Safety

Safety Tips for the USA

A guide for AFS Participants hosted in the U.S.
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Important Contact Information

AFS-USA Office
120 Wall Street, 4th Floor New York, NY 10005
1-800-AFS-INFO
(800-237-4636, Press 9)

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<th>Host Parent Name:</th>
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Note: If your email address or phone number changes at any time throughout your exchange program, please notify your liaison immediately to ensure that AFS-USA’s records are accurate.
## Emergency and Other Phone Numbers

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<tr>
<td>AFS Emergency Line</td>
<td>1-800-AFS-INFO (1-800-237-4636, press 9)</td>
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<tr>
<td>National Emergency Line</td>
<td>911</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poison Control</td>
<td>1-800-222-1222</td>
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<td>Local Police Department</td>
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<td>Local Fire Department</td>
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<td>Trusted Neighbor</td>
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Please use blank space for additional contact information.
Introduction

While on your AFS program, you will find that most of what you learn comes from your daily interactions and experiences at home, in school, and in your host community. AFS staff and volunteers understand that the opportunity to learn while on the AFS program is great, but not always easy. You may encounter situations during your stay that you find confusing, frustrating, or even a little scary.

In order to help you learn from these challenging times, AFS has created a system of “Participant Support” for all students. The purpose of this support system is to provide you with a safe environment and an environment for you to ask questions, seek advice and receive help.

AFS alone cannot prepare every participant for all possible safety concerns, as many issues will be specific to the community in which you are placed. Therefore, we recommend that you talk to the individuals who make up your “safety net” (your host family, liaison, local AFS volunteers, and school staff) about the issues raised in this handbook soon after you arrive in the U.S.

AFS staff and volunteers know that the image of the U.S. that is often portrayed by the international media may be different than the reality in the community in which you are hosted. Therefore, we encourage you to ask your host family to clarify any concerns or doubts you may have about life in your host community.

Maintaining your safety is our number one priority at AFS. However, it is your responsibility to make smart, informed decisions in order to keep yourself safe. Reading all the information contained in this handbook and Welcome to the USA will help prepare you to make these important decisions. After you have finished reading, be sure to discuss any additional questions or concerns you may have with your host family or liaison. We wish you a safe and successful stay in the USA!
Practical Information for Living in the U.S

We are certain that you are going to have an exciting year learning about both your host culture as well as yourself and your own culture. You have been learning - since birth - to understand how to behave in different situations in your home country. Soon, you will be living in a new culture, and you may not be aware of all the "clues" telling you which behaviors are socially acceptable.

Many things that you consider to be “common sense” in your home country may also apply to U.S. culture. The best thing to do in any situation is to discuss your concerns with your host family and/or liaison. However, it’s important to remember that you are also responsible for yourself.

The USA is a very diverse country with social norms differing between regions, states, communities and even families. So, it is impossible to tell you exactly how to behave appropriately in any/every possible situation. How you should behave depends on the situation itself, the people involved, the setting/environment and the desired outcome of the interaction.

After spending a couple of days getting to know your family, please sit down with them and discuss the information contained in this guide. It's important to clarify with them anything you don't understand about the advice given or language used in this booklet.

Carry your AFS ID Card at All Times

Your AFS ID card contains all the vital information that you will need in an emergency. Your ID card includes:

- Your name
- Your U.S. host family’s address and telephone numbers
- Name and telephone numbers of your local AFS volunteer and the AFS National Office
- The AFS toll-free emergency telephone number
- The name of the AFS health insurance provider and policy number
- The telephone number of the U.S. Department of State’s Office of Designation

Students are encouraged to take a photo of their ID with their smartphone as an added precaution. If you lose your AFS ID card, be sure to contact your liaison, who can provide you with a new one.
AFS-USA Chain of Communication

- It is important to follow the AFS Chain of Communication when reporting a problem or an emergency.
- AFS support staff and volunteers can work together to support students and communicate the appropriate course of action, fully considering any cultural or language issues that may need to be navigated.

In the event of EMERGENCIES and the next person in the chain of communication is unavailable, contact:
AFS-USA Duty Officer
1-800-AFS-INFO x9
1-800-237-4636 x9

Communication may flow in the opposite direction but should always follow this chain.
Rules and Regulations - The Three AFS Rules

The following rules apply to every AFS participant hosted in the United States at all times:
If you are involved in any of these behaviors or break any other laws, you may face serious legal problems. These rules are not debatable. **If you break any of these rules, you will be returned to your home country immediately!** Refer to your [Welcome to the USA booklet](https://www afsusa org) for additional information.

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Other Risky Behaviors that May be Considered a Reason for Program Termination and Early Return

In addition to the three non-negotiable rules, there are other reasons that an AFS participant's program can be terminated. Please be sure to read related information in [Welcome to the USA](https://www afsusa org) and in the [Participation Agreement](https://www afsusa org), which you signed as part of your application, as a reminder of the stipulations you agreed to in order to participate in the AFS program.

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Your Host Family

Just like your parent(s)/guardian(s), your AFS host family's first concern is your well-being and safety. Some families are very strict and have specific rules. Other families will tell you what they expect of you and let you make your own decisions. Your family may want you to ask their permission before you make any plans that are different from your daily schedule.

Almost every U.S. American family prefers to know where their children are most of the time. So, you should always communicate with your host parent(s) if you are going to be late for dinner, visit a friend after school and/or return home later than usual. You should always check with your host parent(s) before you make plans to ensure that that your plans don't conflict with any plans that your host family may already have.

We ask all our host families to review the "Participant & Host Family Questionnaire" when you first arrive. Please ask questions about anything you don't understand or about anything that confuses you.

