

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT HOST FAMILY PROGRAM

"When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the LORD your God." Leviticus 19:33-34

What Is a Host Family?

The Host Family Program provides a caring "home away from home" experience for students from other countries who are enrolled in local colleges and universities, and who, though usually already having housing, would like to build a friendship with a local family. American Christian families "adopt" international students to learn from them and to love them as sojourners in our land. Also, host families seek, by their caring lifestyle, conversation and prayers, to demonstrate biblical Christianity to their student(s) so that each might return to his or her country as a maturing follower of Jesus - a missionary already trained in language and culture.

"Adoption" means that a family befriends one or more students or a family of Internationals and builds a friendship through notes, letters, phone calls, visits and activities together. Weekly contact is ideal. The "adoption" process begins when international students and families in the community return interest and background cards to the Host Family Coordinator. The Coordinator then matches students with families, in consultation with both parties, taking into consideration their preferences of nationality, gender, marital status, age, academic major and hobbies.

Why Be a Host Family?

Next to getting an education, the greatest desire of most Internationals is to make one close American friend. However, few are successful, and most never get inside an American family's home. Host families have excellent opportunities to fulfill this desire.

There are a number of reasons why being a host family can be the most complete way of serving Internationals as God's Good News calls us to. First, most Internationals, before coming to the U.S., have lived in the same community and home, surrounded by their extended family all their lives. When they come here to study, they face alone the difficulties of new language, culture, food, values and academic pressures, with neither the encouragement and help nor the accountability and discipline that a local extended family provides. A host family can help.

Second, students get homesick. They miss the presence of parents, grandparents, siblings and little children. They miss the comforts and pleasures of a family and of a home-cooked meal.

Third, research shows that the most important resource for the adaptation of Internationals to the U.S. is an American friend or family. The most critical period is the first three months after their arrival. It has been compared to the bonding of a baby to its parents in the first couple of hours after birth, when it has a greatly heightened awareness and acceptance of its surroundings. If such a relationship is not established with Americans in the first three months or year of a student's arrival, they will develop or find an ethnic or international subcultural group, because they did not find an American friend

when they needed one. Once this happens, whether naturally or by necessity, the felt need for an American friendship disappears. The International then usually becomes increasingly entrenched in the external aspects of an American lifestyle, while becoming much less open to Americans, their values and beliefs. One goal of the Host Family Program, therefore, is to build growing, life-long international friendships, based on shared experiences and mutual understanding. A host family's care in the first three months to a year of a student's arrival can make the difference between hostility and appreciation. The host family will also be able to help the student adjust to practical American living and culture.

Finally, the sustained, deepening friendship of a host family has incredible evangelistic power because it is so uniquely different from general American culture, and because it affords time for the gospel to be seen and understood relationally. A Christian host family must, therefore, also consider the spiritual implications of the relationship. Christians yearn to know God and to help others to trust him as well. As families genuinely care for their students as friends and whole people, they will also seek and discover opportunities to help people who are ready to enter the kingdom of God. Further, growth for both parties results as each struggles to reconcile differing views with its own existing cultural grid, and to determine where and how cultures and biblical Christianity relate. This is essential to Christian maturity.

Of course, international students are not the only ones who benefit. The inherent rewards of international friendships to Americans and their children are many. One gets to see the world (current events, politics, distribution of wealth, war, family, relationships, values and beliefs, etc.) through the eyes of a different culture. This can affect one's ministry priorities, use of resources, career goals, choice of friends, and even day-to-day lifestyle as one is exposed to the variety in God's world and begins to act on God's intentions for it. Further, being a host family is a wonderful way to experience the joy of being a servant for Christ's sake, which scripture says is the only road to blessing and life (Mark 8-10).

Understanding International Friendships

International students have three role needs that host families can help them meet: a) the student role - Internationals are very intelligent, but often are under pressure from governments and family to excel, are stunned by U.S. competition, and struggle with language. They need encouragement, without having their time monopolized. b) Ambassador role - Internationals need and desire to share what their country and culture are like and to clarify misconceptions. Inquire and listen without pride or judgmentalism. c) Tourist role - Internationals need and desire to see and learn about our country and culture. You are an expert!

