



**2026-2027**

**PRE-DEPARTURE  
ORIENTATION**

**STUDENT GUIDE**





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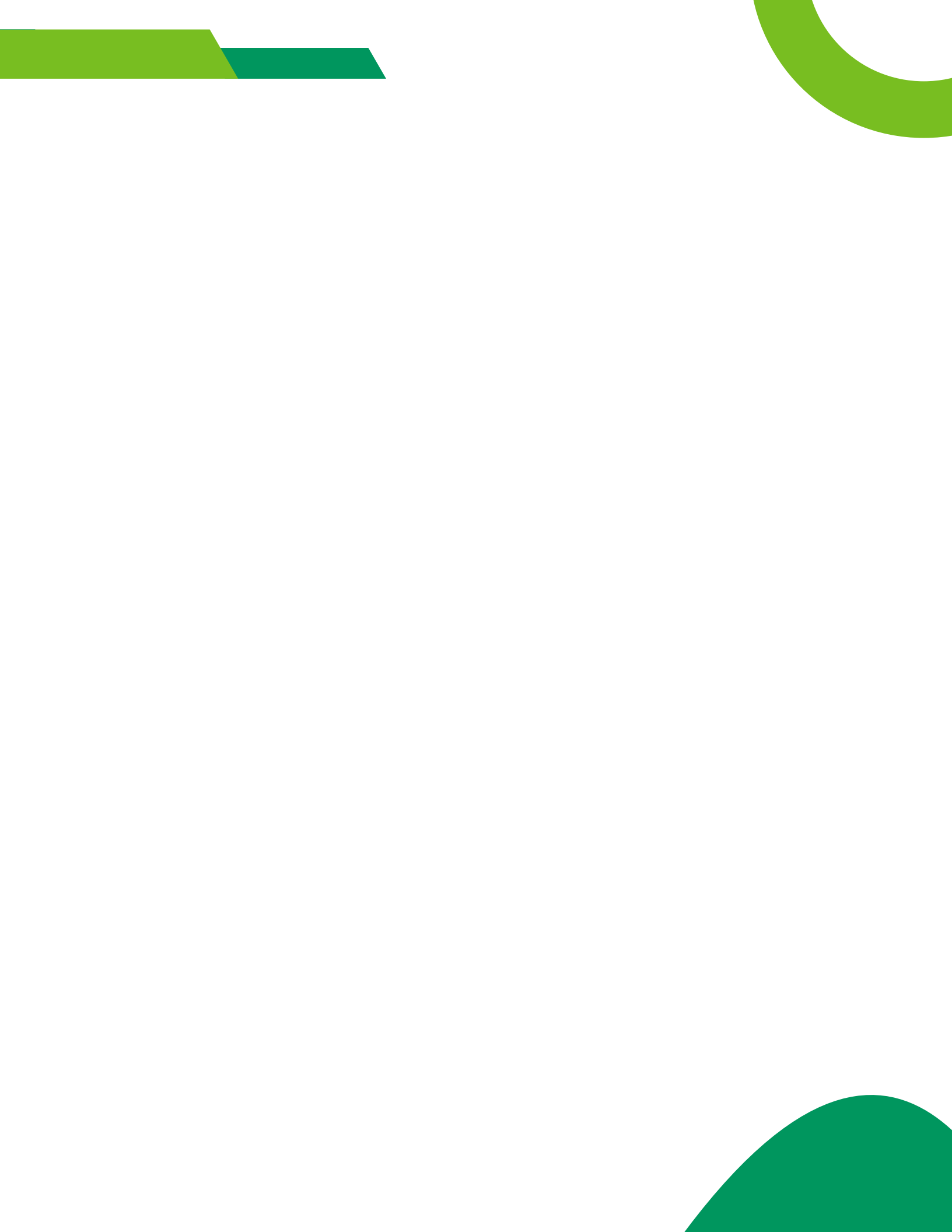
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United States Department of State  
Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs  
Washington, D.C. 20522

January 30, 2026

Dear Secondary School Student:

Welcome to the U.S. Department of State's BridgeUSA Exchange Visitor Program! This is the beginning of an exciting adventures in your life. During your time in the United States, you will obtain an American high school education and experience life as part of an American family. You will make friendships that will last a lifetime, get lots of practice in speaking English, and partake in family traditions. Since 1949, thousands of students from around the world have come to share their language, culture, and customs with their American host families, American schools, and the broader local community. Your participation in this exchange program fosters a greater understanding between our two countries and works towards peaceful relations throughout the world.