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Safety Inside the Home

There may be times when people come to the door who you do not know, such as salesmen, religious groups, or service people. If someone comes to the door, do NOT automatically invite them inside, especially if it's a stranger. Speak to your host family for instructions on how to answer the door, as it can vary from family to family.
Inappropriate, Concerning and/or Unwanted Communications
If someone uses sexual, obscene, or threatening language with you via phone or text, tell your host family immediately. If your family has a land-line telephone, ask them what any expectations are around whether you should answer it. When in doubt, let it go to voicemail and tell a host parent that someone called. Do NOT give out any information; do NOT tell the caller where you are, if you are home alone, or what your plans are. If they continue to communicate with you, do NOT respond and reach out to your liaison or another trusted adult for guidance.

Locking Doors and Windows
Ask your host family if they prefer to lock all doors and windows only when they leave the house OR keep all doors and windows locked at all times (i.e., even when they are at home). Some families feel comfortable keeping their doors unlocked, while others do not. If your host family has an alarm system in their home, be sure to learn how to use it, and memorize the alarm code. NEVER share alarm codes with other people because it can be a safety and security risk.

If you find that someone is entering the home illegally, such as a robber or burglar, get out immediately, run to a neighbor’s house or any area where there are people around, and call 911.

Internet Usage
Here are some general tips for helping to ensure you and your host family’s safety and privacy online. Please see Welcome to the USA for more detailed information on responsible internet and social media use.

1. Keep your passwords private, even from your best friend! Your online service will never ask for them, so neither should anyone else.
2. Use only your log-in name and/or e-mail address when chatting or sending e-mail.
3. “Never give out personal information about yourself or your host family such name, address and contact information without asking your host parents for permission first.”
4. Do not share photos of yourself, your family, or your home with people you meet online.
5. When using social media, only add people you know in real life and always ask your host family what is acceptable to share.
6. Always delete unknown e-mails without opening them. They can contain destructive viruses. They may contain links to pornographic material and upon accessing them you may encounter serious consequences (see the next section).
7. If a person writes something that is mean or makes you feel uncomfortable, don't respond, and inform your host parents.
8. Remember that nothing you post on social media is completely private, even Snapchat. So, if your grandmother wouldn't approve of what you're sharing, then don't write or share it.
9. Never make plans to meet an online "friend" in person.
10. When in doubt, ask your host parents for help.
Firearms

In many parts of the world, it is uncommon for individuals to possess firearms, and most participants are not accustomed to seeing or handling them, nor are they aware of related safety protocols. People in the U.S. possess firearms or guns for various reasons, from hunting to personal protection. Lawful gun ownership is granted in the United States Constitution.

A gun or any other weapon is NOT a toy. Many accidental deaths occur every year when teenagers are looking at or playing with a real gun or other weapon. If you come across a gun in the home of your host family or in the home of a friend, do NOT touch it. Participants should only touch or handle guns for the purpose of hunting or sport, and only after receiving appropriate gun safety training, with the expressed permission of a host parent and under the direct supervision of a host parent or another responsible adult.

Your host parents must ensure that you have a supplemental activity waiver on file as well as permission from your sending parent(s)/guardian(s) for you to take part in any activity that involves the use of firearms or other weapons. This permission should be obtained by contacting your local support volunteers who will then contact the AFS Support Department at the AFS office and inform them of your intention to participate in this activity. FLEX, CBYX and YES students are NOT allowed to use firearms (at shooting ranges for example), regardless of if they ask for a supplemental activity waiver.

Safety Outside the Home

The media often portrays the U.S. as a violent culture. There are a lot of stereotypes about violence on the streets in the U.S. Most likely, you will not observe or encounter any acts of violence, as AFS students are not placed in areas that are considered unsafe. However, it is important to remember that the U.S. is a very diverse country, which includes both small towns and big cities.

Community safety is different in every area. Ask your host family if it's safe to walk around your community at night and/or alone. Ask your host family if there are any specific areas or streets in your host community that you should avoid. In some places, it is advisable to walk with someone else. Always listen to these warnings and be “street smart.”

General Precautions

- Always carry some form of identification (ex: school ID, AFS ID card, etc.) in case of emergency.
- Don’t wear headphones when walking outside, especially near busy streets or in crowded areas.
- If you do wear headphones, always set your volume lower so that you can still hear and react to external sounds.
- Always be aware of your environment and pay attention.
- Walk confidently and look alert!
- Know what and who is around you and where you are going at all times.
- If you see or sense problems on your way, change your route and prepare to run away if necessary.
- If you are unable to run away, give the person anything they ask for and try not to make the person angry.
• **Beware of pickpocketing, especially in crowds and larger cities.** It is NOT advisable to carry large amounts of cash, especially if you don't need it or don't plan to spend it that day. Also, be cautious when taking money out of your wallet. Do not show anyone the money you have with you. **Be careful when using your debit or credit card at ATM machines, especially ATMs located in public places.** Always stand in front of the machine and cover the keypad with one hand so that no one can see what you are entering, especially the Personal Identification Number (PIN).

• **When waiting for public transportation, it's a good idea to wait in a lighted area, ideally near or within shouting distance of other people.**

• **Avoid people on the street who look like they may be under the influence of drugs or alcohol.** These people can be unpredictable and can bring about potentially harmful situations. If they say something to you, it is best to ignore them and walk away.

• **When approaching your home at night, firmly hold your key for easy access and protection.** Ask your host family if they leave any lights on when leaving the house.

• **Consult your host family before you arrange to meet someone.** As a visitor to the U.S., you may find different treatment will be given to you. Some people may be eager to befriend you. Others may try to take advantage of you in hopes that you may not understand English or U.S. cultural norms.

