



**SCHOOL DISTRICT 5**  
S O U T H E A S T K O O T E N A Y

## **Frequently Asked Questions about Becoming a Host Family for International Students**

Thank you for your interest in the International Education Program of School District No. 5 (Southeast Kootenay) and the possibility of becoming one of our host families!

The greatest strength of our Program is the high quality of care we provide for our international students and, for the most part, this “high quality care” is delivered by our host families. Our International Education Program has grown significantly every year since it was established, and we attribute this success to our wonderful group of host families who have opened their homes and hearts to students from around the world.



Brazilian Samba



Brazilian Smiles at Lake Agnes, Banff National Park

### **Our International Education Program**

The International Education Program of the Southeast Kootenay School District was established in August, 2003 and its first students arrived in 2004. The purpose of the program is two-fold. First of all, attracting students from overseas is a common strategy amongst school districts to combat the declining enrolment trend found throughout British Columbia and Canada. And secondly, we are excited about enhancing the multicultural flavour of our schools.

We host students in grades 7 to 12 (ages 12 to 18), but most students are 15 or 16 years old. The largest number of younger students (mostly grade 8) come from Mexico and we sometimes accept elementary-aged students from Korea who are accompanied by a parent or close relative. Students tend to come from the following countries (arranged from most students to least): Mexico, Germany, Brazil, Japan and Korea. We've also hosted students from Spain, Colombia, Switzerland, Austria, Italy, Hong Kong, Thailand, Taiwan and Australia. Our program is unusual in British Columbia in that the majority of our students come from non-Asian countries.

Most of our students from Germany and Brazil stay for one semester (5 months starting in September or February), while our students from Mexico and Japan tend to stay for one school year. A surprising number of one semester students enjoy their time in Canada so much that they extend their stay to a full school year. Some students from Asia stay for more than one year, planning to graduate from high school here.

Students choose to come to the Southeast Kootenay School District for many reasons. Some are interested in our beautiful scenery and great outdoor recreation opportunities. Others are seeking a community with as few people from their home country as possible, to help force them to learn English. Still others come because they already know someone who lives here.

### **Why host an international student?**

Each host family seems to benefit from the Program in different ways, but everyone finds that their horizons are broadened in some way. Families enjoy getting to know young people from different countries, learning about their culture and hearing different languages spoken. And although families usually host only one student, they will also get to know all the international friends of their student, too. This is an unexpected bonus because the families have the joy of getting to know these “extra” students, while some other host family provides the care to look after them!

In that same “bonus” department, many families find that they bond not only with their student, but also with the student’s family back home. A surprising number of international parents travel here to visit their student, his/her host family and the Canadian Rocky Mountains. And quite a number of host families travel overseas to visit their student’s home and country. It is not uncommon for students and host families to keep in touch for years and for host families to be invited to attend graduations, weddings and other important occasions.

Some families get a lot of satisfaction out of showing their student the beauty of our area and what Canadian culture is all about. Still others simply have a “heart” for young people and love to have them around the house.



Okinawan Dance Presentation at Highlands Elementary



Canoeing on Emerald Lake

## What are the responsibilities of host families?

The basic responsibilities of host families are as follows:

- pick up and drop off at the Cranbrook Airport
- orientation to your city
- private bedroom with chest of drawers and closet (a shared bathroom is OK)
- appropriate study area (could be in an area other than the student's bedroom)
- food for three meals per day
- local transportation as appropriate
- access to high speed internet (student may or may not have their own computer)
- arrange special activities of interest to your student
- monitor your student's behaviour, relationships and activities
- report any problems to a homestay coordinator

## Would I need to cook three meals a day?

Most students prepare their own breakfast and many pack their own lunch. However, it is expected that a nutritional dinner be prepared on most evenings. It's perfectly acceptable to use leftovers or to ask your student to reheat a dinner for themselves or to cook simple meals on their own.

## What about transportation?

Students need a reliable way to get to school each day. Some students live close enough that they can walk to school. Others ride a city bus or a school bus. Some host families drive their student to and from school.

In addition to that, students may need to be driven to activities or to visit friends. The amount of driving depends on where you live, whether public transit is available and on how sociable your student is. Needless to say, those host families who live outside city limits will end up doing more driving than those who live in town.



Cooking Marshmallows



Airport Farewell

## **Will food or communication be an issue?**

When we first started this program we thought that food preferences and communication challenges might be common sources of difficulty, but that is rarely the case. In fact, watching the linguistic progress of a student who is weak in English can be a richly rewarding experience.