Friendship patterns tend to be different in most non-western countries from those in western countries:

Western (especially U.S.) friendships

low obligation
short duration
high trust develops slowly
broad scope

Non-Western friendships

high obligation
long duration
high trust develops quickly
narrow scope (few people)

Therefore, though Internationals may wait a long time before calling someone

their friend, once they do, they will give their life for them. On the other hand, Americans appear naive and superficial in their friendships. Here is where Christ-motivated friendships can stand out in wonderful contrast.

Practical Suggestions for the Host Family

1. Help the student to become familiar with the "American way of life" such as vending machines, laundromats, supermarkets, checking accounts, the Post Office and other similar customs.
2. Introduce the student gradually to the community. If possible, it may be a good idea to invite the student to observe or participate in civic or professional activities in which the host family is involved. Inviting them to your church or home Bible study as you get to know each other would be helpful.
3. Familiarize the student with American social customs and manners. Help in the acquisition of practical idiomatic English as spoken in the United States. Provide information into aspects of community living which interests the student most, such as government, business, education, the arts and recreation. You could introduce them to Americans working in their field of study.
4. Holidays are a lonesome time for students. College residence halls are sometimes closed and the food service often closed or limited during some holidays and between semesters. Help the student plan for these periods. Either provide or help the student locate a place to stay, or help arrange travel tours during these periods.
5. The basic guideline is to do the things your family normally does, and invite your student to do them with you.

Hospitality Hints

You may wonder what to do when international students come to your home. Here are some helpful preparations you can make:

1. Learn something about their country, culture and customs before their visit. Seek to know them. You may get more information from your local library or from an encyclopedia.
2. Make sure that time, place, dress, transportation and duration of activity are clearly understood. Provide transportation where needed. Give all details in writing if possible (e.g. on a postcard). Then call a few hours before the appointment to confirm plans.
3. Different cultures have different views of time. Do not be surprised if they come late. Still respect their time and need to get home to study. You may wish to invite them to see your home as a quiet place they can retreat to be alone or to study.
4. Welcome them with warmth and friendship. Learn to pronounce their real name. Practice pronouncing their name with them until you can say it reasonably well. Refreshments -- juice, tea, coffee or soft drinks -- are always appropriate and appreciated.
5. Speak distinctly but not loudly. It is more helpful to pause between sentences than to speak each word slowly. Try to avoid use of slang. Ask them to repeat anything you do not understand. Encourage your friends to

ask you to do the same.

6. Have a simple dinner but have plenty of food. Respect dietary restrictions.

7. Help the student(s) feel at home. Be natural and informal. Find mutual interests or hobbies. Treat them as part of the family. Explain new things to them. Show them around your home but don't brag. Share photographs.

8. Show real interest in the international students. Get them to talk about themselves. Ask about family, education, religious background, home life, culture, customs, food likes and dislikes, aspirations, activities and plans. Learn greetings in their language. Give them time to answer, and encourage them to ask questions about you as well.

9. Be interested in the problems of international students. Most are much more willing to talk about politics or religion than are Americans, but remember: discuss, but don't argue. And don't pry if they seem hesitant.

10. You may not always understand or agree with your international student, but you should be willing to accept him or her and their perspectives, while avoiding, as much as possible, making value judgments of "right and wrong" or "better and worse" between aspects of their culture and yours. Recognize these as simply "different".

11. Make plans for your next get-together before taking your friend(s) home. The worst thing you can do is to see the student one time and never have contact again. They wonder what went wrong and why you didn't like them. Try at least twice.

Your Guest at the Dining Table

Frequently, invitations to international students include a meal. This is an ideal way to get to know a foreign guest. There are, however, certain things to remember in planning and preparing a meal.

The meal should be served in a relaxed and unhurried atmosphere. Most Internationals are unaccustomed to the way Americans quickly devour their food. In some countries it is not the custom to talk while eating, so don't take your guest's silence as a mark of uneasiness or ungratefulness. In some cultures it is considered impolite to accept a second serving until it has been offered several times. So be careful to discern whether the guest does not care for any more of the American-type food or if she or he has had enough to eat. When in doubt, offer at least three times.

Remember, your guest may have some dietary restrictions because of religious or cultural background. Try to ascertain some of these restrictions prior to arrival, and plan your meal accordingly. If this is not possible, include ample amounts of vegetables in your meal just in case the visitor is a vegetarian. For example, devout Muslims will not eat any pork products, and all meat must be bought from a Muslim store. It is always appropriate to ask.