• **Do not immediately trust people that are not well-known to your host family or the local AFS volunteers and always talk to your host family before you make plans to meet someone outside of school hours, letting them know whom you would like to meet and where.**

**Threatening Situations**

If you come face-to-face with someone threatening you with a gun, a knife, or any other weapon, there are steps that you can take to make the situation less dangerous.

**Take a deep breath, step back, remain calm.**

The most important thing to do is probably one of the most difficult: remain calm. If you are hysterical, it is unlikely that you will be able to maintain mental clarity. Making eye contact helps them view you as human. Follow the instructions of the person with the weapon but be sure to communicate what you’re about to do. For example, if they ask for your wallet, before reaching into your purse or pocket tell them what you are about to do. Then do it slowly and calmly. Don't challenge them, talk carefully.

Remember a robber is simply using a weapon to increase their chances of success, the point is your wallet or purse. Give it to them.

Do not get into the car of someone you do not know. If someone attempts to force you into a car, run away and scream.
Transportation

Modes of transportation vary widely across the U.S. Urban areas often enjoy a much more comprehensive public transportation system than suburban or rural areas, which depend more on car travel. Some public transportation systems are safer than others. It is very important to talk to your host family about how you will get to the places you need to go and how to keep yourself safe in transit.

In a Car

Many U.S. Americans understand the lifesaving value of the seat belt. In 2022, 91.6% of passengers and drivers in the U.S. used their seatbelts. In 2022, 47% of people killed in motor vehicle crashes were NOT wearing seat belts. Seatbelts reduce the risk of fatal injury to front seat passenger car occupants by 45%.

Some people might think that wearing a seatbelt for short car rides is unnecessary. However, the risk of getting into a serious crash is just as great when you take a quick trip as it is on a longer trip. 75% of all serious motor vehicle crashes occur within 40 km of a person’s home.

There are mandatory safety belt laws in all states except New Hampshire. In some states, these laws cover front-seat occupants only, but belt laws in 29 states and the District of Columbia cover all rear-seat occupants too. A driver may be ticketed and fined for not adhering to their state’s rules; however, more importantly you as a passenger put yourself at risk by not “buckling up.”

Whether you are in the car of a friend or host family member, always remember to buckle up! To find out more about seat belt use and transportation safety issues in your state, log on to http://nhtsa.gov.

On a School Bus

School bus transportation is safe. In fact, buses are safer than cars! Even so, every year, hundreds of students are injured, and some are even killed in incidents involving school buses in the U.S. More often than not, these injuries and deaths did not occur in a crash, but as the students were entering and exiting the bus. Remember these safety tips:

- Wait for your bus in a safe place. Avoid traffic and remain on the sidewalk.
- Stay away from the bus until it comes to a complete stop and the driver signals you to enter.
- When being dropped off, exit the bus, and walk ten giant steps away from the bus. Keep a safe distance between you and the bus. Also, remember that the bus driver can see you best when you are farther away from the bus.
- Use the handrail to enter and exit the bus.
- Be aware of the street traffic around you as you get on and off the bus. Drivers are required to follow certain rules of the road concerning school buses, however, not all do. Protect yourself and watch out!
While Walking/Jogging

- Cars in the U.S. drive on the right side of the road.
- Always walk in the opposite direction of the traffic so that you can see what is coming.
- When possible, avoid walking alone.
- Walk with someone or walk in areas where other people are nearby.
- Stay in well-lit areas, away from side streets, bushes, and entryways.
- Avoid shortcuts through parks, parking lots, and other deserted places.
- Don't accept rides from strangers.
- If a driver stops to ask you directions, avoid getting near the car.
- If you suspect you are being followed, go to the nearest business or residence for help.
- If you are harassed by the occupants of a car, turn and walk or run in the other direction. The driver will have to turn around to follow you.
- When you return home, have your door key ready so that you can enter without delay.
- Don't use headphones with music when walking in isolated areas at any time of day.
- Regularly change your routines.
- Always be alert in parking lots, especially when it's dark.
- If you are afraid, ask someone you know to escort you to the car or public transportation stop.
- Stay alert at all times.

On Public Transportation

- Remember that there is usually safety in numbers.
- Wait in a nearby shop or in a well-lit area for the public transport to arrive.
- If the bus or train is empty, don't choose the window seat as you may be “blocked in” by a potential assailant; always choose an aisle seat for quick exit.
- On trains, especially after peak hours, always choose the train car that has the most passengers or the train car directly behind the train driver.
- On buses, sit behind the driver or next to the door for quick exit.

Safety in School

Be aware of students in school who are involved in illegal activities such as drugs. Avoid students who are violent. If you hear students planning or threatening to perform a violent act, hear a rumor about such plans, or if you feel threatened in any way, go to your school counselor, teacher, administrator, or AFS school contact. You can also talk to your liaison or another AFS volunteer.

Schools have emergency procedures and protocols (including Lockdowns, Lockouts, and Stay-In-Place) covering events such as fire, medical emergencies, bomb threats or active shooters. The purpose of these drills is to prepare the student body and school personnel to react responsibly, effectively, and to help ensure the safety and well-being of students. AFS students are expected to participate in these drills appropriately. As student safety is taken very seriously in school, any misbehavior during the drill may be subject to school disciplinary action.
To clear up any possible confusion, here's an explanation of each term:

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<th>Term</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>LOCKOUT</strong></td>
<td>Means that there is a possible threat outside the school, and nobody is allowed to go in or out of the building until the lockout is lifted. During lockouts, all activities inside the school continue as normal.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>LOCKDOWN</strong></td>
<td>During a LOCKDOWN, there is a perceived threat inside the school, or directed at the school. The hallways are cleared, classroom doors are locked, and students must stay away from doors and windows.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>SHELTER-IN-PLACE</strong></td>
<td>A SHELTER-IN-PLACE is enacted when it may be harmful to leave the building, or there is no time to evacuate.</td>
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Jokes about terrorism, possession of a weapon, a bomb, or any other items that may compromise the safety of the students are considered a serious offense and can result in police involvement and prosecution.