We want you to have a meaningful and successful experience. Your new school and host family may have different rules and ways of life from what you are used to, so keeping an open mind will be very important to your success. Your goal should be to learn as much as you can about American customs, values, and culture and to build strong relationships with your host family, classmates, and friends.

Your U.S. sponsor is your first point of contact throughout your stay in the United States. Their information is identified on your Form DS-2019, Certificate of Eligibility for Exchange Visitor Program

(J-1) Status. If you have any questions about your exchange program or need assistance of any kind while you are here, immediately contact your U.S. sponsor. It is their responsibility to help you with any problems, needs, or concerns you may have. Their emergency telephone contact number can be found in your program orientation materials and identification card, and is available to you 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Add this phone number to your contact list.

If you have concerns and/or issues that your U.S. sponsor has not resolved, or you find you cannot reach your sponsor, please contact the Department of State through our J-1 Visa Emergency Helpline 1-866-283-9090, which is available 24 hours a

day, 7 days a week, or by e-mail at [JVisas@state.gov](mailto:JVisas@state.gov). Please add the helpline number and the email address to your contacts to ensure you receive important communications from the Department. Your sponsor and the Department of State are here to ensure your success and safety on the program.

We are pleased that you made the decision to study in the United States and hope you enjoy your stay.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rebecca A. Pasini". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "R" and "P".

Rebecca A. Pasini  
Deputy Assistant Secretary  
for Private Sector Exchange

## Getting To Know Your Host Community

Before you travel to the U.S., it's important to begin preparing for the experience that awaits you with your family, local staff and community. When you receive your host family and community information, you should begin familiarizing yourself with the people and community that awaits you.

What's going on in the States? What happens in my community? Will it snow while I'm there? Does it rain, or will it be sunny and warm even in January? Is my community surrounded by a city, farmland, or water? What do people do in my community to make a living? What do Americans hear about my country? These are only a few of the questions that you might have as your departure date comes closer. Below, you will find some tips and useful materials to help answer some of your questions. Remember, these should serve as a reference point to give you a general idea of what to expect in your community. **However, it is very important that you try to come with an open mind and be ready for anything.**

*One of the best ways to feel comfortable and connected in the U.S. is by learning more about your host community. There are many easy-to-use websites that can help you explore where you live, find local resources, and understand what's happening around you.*

- **Google Maps** – Great for finding nearby stores, restaurants, schools, parks, and directions.
- **U.S. Department of State** – J-1 Experiences  
<https://j1visa.state.gov/participants/experiences/>

*Learn more about the purpose of the J-1 exchange program and read about other students' experiences.*

- **City-Data** – [www.city-data.com](http://www.city-data.com)

*A useful site for learning about your host community's history, population, activities, and local lifestyle.*

### **Finding Local Information**

*If you want to find your community's newspaper, your school's website, or even learn how to order food near your home, these sites can help. For example, if your host community is Springfield, Ohio, you can type "Springfield Ohio local newspaper" or "Springfield Ohio high school" into Google to find helpful results.*

*Local newspapers and community websites are great ways to learn about:*

- School events
- Sports and activities
- Community celebrations
- Volunteer opportunities

### **IMPORTANT REMINDERS:**

*Keep in mind that information on the internet may not always be 100% accurate, so it's a good idea to confirm details by asking your host family, teacher, or Community Representative.*

*If you're ever unsure about something in your community, don't hesitate to ask your host family—they are one of your best resources and are usually happy to help you learn more!*

**What's the weather going to be like?** The Weather Channel, [www.weather.com](http://www.weather.com), is trusted and used by many Americans to tell them what to wear and alert them of severe weather. To find out how cold the winter will be and how hot it gets in the summer, check out [weather.com](http://weather.com) and search for your host community.

