

Why Host – by Charlie Kelly

The phrase “life-changing experience” is much over-used, right? But there ARE events and situations where it’s spot on – and being a Host Family for a Rotary Exchange student will change your life, the student’s life, and many more!

There are two aspects of hosting to focus on: 1) the responsibilities – there are just a few, and they’re easily understood and not difficult to deal with; and 2) the emotional – and, wow, here’s where it gets really deep!

OK, the responsibilities:

a) **a clean living space in a safe neighborhood**, including: a quiet space for study, for sleeping (no air mattresses) in private (may share a bedroom with one other same-sex family member, access to a bathroom (may be shared).

b) **transportation to school** (may use school or public transportation); usually, after a month or two, they will find friends who drive.

c) **“three square meals” per day** – on school days, some kids eat school-provided lunches, others may take a sack lunch.

And now, the emotional stuff – there will be many simple pleasures, maybe a couple of “trying/crying times”, and finally, the memories that will last.

An exchange student will become (“is”) *a member of your family*, not a guest/tourist/visitor. Treat your student as your own kid (Most exchange students will actually call you “Mom” and “Dad”). Whatever you would do (or have done) with your own kid(s), do with your new “exchange kid”.

Set “house rules”; there are available “First Night Questions” (in English AND most languages of our incoming students). In this cloud-based world, you can be corresponding with your exchange student (AND FAMILY) by email and video way before they arrive in your home.

Most incoming students will be reasonably capable in English, but all are happy to be corrected if/when necessary. It has been a kick for me and my wife to find many of our kids getting top grades in American History and English !!! You’re welcome to *help* with homework [Interestingly, homework is a foreign concept to most international students, and they may not believe that it’s required, here]

Encourage them to join Clubs at school, especially Interact, if there is one. Many schools offer “hobby” type clubs, and usually special study groups. Of course, athletics, music, drama are great ways for the kids to make friends and fit in.

Uh, speaking of “drama”... the subject of dating will come up. Rotary says “no (**serious**) dating”, *i.e.*, don’t become overly attached to one person (to the exclusion of a larger circle of friends). Keep in mind that they are teenagers with raging hormones; don’t expect them to suppress those hormones, but be cautious and concerned/involved/aware parents. Prom (and other special) nights are often preceded by worry (remember when you were a kid!), but when the night comes, you’ll be blown away by the gorgeous grown-up that appears in formal wear.

Keep in mind that, in the Rotary exchange world, hosting is only for 2-4 months. Two hints: don't put off something you want to do with your student -you might run out of time; and, share your student with the other past/future host parents in the area – that will make transitions much easier for everyone. Be sure to get your kid to as many regular Rotary meetings as possible. Other Rotarians will be excited at the chance to take the kid to ball games, skiing, etc.

Finally, stay in touch with your student's natural parents. Understand that they want to know their kid is safe and happy with YOU. Joan and I have now visited (many times) the parents of former exchange students in their respective countries and were ALWAYS welcomed as real family members – and many natural parents have visited with us (some during the exchange, some after).

Done right, hosting an exchange student will make a permanent change in your life (for the better 😊). Joan and I are listed as “parents” in Facebook by over a half dozen, and they say they are “son” and “daughter” on my page(s)

I'd love to chat with potential host parents – and happy to do it “live” if desired. A club might arrange for a group to meet - with refreshments. Contact me to set something up: charliek@pacific.net is best, or call/text 707-391-4851