AFS participants must NOT make jokes that could be interpreted as threats. **Potentially dangerous situations are excellent subjects to discuss with your host family.** By talking about safety and what you can do to prevent potentially harmful situations, you can learn a lot about U.S. Americans' attitudes towards safety.

AFS participants should NOT keep valuable items in their school locker or bring expensive items to school (jewelry, electronics, credit cards, large amounts of cash, etc.).

**What should I do if I get sick?**

If you become ill with flu-like symptoms, there are several steps you should take:

1. Talk with your host family or liaison about your symptoms.
2. Ask your host parent/s to contact a doctor, particularly if you are worried about your symptoms. Your doctor will determine whether testing or treatment is needed.
3. Stay home and avoid contact with other people as much as possible to keep from spreading your illness to others.

If you think you may have been exposed to COVID-19, tell your host parent/s immediately. Be sure to keep track of your symptoms. If you have an emergency warning sign (including trouble breathing), tell your host parent, teacher, liaison, or other adult and get medical attention right away.
Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)

For the most up to date information on COVID 19 symptoms, prevention and what to do if you feel sick, please see this link from the CDC Website.

AFS-USA advises all host family members, students, and volunteers to adhere to CDC, federal, state, and local laws, orders, and guidelines pertaining to the prevention of the spread of COVID-19. We understand that rules and guidelines pertaining to social distancing and wearing PPE will likely vary across states and towns. We therefore advise you to remain informed of these rules and guidelines, as they may evolve during the year and to be respectful of your family’s preferences and any local requirements. For the entirety of the 2023-24 cycle, we will defer to these rules and guidelines. For further information on CDC guidelines, as well as state and local guidelines, please review the following resources:

- Things to Know about the COVID-19 Pandemic
- State, Territorial & County Health Department Information
- Travel Planner

In addition to CDC guidance around social distancing and usage of PPE, volunteers, host families, and students may wish to take note of CDC advice to obtain seasonal flu vaccination as an added precaution. Influenza or “the flu” is a contagious respiratory disease caused by varieties of the influenza virus that, in the U.S., is most commonly contracted during the fall and winter seasons. Please note that the AFS Medical Plan does not provide coverage for vaccinations*, so you and your parent(s)/guardian(s) would be responsible for any costs associated with any immunization(s). Individual families and students may wish to exercise greater caution than what is mandated or advised by the CDC and their state or local governments. In these cases, these expectations should be clearly communicated between the participant and host family upon arrival.

*The cost of vaccines that are required by school or the program for YES and FLEX participants is covered by program funds.

What COVID-19 related expenses are included in the AFS Participant Medical Plan?

The AFS Medical Plan will continue to respond solely to immediate illness and/or injury, anything considered routine, or preventative will NOT fall under the AFS Travel Medical Plan and will be the responsibility of you and your parent(s)/guardian(s).

Is the cost of a COVID-19 vaccine covered by the AFS Medical Plan?
No. The COVID-19 vaccine, as with any other vaccine, is not covered under the Travel Medical Plan and any costs associated with obtaining the vaccine will also be the responsibility of you and your parent(s)/guardian(s)

Who covers the cost of any COVID-19 tests required to enter the US/return to the home country?
The Sending Family. The AFS Medical Plan responds to participants who get injured or sick while they are on program. Therefore, you and your parent(s)/guardian(s) are responsible for any costs associated with obtaining a negative PCR result as it pertains to travel requirements needed in order to travel both to the host country and return travel to their home country. If there is a cost involved in COVID-19 testing prior to entry to the U.S. or upon return to the home country for FLEX and YES students, the cost will be covered by program funds.

If during the program I need to go to the doctor and need tests to determine if I have COVID-19, who covers those costs? The AFS Medical Plan covers costs related to diagnosis and treatment of illness. From that perspective as an insurer, this is not specifically COVID-19, but simply illness. If a doctor orders a test, then it is a covered expense. If a school requires an additional test, then you and your parent(s)/guardians would pay for Core or CBYX participants, and any cost for a FLEX and YES students will be covered by program funds.

Expenses for Routine Physical Exams or Preventative Care

The AFS Medical Plan does not pay for routine physicals, inoculations, vaccinations, or examinations, even if required by schools. For example, schools often require a sports physical examination prior to allowing participants to participate in school sports. Participants and/or natural parents are expected to pay for these expenses directly.

How can I prevent viruses?

- **Wash your hands** often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. Use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol if soap and water are not available.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.
- Always cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze or use the inside of your elbow.
- Clean AND disinfect frequently touched surfaces daily. This includes tables, doorknobs, light switches, countertops, handles, desks, phones, keyboards, toilets, faucets, and sinks.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.

Endemic Illness Advisory

Certain diseases are endemic to areas of the United States, such as Lyme disease in the Northeast and Valley Fever in the Southwest. Please ask your host parents and/or local volunteers for advice regarding any precautionary measures that can be taken to avoid contracting such diseases. As always, if you begin to feel unwell, be sure to let your host parents know so that they can assist you in getting treatment.
Mental Health and Emotional Well-Being

Just as your physical health is important, so is staying mentally healthy. Your school year is likely to be full of both rewarding experiences and personal challenges. AFS believes these challenges are key opportunities for personal growth and a fundamental part of the learning process.