**What will my host family be like? What sports and afterschool activities will I be able to do in my host community? What have past Ayusa students' experiences looked like?**

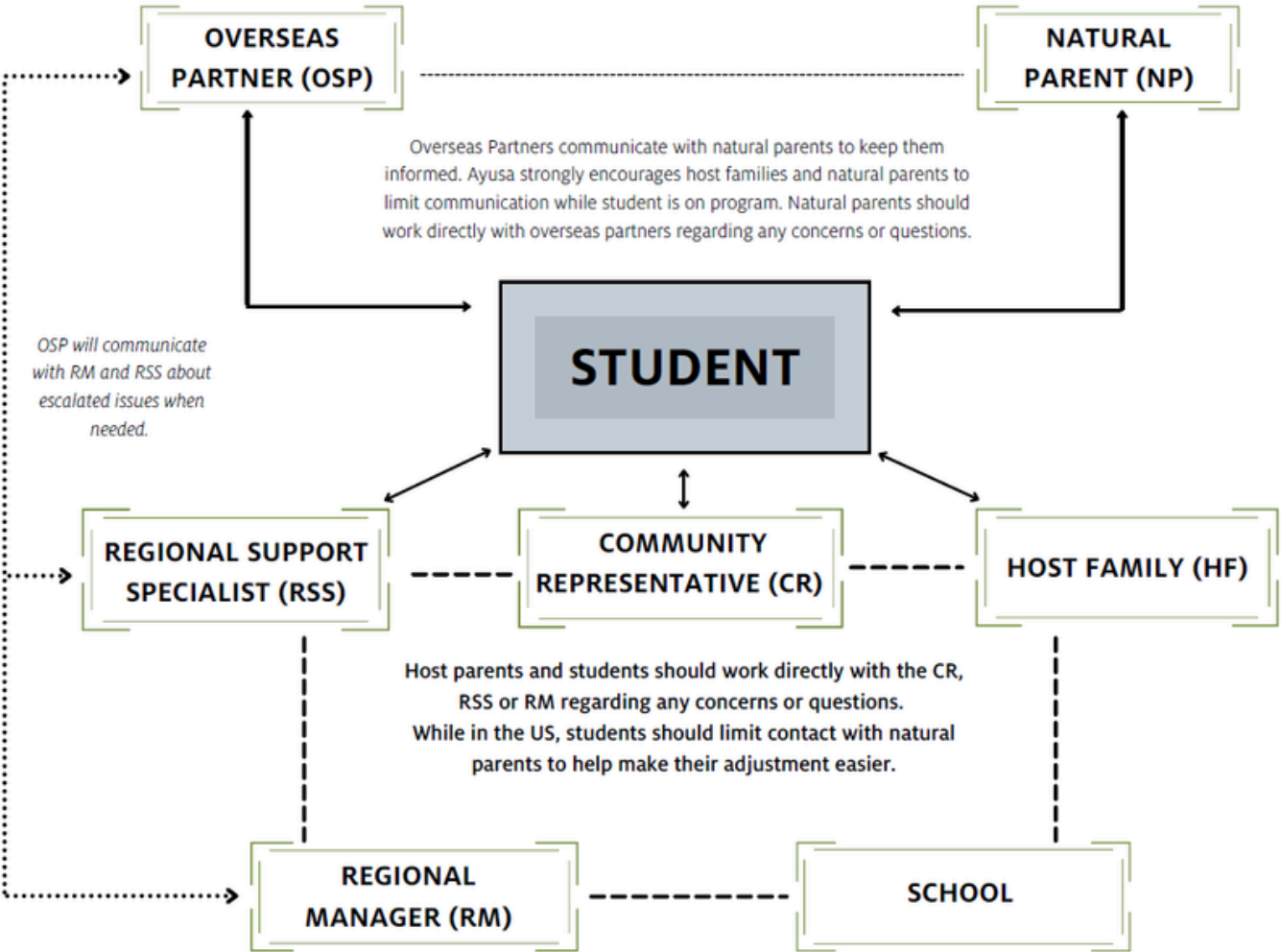
Researching your community is a great way to become familiar with where you will spend your time abroad, but people--your host family and Ayusa staff-- will give you the best insights into the community and host family. Contact them soon after receiving your placement details. Introduce yourself and begin the exchange of information. They will want to meet you and prepare you for the experience. Your host family and staff can also let you know what school you will probably attend and how to access its website to check out possible sports, activities and classes available to students.

