

About Being a High School Student in New York, USA

Making friends with U.S. high school students can sometimes be hard. In some areas, they are noted for their cliques and their unwillingness to take new students into their group. Sometimes you can make progress toward friendships by using the circle of friends of a host brother or sister as a base. While these students are not always the ones you wish to have for friends, this base can many times be used for introductions to other students. In any event, **you need to be the prime mover in developing friendships**, and must be willing to reach out to others and make the effort to win their friendship. Once you've made a few friends, doors usually open up through the new friends' existing relationships with other students at the school and in the community at large, and additional friendships are made more easily.

Young adult activities in U.S. communities are mainly through schools, churches and sports associations. One of the best ways to meet other students and establish friendships is through school activities. Enrolling in a sport makes you part of a team. Joining a club helps develop friendships with other students who share your interests. If your school has a Rotary-sponsored Interact Club, that's a great way to start!

Potential Problems

Homesickness is the most common problem for exchange students. If you are not doing something physical or staying mentally active, homesickness can strike. Don't worry about it. Go to your room and cry or mope for a while if you must, then overcome it by getting active. The best advice came from a student in South Africa: "Cry in the Shower". Then play racquet ball or tennis, do aerobics, go biking or running, just DO SOMETHING and you will soon get over your homesickness. If you need a good laugh or hug **Call your Youth Exchange Officer.**

Weight gain is the second most common problem of exchange students. You are in a new country with a new diet, and some of it is even good. Most students go home heavier than they arrived. All you can do is watch your diet, control how much you eat, and exercise to get rid of excess calories and kilos. Also remember that most of the U.S. population is concerned about weight. The biggest surprise is that after you return to your own country, all those extra pounds disappear without even noticing (well almost).

Language Difficulties: There are certain rules for the student weak in English which will help in learning the language as rapidly as possible. These are:

a. Say "Speak more slowly" or "I do not understand" if you are having trouble understanding. If you want to be sure that you understand what is being said to you or asked of you, you can repeat back, "Do you mean..."

b. Use a bilingual dictionary when conversation is not working out, to look up meanings of words heard in English, and for translating into English the words or thought from your native language.

c. You should not be afraid to ask questions to ensure understanding. The more outgoing you are in demanding understanding, the more rapid will be the transition into good English in terms of thinking and dreaming, as well as speaking. Most students will reach a point within two to four months of no longer needing to translate everything, of thinking and speaking in English!

d. You should spend your time with U.S. students rather than other exchange students, even if it is a lot more comfortable to be with the exchange students. It's OK for you to visit or speak with other exchange students occasionally, but it is in spending your time with the U.S. kids that the exchange will begin to accomplish its potential of building bridges of good will and understanding between our peoples.

Conflict with the Host Family

Into each life some rain must fall, goes the old saying. So don't feel too bad if there is something between a gentle drizzle and a hurricane that occurs when you and your host family don't agree on issues of privileges and discipline, or when a personality conflict develops between you and one or more family members.

Usually, these matters can be resolved within the family by discussing why things are as they are, and why the family expects what they do from you. If you do not succeed in solving your problem with the family, then you should arrange for a private talk with your Rotary Youth Exchange Officer. If you have problems which cannot be resolved by the YEO, then you should turn to the District Youth Exchange Committee.

Problems Adjusting to the US

Being an exchange student requires that you always push yourself to get the most from this experience. During each part of the year, you will face new challenges and adventures.

For many students, there will be opportunities to stay in contact with people of your own culture, especially with cell phones, the Internet, Instant Messaging and programs like Skype.

If you speak your native language with others on a regular basis, and not English, you will be defeating a primary purpose of being an exchange student. Speaking your native language frequently while you are here will delay your adjustment to life in your host community and will prevent you from developing fluency in the English language.

It is natural to want the comfort of conversing with your family at home and with your friends, both at home and in other exchange communities, but you must have the self-discipline to limit these conversations. If you have "one foot in your native country and one foot in the US" you will never really immerse yourself in your host community and you won't get the most from your exchange experience.

Friendships will come easiest with other exchange students because you have many things in common. It's okay to make friends with other exchange students, but insist on speaking English with them. And make sure that you keep trying to make friends with American students, too.

Speaking a language other than English in front of your hosts is impolite and may insult them, because you are excluding them from your conversation.

If you are experiencing a problem that you want to discuss, make sure that you talk to your counselor. Hundreds of exchange students go through this program. All exchange students have some problems adjusting. For these problems, your counselor may have a solution that you might not have thought of.

From August to February, exchange students face the greatest challenges of adjustment. During this period, you must react to the many challenges which arise. Once February arrives you'll have a better command of the language and routines, so it becomes tempting to relax and coast. Don't do it! It's now up to you to make the most of the remainder of the year. This will be the greatest time of your life if you decide to do whatever you can to maximize the opportunities for involvement and personal growth.

GO FOR IT! GET INVOLVED! PARTICIPATE! GIVE 100%!