rules and AFS' rules, the participant will be sent home. All students have to attend school at least 25 hours/week and go to all school lessons according to the timetable. If you fail three courses due to absences from school, you will be sent home.

Substance use and supplying

Misuse of any substances as well as supplying alcohol, tobacco, snuff or any illegal substances to minors is strictly forbidden, and a violation of this rule will cause a dismissal from the program.

Host family rules

Last but not least – you must of course respect your host family's rules. They will feel a great responsibility for you, and they will of course want to keep you safe through your whole stay in Finland. If you feel the rules are strict in the start – remember that more independence might come with trust. When they get to know you and you know your way around the hosting community, it might get easier for them to adapt their rules to the occasion.

Travel Rules

The rules are set to ensure the safety and protection of the participant, the natural family, the host family and AFS. Violation of the travel or visitation rules (by the participant, the host family or the participant's family or friends from home) can result in total travel restriction for the AFS student for the remainder of the year. AFS students aren't allowed to travel outside school holidays. If the travel restriction is violated, the participant will be sent home immediately.

The AFS travel rules apply to all AFS students regardless of their age.

General rules regarding travelling

The exchange student is allowed to travel independently maximum two times during the exchange period and can be absent from school maximum of ten days due to travelling. "Abi" and "vanhojen" cruises are included to these two independent trips.

The exchange student **ALWAYS** needs independent travel permission for "Abi" and "vanhojen" cruises. The travel permission needs to be applied for from the AFS office with the travel permission application.

It is always AFS Finland (the AFS office in Helsinki) who grants all the travel permissions. The volunteers in the local AFS chapter or the natural parents of the student or the AFS office in the home country do not grant travel permissions.

The exchange student is always responsible for all the travel arrangements for example possible VISAs and permissions from the Airlines or cruise companies. The AFS office doesn't have the time to organize or help with any travel arrangements.

The travel permission applications have to be sent to AFS office well in advance but at latest 3 weeks prior the planned trip. The student should not book flights or make other payments before he/she has the travel permission from AFS Finland. If the student books flights before applying the permission and AFS denies the application, the student is responsible for the lost money. Travelling without required permission from AFS is strictly prohibited and students travelling without permission will be sent home.

The deadline for the travel permission applications is the 30th of April (the application has to be at the AFS office the latest 30th of April) for all the independent trips or other trips that require permission from AFS Finland that will take place in May or June. After that date AFS office will no longer handle any travel permission applications. This doesn't apply to trips with the host family.

All trips should take place during school holidays or weekends. AFS doesn't grant permissions for travelling during exam periods. If the trip takes place during the school week the student must always ask permission to be absent from the headmaster or contact teacher of the host school. The student can be absent from school maximum 5 school days per trip. It is recommended that year program students will only travel independently during the spring semester.

Trips that AFS Finland will not authorize

Cruises to Stockholm and Tallinn alone or with other exchange students are prohibited. This also applies to day cruises to Tallinn, which are prohibited when travelling alone or with other exchange students or Finnish friends!

InterRail is prohibited in Finland and abroad.

Sleeping over or camping at any music festivals (Provinssirock, Tuska etc.) or any similar events is strictly prohibited! Visiting music festivals during day time is allowed with the permission of the host family.

The exchange students are not allowed to travel alone or with other exchange students for example to Lapland or rent cabins or other places, stay in hostels, holiday houses, motels, hotels or travel as a "tourists" to another city in Finland unless they are travelling with their host family or another chaperon approved by AFS.

The exchange students are not allowed to participate alone or with other exchange students in tourist trips abroad organized by travel agencies. Furthermore, exchange students are not allowed to travel abroad as a group of students and stay in hotels, hostels, cabins or motels.

Travelling with your host family

In Finland

In Finland the AFS student is allowed to travel with his/her host family without a specific permission from the AFS office. However, during school weeks travelling is not allowed as school is the priority for all the AFS students.

Abroad

The AFS student is allowed to travel abroad with his/her host family without a specific permission from the AFS office. If the host family is planning a longer trip (more than few days) with the student, AFS office has to be notified about the destination and the duration of the trip. If the trip is during school week (which is not preferable) the student needs also permission from his/her host school.

Travelling independently

If the student wants to plan a trip alone, the student must always first ask permission from the host family. The host family has the right to say no to the plans.

In Finland

The student can visit relatives and friends of the host family, other AFS exchange students or friends from school without a specific permission from the AFS office as long as the host family and the welcoming family agrees on the visit. Unnecessary absences from school must be avoided. If the student is planning for example a skiing trip with friends from school, permission from the AFS office is needed.

Student please note: If you are planning to sleep over at other AFS family, your host parents and the parents of that family need to agree with the sleepover first. You cannot just make plans in Facebook/WhatsApp with other exchange students. Always speak with your host family first.