Remember that being an exchange student is about sharing and experiencing, not only just living and studying in your community. Every interaction that you have with people in your community is a great opportunity to share your culture and learn about the United States. To find out what kind of community service opportunities are available in your community, check out [www.volunteermatch.org](http://www.volunteermatch.org). Type in your host community and the site will search for opportunities available in your area. Community service shows goodwill, and it's also a great way to meet people in your community.

To see what current and past Ayusa students have been doing, check out the Ayusa website's news page: <https://www.ayusa.org/stories>. Here you can find pictures and stories about Ayusa students and their host families. Every year Ayusa holds two national contests for students: the Community Service Contest and International Education Week. These are opportunities to show Ayusa how you've been serving and sharing your culture with your host community.

Ayusa is committed to making sure that you have successful, life-changing experiences in the U.S. We hope that these resources and tips will help prepare you for the experiences that await you. May your year with Ayusa be successful and impactful!

# AYUSA COMMUNICATION FLOW





**Ayusa Responsible Officer and Alternative Responsible Officer  
Contact Information**

Ayusa Headquarters  
455 Market Street, Suite 1700  
San Francisco, CA 94105

**Debra Slagle**

Executive Director  
415.231.3851  
dslagle@ayusa.org

**Sandi Chu-Yang**

Manager, International Partnerships  
415.231.3866  
schu-yang@ayusa.org

**Heather Campbell**

Director of Program Support and Grants  
415.231.3855  
hcampbell@ayusa.org

# Ayusa Students and Diversity, Acceptance and Tolerance

**Ayusa does not accept any act of discrimination either perpetrated by our exchange students or demonstrated towards our exchange students. The United States is comprised of many people of different backgrounds (ranging from a wide spectrum of racial, ethnic, religious, and cultural groups spanning a large socio-economic range), and Ayusa believes that everyone, regardless of these traits, should be treated with respect.**



## **Helpful Definitions:**

### **What is Racism?**

Racism is the belief that different traits in human racial groups justifies discrimination.

### **What is Discrimination?**

Discrimination is the prejudicial treatment of an individual based on their membership (or perceived membership) in a certain group or category. (Action.)

### **What is Prejudice?**

Prejudice is preconceived judgments toward people or a person because of race, social class, ethnicity, age, disability, gender, obesity, religion, sexual orientation, or other personal characteristics. (Judgment or belief.)

### **What is a Stereotype?**

A stereotype is a standardized, simplified, and popular belief about a group of individuals based on certain traits.

## **Tips**

- Obey "The Golden Rule": Treat others in the way you want to be treated.
- Remember, words have an impact!
- Appreciate the differences in others and don't assume.
- Be mindful AND open-minded.
- Respect others.
- Be aware of your school's tolerance and bullying policy.

## **Do you feel like you're being targeted?**

- Remain calm and do not engage or retaliate with hurtful comments.
- If this happened at school, report the incident to your school counselor or teacher.
- Talk to your CR and host family about it.

# Your Safety Abroad

## A Guide to Identifying and Reporting Sexual Abuse and Exploitation

Sexual abuse rarely occurs during a student's exchange year. However, we wish to inform you about how to recognize and report sexual exploitation or abuse, so you do not become a victim.

**Teenagers are twice as likely as adults to become victims of abuse. Exchange students are more vulnerable because of:**

- Cultural differences
- Language difficulties
- Isolation
- Fear of not being taken seriously



*As an exchange student, it can be hard to understand different family and cultural behaviors. While sharing affection is one of the nicest things in the world, it is possible that someone will show you affection that makes you uncomfortable.*

### **What is Sexual Abuse and Exploitation?**

*Sexual abuse* is unwanted physical interaction. This can include different kinds of physical touching such as:

- Being made to kiss someone
- Touching private parts of the body
- Being made to engage in unwanted sex or sexual acts
- Being made to look at pornographic videos or Magazines
- Any other behaviors that make you uncomfortable and continue after you've asked that they stop

*Sexual exploitation* is when a person of authority uses his/her position for sexual purposes.

Relationships between adults and minors (persons under the age of 18) are considered exploitative and are therefore illegal in the United States.