## **How much is the monthly allowance for host families?**

Host families are paid \$660 at the end of each month. Since this amount is intended to cover expenses, it does not need to be declared as taxable income.



Sled Dogs



Dog Sledding near Fernie

## **How long a commitment would we need to make?**

In general, we look for a commitment of at least 5 months, regardless of how long the student might be staying in Canada. However, some students are here for shorter periods than 5 months.

## **Would our lifestyle have to change?**

Some prospective host families worry that hosting a student would be like having a special guest in the house and that fancy meals would need to be cooked, the house would need to be kept spotless, or that everyone would need to be on their best behaviour at all times. However, international students are first and foremost “teenagers” and, secondly, they are persons from another country and culture. Young people in Canada tend not to worry too much about nutrition or the tidiness of their surroundings, and international students are no different. Having said that, though, it’s probably true that the arrival of an international student encourages host families to eat better, be tidier and bicker less, which isn’t all bad!

## **What if we want to go away for a weekend or a vacation?**

Ideally, your relationship with your student would be so good that you would want to take him/her along with you on your vacation. Host families have taken students to places like Costa Rica, Disneyland and Las Vegas! However, it's not always possible or desirable to take students along, and in that case, we have a number of families who are willing to host students for a few weeks. For weekend absences, some host families leave their student at home alone or, more commonly, the student will stay with a friend's family.



Radium Hot Springs



Gold Panning at Fort Steele

## **Should we treat our student as if he/she were one of our own children?**

When we first started this program, our answer was “yes”. But now we realize that the role of host parents is more like that of grandparents rather than parents. Your student is not your child. That means that you are not responsible for making your student a “better person” than when he/she arrived. You are not required to turn a “C” student into an “A” student nor a messy student into a tidy one. Nor is it your responsibility to get them to love vegetables or make healthy food choices. After years of conditioning, it can be quite a challenge for some parents to relax about these and other similar issues. Having said that, though, we don't want any of our students to leave as “worse persons” than when they arrived.

That doesn't mean that students can do whatever they like. Student behaviours or habits that have a significant negative effect on you or your family need to be addressed. For example, it would be unacceptable for your student to consistently stay up till all hours of the night and be cranky every morning. It is expected that students follow all reasonable rules of the household.

Host families have a greater responsibility for monitoring the safety of their student than they do the safety of their own children. It's one thing to let your own child go rock climbing and get seriously injured and quite another to make that decision on behalf of a student's parents.

## **Do we need to have our own children at home to be qualified as a host family?**

One thing we have learned over the years is that there is no formula for what makes a good host family. Outstanding host families have been single adults, single parents with kids, young couples, retired couples, couples with young kids and couples with teenagers. Probably the most

successful type of host family has been couples whose own kids have grown up and moved away. We often place two students from different countries with such families. This arrangement works well because the students must speak English while keeping each other company and the host parents already have experience dealing with teenagers. Hosting an international student can be a bit of an adjustment for host parents who have never raised a teenager before. Such families might expect that teenagers should be able to plan what they are doing the next day or that teenage boys should be able to reliably pass on telephone messages to the intended recipient!!

## **How would a student be selected for us?**

One of our homestay coordinators would visit your family in your home and find out as much as possible about your personalities, likes, dislikes, activities, interests and so on. Information about our incoming students is provided by their applications which usually include photos, school reports, a completed homestay application and a letter of introduction from the student and his/her natural parents. Then we begin the important process of carefully matching students with the best possible host family. Host families always get a chance to review the application of the student we propose for them, and the student gets a chance to review the profile of the host family. Though at times we seem to be grasping at straws when we make our matches, we are consistently amazed at how well things usually work out!

## **What if things don't work out?**

Despite our best efforts, it seems that every year there are a few matches that don't turn out as well as everyone would hope. If that happens, we spend time with both the student and host family to try to understand everyone's concerns. Sometimes we are able mend the relationship, but if not, we will move the student to a new host family. When we have to relocate a student, it's seldom anyone's fault. It's just that the match didn't click. More often than not, the next placement for both the student and the host family turns out great!

In the past, host families who have had difficulties clicking with their student have been very impressed by the support they have received from our homestay coordinators and the Program in general.

## **Does that answer all your questions?**

If not, you are most welcome to contact us for more information.

Thanks for considering becoming a host family! We look forward to the possibility of working with you in the future!

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