Practicing good self-care will help you be a more effective learner and more capable of achieving your goals.

Identify some good self-care strategies for yourself using your “Emotional Passport”

- Pay Attention to yourself and your emotions. Notice when to slow down to give yourself a break.
- Practice these strategies when you are feeling stressed, upset, or down.
- Reach Out and remember your support system. Talk to your AFS Liaison, host family, peers, trusted teacher, school counselor or others in your community.
- Reflect on what works for you and what doesn’t. You may find some strategies work better than others or discover some new ones! Refer to these Tips for Managing Stress

Remember, it's a strength to ask for help!

988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline

The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline is a United States-based suicide prevention network of over 200+ crisis centers that provides 24/7 service via a toll-free hotline with the number 9-8-8. It is available to anyone in suicidal crisis or emotional distress. Learn more at 988lifeline.org

Weather

Wherever you live in the U.S., at some point you are likely to experience severe weather, be it very hot and dry temperatures or excessive rain and flooding. In all cases, the best way to protect yourself is to follow the advice given to you by your host parents, teachers, or other responsible adults.

Most participants are likely to experience a thunderstorm during their stay and some may experience a tornado warning or an actual tornado. Since there will be times when you find yourself outside of the company of a responsible adult, below are steps which you should take to protect yourself in the event of a thunderstorm or a tornado.

There are times that a severe, impending weather event may result in the need for you and your host family to evacuate the area. Should this occur, please keep AFS volunteers/staff informed of these changes. AFS Staff and/or Volunteers may also reach out to your host family to verify your host family’s plan and your safety.
Make sure your phone and computer are fully charged in the event of a severe weather warning of any type in your area.

Thunderstorms

Thunderstorms can occur at any time of the year and just about anywhere in the world. Lightning is perhaps the most common and deadly threat of a thunderstorm. Lightning always accompanies a thunderstorm.

The "30/30 rule" is good way of knowing when you're in danger. Count the seconds between seeing lightning and hearing thunder. If this time is 30 seconds or less, the lightning is close enough to be a threat. Seek shelter immediately. After seeing the last lightning flash, wait 30 minutes before leaving shelter. More than half of lightning deaths occur after the storm has passed. Stay in safe shelter until the threat has passed.

Indoors:
- Stay off land line phones.
- Stay away from windows.
- Use flashlights if the power goes out.
- Discontinue use of phones and electrical equipment. You may also want to unplug appliances and computers.
- Avoid taking a shower or bath. If lightning strikes your house, it may send a current of electricity across metal plumbing throughout the house.

Outdoors:
- Stay low.
- If possible, find shelter in a building.
- Keep away from trees, tall objects, metal objects, and water.
- Boaters and swimmers should get to land as soon as possible.
- If you’re in a group caught outside, spread out.

If you begin to feel your hair stand on end, this indicates lightning is about to strike. You should drop to your knees and bend forward placing your hands on your knees and crouch down. Do not lie flat on the ground, this will only make you a larger target.

Tornadoes

The unique geography of the United States helps to produce some of the most favorable conditions for tornadoes to occur. The months with the greatest number of tornadoes overall are April, May, and June, but tornadoes can occur during any month of the year. Tornado seasons vary in different parts of the United States. In the Southeast, the peak season for tornadoes is February through April. In the Northern Plains, tornadoes are most likely to develop from June through August. Generally, tornado frequency is high in the South in late winter and early spring; and in the Plains, Midwest, and Ohio Valley from early spring through summer.

If a tornado warning is issued for your location, take the following steps immediately:
At Home:
• Go to the basement, storm cellar, or the lowest level of the building.
• If there is no basement, go to an inner hallway or a smaller inner room without windows, such as a bathroom or closet.
• Go to the center of the room. Debris can sometimes come through walls.
• Get under a piece of sturdy furniture such as a workbench or heavy table or desk and hold on to it.
• If you DO have time, get a mattress or blankets to protect your head If you DON'T have time, use your arms to protect your head and neck.

Outdoors:
• If possible, get inside a building.
• If shelter is not available or there is no time to get indoors, lie in a ditch or low-lying area or crouch near a strong building. Be aware of the potential for flooding.
• Use your arms to protect your head and neck.
• Be aware of the potential for flooding.

At School:
• Always follow the instructions given by your teacher or other responsible adult.
• If there is no teacher around, do the following:
• Go to the basement, to an inside hallway, or to a restroom at the lowest level of the building where there are no windows.
• Avoid places with wide-span roofs such as auditoriums, cafeterias, or hallways.
• Get under a piece of sturdy furniture such as a workbench or heavy table or desk and hold on to it. Use your arms to protect your head and neck.

In a Car:
• A driver should never try to out-drive a tornado in a car or truck. Tornadoes can change direction quickly and can lift up a car or truck and toss it through the air.
• Get out of the car immediately and take shelter in a nearby building.
• If there is no time to get indoors, get out of the car and lie in a ditch or low-lying area away from the vehicle.

Hurricanes
In the U.S., hurricanes may bring very strong winds, rain, and flooding to areas on the Atlantic and Gulf coastlines. The Atlantic hurricane season starts on June 1st. In the U.S., the peak hurricane threat exists from mid-August to late October, although the official hurricane season extends through November.

If you live in an area that may be susceptible to hurricanes, your host family likely has a plan for what they will do in case of a storm, including evacuating the area. Following their plan and staying with your host family is the key to your safety during a hurricane.

Before the Storm... When in a Watch Area:
• Frequently listen to radio, TV, or NOAA Weather Radio for official bulletins of the storm's progress.
• Locate flashlights in case the electricity goes out.
• Charge your devices!