### **ABUSER STRATEGIES**

Sometimes relationships between two people begin without any discomfort or inappropriateness. However, abusers sometimes prepare their victims to be victimized. An abuser may gain your trust by:

- Giving you special attention
  - Asking you to break rules
  - Sharing secrets with you and telling you not to say anything
  - Telling you that everything is okay when you feel uncomfortable
  - Telling you that you will get in trouble or sent home if you tell someone
- Be aware of these strategies and tell someone if you feel uncomfortable.

### **INTERNET SAFETY**

Many sexual abusers surf the internet looking for potential victims. They often pose as teenagers in order to gain trust. As a rule of safety, never share the following information:

- Personal information (i.e. last name, age, city, school name, etc.)
- Address – home or abroad
- Home or cell phone number
- Personal email address



## **YOUR RIGHTS**

United States law protects the person that is abused. In other words, if you are uncomfortable the adult or the abuser is wrong. You are not at fault if someone abuses

### **Your body belongs to you.**

You have the right to determine your boundaries and to trust your feelings.

### **Trust your feelings.**

You should take your feelings seriously. Listen to your intuition and follow your best judgment.

### **You decide who can touch you.**

You have the right to decide how and by whom you are touched.

### **You have the right to say no.**

It is always ok to say "NO" when you feel uncomfortable with someone else's behavior.

### **Ask for help and talk to an adult whom you trust.**

Ask for help if you are uncomfortable or concerned about a situation. There is always an adult at Ayusa who can help you. You may also choose to talk with an adult whom you trust: a teacher, school counselor, friend, friend's parent or the police.

## **WHERE TO FIND HELP**

If you feel uncomfortable due to attention you are receiving, physical or otherwise - including emails, phone calls or text messages, tell that person to stop! If the behavior doesn't stop tell the Ayusa staff in your local community or the Ayusa headquarters office what you are feeling. It is never too late to let someone know.

Ayusa staff members in your local community are trained and ready to help you. You can find your Community Representative's number on your Ayusa student identification card, underneath your host family information, or in the back of your Ayusa Participant Handbook. If you cannot reach your CR, call the Ayusa Emergency Number.

In addition, Ayusa headquarters staff can be reached at any time.

455 Market Street, Suite 1700 San Francisco, CA 94105

8:30am-5:00pm (PST):  
1.415.434.1221



Toll Free Emergency Number: 1-800-727-4540, Press 1. An answering service can reach staff members around the clock in the event of an emergency.

Email: [studentsupport@ayusa.org](mailto:studentsupport@ayusa.org)

## **SURVIVING THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL!**

The first day of high school in the U.S. as a foreign exchange student will be very exciting for you, but it can also be a little overwhelming. To help ease any nervousness you may have, it's a good idea to be well informed of what to expect before the first day. Please review this list of suggestions for things that you can do to better prepare!

- ✓ Your host family will take you to school a few days before school starts to register for classes. During this time, ask your guidance counselor for a quick tour or a map of the school.
- ✓ You will be assigned a guidance counselor who will be available all year to help you select your classes. This person is a wonderful resource for you and can help you if you have any problems throughout the school year.
- ✓ If you don't have any host siblings at your school, ask your host family if they have any family friends who have children your age and go to your school. Ask if he/she can help you on your first day!
- ✓ Ask your host family how you will get to school, if you need to take a bus, what number the bus is, where to get on, and where to get off.
- ✓ School usually begins with a homeroom period where a teacher takes attendance and reads daily school announcements. Remember to be on time for homeroom period!
- ✓ You may be assigned a locker and can keep all of your school supplies and personal belongings there. Find out if you need to bring a lock of your own or if one will be provided for you.
- ✓ Remember that there will be other new students starting on the same day, and not everyone knows each other.
- ✓ Homework in American schools is required, and failure to submit homework on time may impact your grade.
- ✓ American teachers and office staff are very accessible to students for academic and personal matters. If you find that you are lost or confused about where you need to be, do not be afraid to ask someone.
- ✓ Try to initiate conversation with other students in your first few classes and try to sit with them at lunch.
- ✓ You will receive a copy of your school's Student Handbook. Review this immediately as it contains school calendars, grading system, dress code, school rules, and information on extracurricular activities.
- ✓ The most important thing is to be outgoing and friendly during the first few weeks.
- ✓ Ask what activities, sports and extracurricular activities are available at your school! This is a very important part of American high schools and is how many students socialize after school. The best way to make new friends is to get involved!