Abroad

An exchange year is not about travelling, therefore the student needs a very good reason to travel independently abroad for example to visit a close relative who lives in another country in Europe or to visit a former AFS host sibling.

If an exchange student is planning to travel independently abroad he/she must **ALWAYS** ask for permission from the AFS office. The *travel permission application* must be filled in carefully and sent to the AFS office (semester students: susanna.taskinen@afs.org or year students: suvi.turunen@afs.org). The AFS office will handle each travel application individually. If all the required information is included on the travel permission application and AFS office thinks the trip meets AFS safety guidelines, the travel permission can be granted. Otherwise AFS will deny the permission. The *travel permission application* has to be sent to AFS office at least 3 weeks prior the planned trip.

If AFS Finland allows student to travel independently abroad, AFS Finland will ask for the AFS office in student's home country to deliver a specific *Travel Waiver* signed by student's natural parents or legal guardians. The *Travel Waiver* is a specific permission for the one trip the student has applied the travel permission for. The *Travel Waiver* is always handled by the AFS office and AFS Finland will ask for the *Travel Waiver* from the AFS office of the student's home country only if AFS Finland has approved of student's travel permission application. By signing the *Travel Waiver* the natural parents or legal guardians of the student release AFS and the host family from all responsibility during the independent trip abroad. However, the AFS Insurance is valid also during the independent trip abroad. Student is not allowed to travel until AFS Finland has received the *Travel Waiver* from student's home country.

During the AFS program the student can be granted maximum of two permissions for independent trips abroad.

The spring semester is always a very busy season at the AFS office and therefore the deadline for all travel permission applications is the 30th of April. After this date the AFS office will not handle any more travel permission applications. So, plan your independent trips well beforehand to avoid any disappointments.

When the exchange student plans an independent trip abroad:

The student needs a permission from the host family.

The student **needs an invitation** from the family or the person whom the student is planning to visit. The person/family whom the student is planning to visit must be someone that the student knows very well beforehand.

The invitation can be an informal letter or email that includes the contact information of the family/person whom the student is planning to visit. The invitation has to be attached to travel permission application. When travelling alone, the student is not allowed to stay in hotels or hostels or with strangers.

If the trip is during school week (which is not preferable) the student needs a written permission from the hosting school. The student can be absent from school for a maximum of 5 school days. The permission has to be attached to travel permission application.

The student needs to carefully fill out the *travel permission application* form. You will get a copy of this form once in Finland. Return the filled form to the AFS office (semester students: susanna.taskinen@afs.org and year students: suvi.turunen@afs.org).

Travelling with your host school

In Finland

The exchange student can participate in school trips in Finland with the permission of the host family.

Abroad

If the student is planning on participating on a school trip abroad, the same travel guidelines apply as when travelling abroad independently. The student has to apply travel permission from the AFS office with a travel permission application form. The trip schedule and the contact information of the supervising teachers or chaperons have to be attached to the application.

Participating on “abi” and “vanhojen” cruises to Stockholm or Tallinn is allowed as long as all the required permissions are taken care of with the AFS office and the student has permission from the host family.

Visits in Finland by natural family or friends:

AFS strongly advises against visits from your family or friends during the AFS year.

For friends and family, an AFS year might seem like a perfect opportunity to visit Finland. But AFS has seen the damaging effects such visits can have on the participant and the relationship between the participant and the host family. If for one reason or another there is talk of such a visit, the AFS office must be contacted in advance. The AFS student must ask both the host family and AFS for permission, which may be granted or denied in consultation with all three parties.

Please note: All AFS students must return home after the AFS program ends. Semester students cannot extend their Semester program to a Year program.

Learn More about Finland

If you want to know more about Finland than the information you get from this booklet, we suggest that you visit the following web pages:

www.visitfinland.com

or

www.finland.fi

Learn Finnish – or Swedish!

We strongly advise you to start using free, internet based language material as soon as possible – and work with it as much as you can until your departure from your home country!

Language material (both Finnish and Swedish) can be found in the internet via link:

<http://www.helsinki.fi/kksc/language.services/english/linkit.html>

Even though the Finnish (or Swedish) language might seem difficult to learn or very different from your own language – do not despair! No one expects you to know a lot of Finnish (or Swedish) before coming on the program: learning a language takes time. What's most important is that you try to get accustomed to the language and some of the grammar, and maybe learn a few words, how to introduce yourself, etc.

Contact Information AFS FINLAND

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GOOD LUCK!

There is so much more unsaid,
but we will give you the chance
to find out the rest yourself.

We hope that many years from now
you will be able to turn back and say:
"A little part of me will always be
in that land of the midnight sun far up north".

But before that *WELCOME TO FINLAND*,
and remember: you are not alone,
we are always here for you.

AFS Finland



Follow our Instagram or Facebook @afsfinland