In strong winds:
• Stay away from windows and doors even if they are covered. Take refuge in a small interior room, closet, or hallway.
• In a multi-story house, go to an interior first-floor room, such as a bathroom or closet.
• Listen closely to the radio, TV, or NOAA Weather Radio for official bulletins.
• Follow instructions issued by local officials. Leave immediately if told to do so!

During the Storm... When in a Warning Area:
Stay away from moving water. Moving water even 6 inches deep can sweep you away.
Stay away from standing water. It may be electrically charged from underground or downed power lines.
Notify your AFS liaison of your evacuation plans.
Only stay in a home if you have not been ordered to leave. Stay inside a well-constructed building.

Earthquakes

Earthquakes are fairly common in some parts of the U.S. While most are too small to feel, you may experience the earth shaking at some point during your program. The most important thing to remember during an earthquake is to remain calm. The following tips will be helpful in case your area experiences an earthquake.

What to Do When the Shaking Begins:
- DROP, COVER, AND HOLD ON! Move only a few steps to a nearby safe place.
- Stay indoors, away from windows, until the shaking stops and you're sure it's safe to exit.
- If you are in bed, hold on and stay there, protecting your head with a pillow.
- If you are outdoors, find a clear spot away from buildings, trees, and power lines. Drop to the ground.
- If you are at school, get under your desk or table so your head and body are covered and hold on.

What to Do After the Shaking Stops:
- Check yourself for injuries. Protect yourself from further danger by putting on long pants, a long-sleeved shirt, sturdy shoes, and gloves.
- Check others for injuries. Give first aid for serious injuries.
- Look for and extinguish small fires. Eliminate fire hazards. Turn off the gas if you smell gas or think it’s leaking. (Remember, only a professional should turn it back on.)
- Listen to the radio for instructions.
- Expect smaller earthquakes, called aftershocks, to follow. Each time you feel one, DROP, COVER, AND HOLD ON!

Source: Red Cross - [http://www.redcross.org/services/prepare/0,1082,0_241_,00.html](http://www.redcross.org/services/prepare/0,1082,0_241_,00.html)

Emergencies and 911

In the U.S. and Canada, the telephone number for police, fire, or ambulance emergency services is 911. This line is available 24 hours a day. There may be a more specific number to use for particular emergencies, like Poison Control. Ask your host family to provide you with the important emergency contact numbers.

In the event of an emergency, accident, or serious illness that doesn't require police, fire, or ambulance emergency services:

1. Call your host family first. Let them know what happened and where you are.
2. If you can't reach your host family, call your liaison.
3. If you can't reach your liaison, call another local volunteer or AFS Support Coordinator.
4. If you are unable to reach your host family, liaison, or another AFS Volunteer, and you have an emergency, call the AFS National Office at 1800- AFS-INFO (800-237-4636 ext. 9). During office hours, you will be connected to a Participant Support Specialist, otherwise, you will be connected to the AFS Answering Service who will connect you to the Emergency Duty Officer. AFS Staff are available 24 hours a day for emergencies only.
Personal Safety

It can be difficult handling new situations within your home culture but, in a culture that is new to you, such a situation can seem even more confusing. By presenting you with some legal and cultural rules of the US, we hope to help you make informed decisions when confronted with sexual harassment, alcohol, and other drugs.

In any situation you may encounter during your stay in the U.S., it is important to keep in mind that you should not compromise your personal moral values while you are here on the AFS program. While it is important for an exchange student to be open-minded, adventuresome, and accepting of the host culture, this does not mean you should ignore everything you have learned in your home culture. It is always a good idea to observe the behavior of those around you, then follow what you have learned concerning what is right and what is wrong.

The best advice AFS can recommend regarding issues of personal safety is:

- Get to know the host culture through questions, dialogue, and discussion with your host family, peers, and the AFS local contacts.
- Take seriously any concerns expressed by your host family, school, and AFS volunteers, and follow their advice.
- Do not ignore your instincts or feel that you have to compromise your own personal values and beliefs. These are valuable resources in making decisions about what to do.
- Read Welcome to the USA and take personal responsibility for making smart choices that will keep you safe and healthy.

Know the Rules to Keep Yourself Safe

Rule 1: Don't Go Out Alone
Remember that if you can avoid situations that put you at risk in the first place, you’re already one step ahead. There is safety in numbers and this rule is not just for little kids; it applies to everyone. We are always safer if we take a friend, host sister, or host brother.

Rule 2: Always Tell an Adult Where You're Going
Never ever go anywhere with someone you don't know. This includes accepting rides and babysitting for anyone without getting information about the family first. Leave a telephone number and an address with your family before you go. Letting someone know where you’ll be at all times is smart.

Rule 3: It’s Your Body
During your exchange year, you will face a lot of situations that put you in uncomfortable spots. You will constantly have to make decisions for yourself, and you will be faced with peer pressure about everything from who your friends are male or female to drugs and sex. You have the right to reject unwanted and inappropriate attention such as teasing, touching, and bullying. If someone touches you in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable, you have the right to say no.

Rule 4: Say NO if You Feel Threatened or Uncomfortable and Tell a Trusted Adult
Don't be afraid to stand up for yourself. Listen to your intuition and follow your best judgement. Just because your friends are making bad decisions doesn't mean you have to too. Have the confidence to say NO if anyone makes you feel uncomfortable about anything. And remember, it is never too late for you to tell an adult if anything is bothering you.
If you're ever faced with a risky situation or get into trouble, your host family and friends will know where to begin looking for you.