## Tips for Improving Your English...before You Come to the U.S.!

One of the wonderful benefits to the Ayusa program is the opportunity to improve your English over the 10 months you will be living in the United States, spending time with your host family and attending high school! However, it is important to start now, before you arrive. Below are some tips to get you started!

### **4-5 months before you arrive...**

- ☒ Find a native English speaker who can work with you on speaking and listening skills. You should be meeting with this person at least once a week. Set goals with this tutor. Some might include: being able to make friends easily, improving your confidence, understanding American culture, understanding teenage slang, being able to listen to native English speaking at a normal pace, etc. Try to think of this person as a friend and have casual conversations as you would with a friend.
- ☒ If you haven't already, start surrounding yourself with American culture! Watch one American movie per week with English subtitles. Watch it until you totally understand what the actors are saying. Then, think about the movie itself. What did you learn about American people or culture from this movie? How is this different from your own culture? Did it make you excited to experience American culture? If so, how?
- ☒ Find out about popular American music and start listening to it. Read the lyrics and try to understand their meaning. Singing along is also great for pronunciation and reading skills!
- ☒ Find English Newspapers for ESL learners. This is a great way to improve your skills and to learn about the world– in English! Speak to your teachers, tutors and native English speaker friends about what you think is interesting.

### **3 months before you arrive...**

- ☒ Start keeping an English journal and commit to writing in it once a week. Use this as a tool to improve your writing and critical thinking skills. Be creative with your topics – some might include: How was my week? How am I progressing with my English? What am I excited about for this year? What am I nervous about? What are my plans for next week, next month, next year?
- ☒ Download one of the apps mentioned on the “Resources for Improving Your English” page and spend 30 minutes per day practicing on the app.

### **2 months before you arrive...**

- ☒ You should be able to see your improvement already! Put those skills to use and challenge yourself. Think of something about American history, culture, current events, places, etc. that really, really interests you. Find out more!! Use the internet, books, friends, etc. as a resource. Share what you learned with your teachers, family, and friends.

### **1 month before you arrive...**

- ☒ If you have received your placement, contact your host family or school and ask if there is a student in your community who wants to be an email pen-pal with you! This is a great way to find out about your school and community, to learn American slang, to practice your reading and writing skills, and to make a great friend before you arrive!

### **2 weeks before you arrive...**

- ☒ Think about how much you have learned since you applied to the Ayusa program. Make a list of everything that you have accomplished and everything that you have learned– about English, about the United States, and about yourself. Remember that even if you make mistakes, you know a lot and are prepared for this experience!

### **1 week before you arrive...**

- ☒ Make sure you have a dictionary (book and electronic), a journal, flashcards, notebooks, and other study materials you use.

## Online Resources for Improving Your English!

- **Voice of America** – this is one of the best radio news websites for English learners.

[www.voanews.com/specialenglish/index.cfm](http://www.voanews.com/specialenglish/index.cfm) – This is an index of all news programs and broadcasts

- **BBC** – Learning English Website. This website has many sections for English learners, including vocabulary, grammar, quizzes, short programs, blog, and newsletter!

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/>

- **Podcasts** – These are free radio programs that you can download to increase your general knowledge of English and improve your listening skills!

<http://www.englishpronunciationpod.com/newarchive.html>

<http://www.eslpod.com/website/>

- **Self-Study Website for Grammar, Pronunciation, Vocabulary:**

<http://www.eslcafe.com/students/>

- **Website for improving your listening skills:**

<http://www.esl-lab.com/guide.htm>

- **Website for learning the North American accent:**

<http://www.trainyouraccent.com/>

- **Website for learning popular slang words and phrases:**

<http://www.ezslang.com/>

- **Website that helps with conversation starters:**

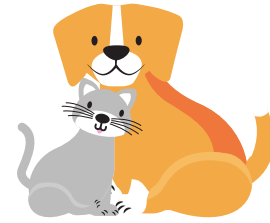
<http://www.dailyesl.com/>

- **Free Apps to improve English skills:**

Duo Lingo – learning through a game-like setting

Beelinguapp – helps improve pronunciation and comprehension. Allows you to compare two languages side-by-side

Drops – lets you set aside words you already know and select words you don't to learn more. Great for those who just need to refresh their skills



## **Pets in America**

According to the American Pet Products Association, 66% of American households have at least 1 pet. It is very likely that your host family will have pets, and it is very important to understand the relationship Americans have with their pets. Pets are often treated as members of the family. This a very important part of American culture and one that you, as an exchange student, must learn to adapt to. Below are some facts about pets and their role in the average American family:

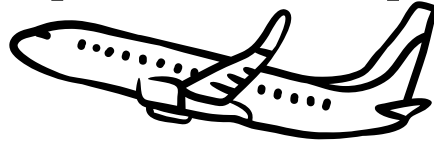
- 95% of pet owners say they consider their pet to be a member of the family.
- 43% of pet owners allow their dog to sleep in their bed.
- 33% of America's pet owners have a social media account for their pets, and the average pet has almost 1000 followers.
- There are more than 146 million dogs and cats in the United States. Americans spend more than 136.8 billion dollars on their pets each year.
- It has been established that people who own pets live longer, have less stress, and have fewer heart attacks.
- Owners say they will spend \$1,000 or more to save their pet in a life-threatening situation.
- 70% of people their pet's name on greeting cards and 58% include their pets in family and holiday portraits.

### **Tips on Adapting to Pets**

You may not be accustomed to living with pets in your home country and may find this a difficult part of American culture to adjust to. Here are some tips to help you:

- Do not avoid your host family's pet- try to spend time getting to know or playing with the pet.
- Speak with your host family about how to handle their pet, what the pet's personality is like, how their pet likes to be played with, etc.
- If needed for cultural or religious reasons, talk with your host family about how you can make sure that the pets do not go into your bedroom.
- Ask your host family questions about where the pet spends time and sleeps.
- Talk to your host family about rules and chores associated with pets and ask how you can help!
- It takes some time to get used to living with pets, but exchange students come to think of their host family's pets as part of the family.

# Tips on Trips



- **Before you go:** Make sure that you carry your passport and DS-2019 form with you in your carry-on luggage. Check the airline's website for information about baggage fees and weight/size limits for your luggage.
  - Once you receive your flight itinerary from your sending agency, you can prepare for your trip by finding a map of the airport(s) online to become familiar with the layout. If you have any transfers, use the airport map to figure out where you will need to go. *Download the app for the airline.*
  - Before you leave your home country, make sure that you have the phone numbers for your host family, Community Representative, and the Ayusa Emergency Line in case you need to contact someone during your travel.
- **If you need directions to your departing gate,** ask the person at the ticket counter. If you get lost (some airports are very big!), ask an airline representative to help you.
- **If you need assistance changing airplanes:** Before the airplane lands, ask a flight attendant to help you transfer to your next flight.
- **If you miss your connecting flight:** Talk to the airline representative at the ticket counter. Ask them to book you on the next flight to your final destination. If you need help, call Ayusa at 1-800-727-4540. If your flight schedule changes, please be sure to call your host family, Community Representative, or Ayusa with the new info.
- **If your luggage is lost:** You will need your luggage claim ticket, so be sure to keep this in a safe place. Go to the baggage claim counter and file a lost baggage form. Your luggage will probably arrive on the next flight, and airlines are responsible for delivering your luggage to your home. The baggage claim office is near the baggage pick-up area.
- **If your host family is not at the airport:** After you get off the airplane, go to the baggage claim area to get your baggage. Due to security measures, your host family and/or Community Representative will not be able to meet you at your gate. They will meet you in the baggage claim area. If they are not there, don't panic. Stay calm, be patient, and stay in one place. Your host family may simply be late in arriving at the airport. After you have waited 30 minutes, let an airline representative know that you are waiting for your host family. They will help you locate your family and/or your Community Representative by using the public address system. If you still cannot locate your host family, call Ayusa at 1-800-727-4540, and one of our staff will be able to help you! Do not leave the airport with anyone other than your Community Representative or your host family.