Certain signs of affection or physical contact that may be typical for your host family may make you feel uncomfortable, as physical boundaries and "normal" signs of affection differ from culture to culture. For example, it is common for a participant from France to greet someone with a kiss on each cheek. In contrast, a participant from Japan, who may typically greet someone with a slight bow may be uncomfortable with or misinterpret such physical contact. Furthermore, while your host family members may feel comfortable giving each other a foot, back or shoulder massage after a long day at work, tough sports or dance practice, etc., you should NOT request from, nor should your host parents or siblings request from or give to you, any type of massage, in order to avoid any possible misunderstandings and/or discomfort.

Whether it is peer pressure about sex, drugs, or doing something that you know is wrong, be strong and stand your ground. Don't be afraid to make your feelings known.

Sensitive Situations

If you find yourself dealing with a sensitive situation, including, but not limited to, any of the issues addressed in this handbook, it is important that you share this information with your liaison, even if you are apprehensive about others' reactions and would prefer to keep the situation to yourself. You might be unaware of the resources and support that AFS can provide in these types of circumstances. It is important to know that liaisons undergo in-depth training so that they are well-equipped to support our participants under such circumstances.

Please contact your liaison immediately to share any sensitive information that may affect your personal safety or well-being. AFS Liaisons will have the resources and discretion to provide or obtain the appropriate support to assist you.

Teen Pregnancy

The teen years should NOT be about pregnancy, parenting and childcare. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy interviewed people who became 'teen parents' to see what they would say to others about teen pregnancy. The teen parents offered the following tips:

- Thinking "it won't happen to me" is unwise; if you don't protect yourself, it probably will. Sex is serious. Make a plan.
- Just because you think "everyone is doing it" doesn't mean they are. Some are, some aren't — and some are lying.
- There are a lot of good reasons to say "no, not yet." Protecting your feelings is one of them.
- You're in charge of your own life. Don't let anyone pressure you into having sex.
- You can always say "no" — even if you've said, "yes" before.
- Carrying a condom is just being smart — it doesn't mean you're pushy or easy.
- If you think birth control "ruins the mood," consider what a pregnancy test will do to it.
- If you're drunk or high, you CANNOT make good decisions about sex. Do NOT do something you might not remember or might really regret.
- Sex will NOT make someone "yours".
- A baby will NOT make the other person stay in a relationship with you.
- Not ready to be someone's parent? It's simple: Use protection every time or don't have sex.
### Sexual Activity

Some participants may enter into a romantic relationship while on program and/or may consider having a sexual encounter with someone. While having a sexual relationship can be a wonderful experience, we have found that it can also be overwhelming to participants, detract from their AFS experience and can cause tension with host parents. If you wish to engage in sexual activity while on program, please educate yourself about how to prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. If you are not comfortable talking about these topics with your host parent, speak to your school counselor or another trusted adult.

For more information about Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STIs), and other issues, go to https://advocatesforyouth.org/ or http://www.iwannaknow.org/ for answers to your questions about teen sexual health and sexually transmitted infections.

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### Preventing & Identifying Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment has become a major issue in the U.S. It is now accepted that certain types of sexual advances, either verbal or physical, are seen as inappropriate and, if you initiate these advances, you could be breaking the law. For an exchange student, this can mean being expelled from school, speaking to the police, and even being sent back to your home country.

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

- Treat everyone you meet with respect.
- Listen to what people are saying to you and act accordingly. In other words, if someone says no, you should assume he or she means it!
- Get to know your liaison and other respected people in your host community. They will be able to provide you with valuable information about what is and what is not acceptable.
- When a person asks you to stop making sexual advances towards them, it is your responsibility to stop. Likewise, if you ask someone to stop, they should listen. "No means no" is a phrase being used a lot in the U.S. to encourage people to speak up if they want to stop unwanted advances. It is also being used to educate people to stop making advances when someone say "no."

### Protecting Yourself from Sexual Abuse

During your AFS experience, you’ll have many new and different experiences. Yet some things remain the same:

- Your body is always yours.
- You always have the right to say no.
- If something doesn’t feel right to you, it probably isn’t.
- If a friend gives you cause for concern, get involved.

This information is designed to help you learn more about sexual abuse, how to prevent it, and where to go for help. Be sure to speak with your host family, your liaison, or another adult you trust about keeping yourself safe in your community Your Body Your Safety Pamphlet.
What Constitutes Sexual Abuse?

As defined by the U.S. Army Sexual Assault Prevention & Response Program, sexual abuse is:

“A form of gender discrimination that involves unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature. Sexual abuse occurs when a person is subjected to offensive, unwanted, or unsolicited comments and behavior of a sexual nature that creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive environment.”

Regardless of where you travel on your exchange program or the customs of the country in which you’re living, you can be sure of one thing: your body belongs to you. While it’s rare that someone will attempt to abuse you, it’s important for you to be alert, aware, and informed about sexual abuse prevention. Do NOT allow anyone to do anything to you that does not feel right to you, regardless of who they are — male or female, young or old, what they do for a living, or your connection to him or her.

True or False Quiz

Help protect yourself from potential sexual abuse. Circle True or False to each of these questions. Correct answers are on the next page.

1. True or False: When abuse happens, it is never your fault.
2. True or False: An abuser may discourage you from communicating with your friends, family, and AFS volunteers or ask that you not tell others about your relationship with him or her.
3. True or False: If someone, especially an adult, buys you an expensive gift and expects you to kiss him or her in return, you are obligated to do so.
4. True or False: Activities like being forced to look at pornographic books or films or being photographed in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable, are not sexual abuse. For sexual abuse to occur, you must be physically touched. True or False: If you are feeling uncomfortable because of physical attention you receive from someone, you should confront that person and tell him or her to stop.