**Ayusa Free Emergency Telephone:  
1-800-727-4540, press 1**



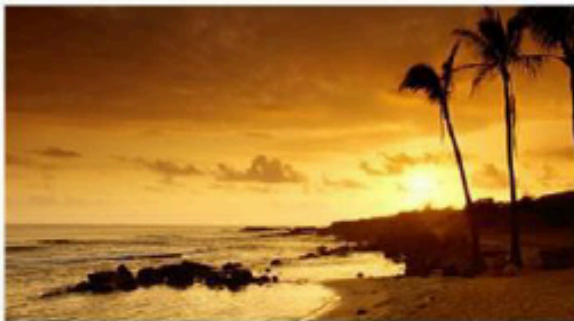
**Ayusa works exclusively with Belo USA, a travel program designed for exchange students, to provide amazing opportunities for them to travel during their program. Fees vary according to the trip and are at the student's expense. More information can be found under the "Resources" tab when you login to your MyAyusa account.**



**New York Trip**  
A city like no other



**New York, Philadelphia, and Washington D.C.**  
Live American history and culture



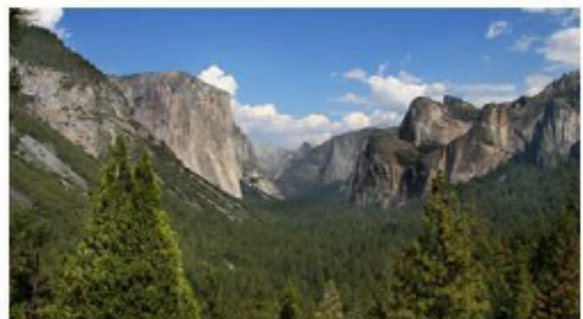
**Hawaii Expedition**  
Catch some waves and aloha spirit



**California Adventure**  
Hollywood stars and cable cars



**East Coast**  
Experience America from top to bottom



**West Coast**  
See why they call it the best coast



# COMMUNITY SERVICE

"We can do no great things, only small things with great love." - Mother Teresa

LET'S MAKE A DIFFERENCE TOGETHER!!



30 HOURS ARE MANDATORY FOR YES STUDENTS

## How Can You Serve YOUR Community?

### In the Neighborhood

- Mowing grass
- Babysitting
- Shoveling snow
- Raking leaves
- Helping senior citizens

### Places of Worship

- Childcare
- Events and programs
- Upward bound
- Cleaning or artistic projects

### In the Community

- Senior Citizen Centers
- Library
- Clean parks/beaches
- Local Children's Hospitals
- Food banks or soup kitchens
- Election Centers
- Community fund raisers
- Habitat for Humanity
- Museums
- Farmer's markets/fairs
- Red Cross events/blood drives
- Local Boy Scouts/Girl Scouts (share culture for their international component)
- Organizations focused on disabled/special needs

### State and Worldwide

- State fairs
- St Jude's Hospital
- Operation Christmas Child
- Youth Services America/GYSD

## Need ideas?

Google "Volunteer opportunities near me" or go to <https://www.volunteermatch.org/>

100 HOURS WILL EARN YOU A CERTIFICATE FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Students need to download the Clockify app to track their Community Service hours, and log in using the account they created. To learn more go to <https://clockify.me/features/>

iPhone Android





Share YOUR Culture!

# INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION WEEK



Succeeding Globally Through International Education and Engagement

## WHAT IS IT?

IEW was created by the US Department of State and US Department of Education to promote international understanding and cooperation through education and exchange. It's an opportunity to share your culture with others in fun and unique ways. Ayusa encourages all students to participate, but it is mandatory for YES grant students.

## WHAT DO WE DO?

Present to your classmates or people within your host community. Share your favorite dish from home, teach a traditional dance, sing or play an instrument, make posters, create a video, and more! You can present during IEW week or any time throughout the year!

November 14-18, 2026

Be sure to take photos and post on social media using:

#InternationalEducationWeek  
#IEW2026  
#EducationWeek  
#Ayusa



[www.ayusa.org](http://www.ayusa.org)



"If it wasn't already clear before the pandemic, it should be clear now that, in today's interconnected world, many of our biggest challenges are global in nature. To address them, we must work together – not just within the United States, but also with others around the world." – Secretary Miguel Cardona