Answers to the True and False Quiz

1. True - If you are sexually abused, it is never your fault. Always expect others to treat you with respect and dignity. You deserve an environment that is free of sexual abuse or the threat of sexual abuse.
2. True - One strategy of sexual abusers is to isolate you from your friends, family, and others. Without the support of others, people feel lonely and often vulnerable. This allows abusers to get closer to their victims. Expect to have access to your friends and family.
3. False - Some sexual abusers try to make people feel uncomfortable by getting them to do things, such as kissing, as a way to show appreciation. If you feel pressure to do something you are not comfortable with, don’t do it. By the way, if you don’t feel comfortable accepting a gift, you can say no to that too!
4. False - You don’t have to be touched to be sexually abused. Being exposed to pornographic books or films is another way that an abuser will try to exploit you. Do not tolerate this. Report this to an adult that you trust.
5. True - Confront any person who is sexually abusing you and tell him or her to stop immediately. Always tell a trusted adult or AFS volunteer or staff about it as soon as possible.
Tips for Preventing & Dealing with Sexual Abuse

- Remember that it's always ok to say no.
- If you feel threatened, tell an adult that you trust. This can be your natural parents, your host parents, an AFS volunteer or staff, or anyone else that you feel you can trust and rely upon.
- Never go anywhere with a person you don't know.
- When you go out, always let your host parents know where you are, where you are going, when you plan to return and anytime your schedule or destination changes.
- Be a friend to a friend.
- If your friend tells you that they are being sexually abused, the first thing to do is listen. Be patient and respectful. Try not to judge or question your friend's behavior. Believe what your friend is telling you.
- Go to an adult you trust for advice and help. Involve a parent, teacher, or another adult that you trust. You will not be "snitching". You'll be helping to stop or prevent your friend from being abused.
- Talk to your friend and try to get them to talk to an adult. Offer to go with your friend if they feel nervous about talking to an adult. Report the abuser to an adult whom you trust.

How to Get Help

Local AFS Volunteers and AFS Staff are available to help you in the event of sexual abuse that you or another participant has experienced. Contact your liaison immediately if you feel scared or concerned. You can find their contact information on your AFS ID card. You can also reach AFS-USA Support Staff 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at 1-800-AFS-INFO (800-237-4636, ext. 9).

In summary, AFS and your host family have put in place rules and guidelines to help keep you safe while on program. It is your responsibility to follow them, to avoid risky behaviors, and to ask questions or share concerns about anything that may impact your safety while on program. Your well-being is our top priority and AFS volunteers and staff are here to support you through any challenging times.
Your Body, Your Safety Pamphlet

**What is Sexual Abuse**

"Sexual Abuse" is sexual or romantic attention that is inappropriate or unwanted. Sometimes it may feel like a compliment, other times it may make you feel uncomfortable or even unsafe.

**Examples Include:**

- Physical contact: When someone touches you and you feel uncomfortable or nervous. This includes touching, kissing, petting, massaging, pinching and brushing up against your body.
- Verbal or written statements: When someone uses offensive or rude language or makes remarks that embarrass you. For example, the person may make direct statements that they would like to kiss or have sex with you. They might also make unwanted remarks about your body. Statements can be made in person, in writing, or electronically (email, texting, sexting, social media, etc.).
- Visual gestures and images: When someone shows you sexually explicit images, such as pornography. The person may also make gestures with their hands or body or look at you in a way that suggests a romantic or sexual intention.

**Awareness of Cultural Norms Helps Ensure a Great AFS Experience!!!**

Adapting to Personal Space

AFS Participants must often adapt to different expectations for personal space. Failing to communicate preferences for personal space could lead to discomfort or misunderstandings.

**Example:** If someone stood very close while talking to you, how might you feel? Without knowing the personal space norms in your host country, you might feel uncomfortable or even threatened.

**Touching and Gestures**

Like physical space, physical touch and gestures can be interpreted differently across cultures. Be aware that some gestures and forms of physical contact are welcome in some cultures, but offensive in others.

**Example:** If you gave someone a thumbs-up sign, how might they react? Without knowing the meaning of this gesture in your host country, you might make them feel embarrassed or offended.

**How to Keep Yourself Safe**

Open Communication is necessary for your safety and well-being. If you experience any behavior that makes you uncomfortable, don’t assume that it will stop. Be sure to tell an adult where you are going, especially if you are going alone—and always tell someone if something happens.

Trust your instincts if you feel unsafe. Remove yourself from the situation and tell a trusted person once you’re in a safe space. Your body belongs to you, so speak up if someone says or does something that makes you feel uncomfortable.

Be a friend to a friend. If you suspect that someone has experienced sexual abuse in any form, you should contact your local contact person or AFS Support Staff immediately! It’s every person’s responsibility to report sexual abuse.

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**Why It’s Tricky to Identify**

A perpetrator will try to keep the abuse a secret—and might manipulate the victim to keep the secret, too. The relationship might seem completely normal from an outsider’s perspective.

Some things that might be inappropriate in your home country may be culturally acceptable where you are hosted, and vice-versa. Be sure to talk with your host family and local contact person if you feel unsure about cultural norms.

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**AFS is Here for You!**

Sexual abuse is never your fault!!!!

AFS has resources to help and support you on program.

Be sure to fill in your host family and local contact person’s contact information below.

**Important Contact Info**

Host family name & phone #: 

Local contact person name & phone #: 

24-hr Duty Officer phone #: 

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**Speak up if you Witness or Suspect Sexual Abuse!**

Report to AFS-USA Staff at 800-237-4636, extension 9.
AFS–USA Mission

AFS-USA empowers people to become globally engaged citizens by delivering meaningful intercultural experiences that provide the knowledge and skills needed to help create a more just and peaceful world.