

rotary  
youth  
exchange

Rotary 

# A GUIDE FOR EXCHANGE STUDENTS

Rotary



# Contents

Thinking about Participating in an Exchange?	3
Preparing for an Exchange	7
During the Exchange	12
A Note about Culture Shock	15
After the Exchange	17
For Parents or Guardians	18

*The purpose of this guide is to provide students with a general overview of the Rotary Youth Exchange program and advice on how to prepare for an exchange. Highlights include what to expect while on an exchange and points to consider before, during, and after. Specific information should be covered in orientation sessions arranged by Rotarians in the sending district before the exchange.*

# Thinking about participating in an exchange?

## Why participate in an exchange?

Students reap many rewards from an exchange experience, including:

- Serving as an ambassador for their country and community
- Benefiting from immersion in another culture while adapting to a new way of life
- Making lifelong friends, not only within the host country but also with other students from around the world
- Learning about the practices and accomplishments of people in other countries
- Returning home with a greater sense of the world and a deeper understanding of themselves and their culture
- Assuming leadership roles shaped by lessons from the experience
- Building memories that will be with them forever

## What is Rotary?



Rotary clubs are service organizations that strive to improve the quality of life in their communities, promote high ethical standards in all vocations, and help build goodwill and peace. There are over 33,000 Rotary clubs in the world. Club members, called Rotarians, are business, professional, and community leaders who volunteer their time and talents to serve others. Rotary Youth Exchange is one of their service activities.

A district is a group of Rotary clubs that are linked for administrative purposes. Districts may sometimes join together to form multidistricts that coordinate exchanges in a larger geographic area.

Rotary International, as the association of Rotary clubs throughout the world, encourages clubs and districts to undertake Youth Exchange activities and offers support through publications and administration relevant to every Rotary district. Districts operate their Youth Exchange programs independently of RI but within a policy framework to support student safety and well being.

## What are the requirements?

Ideal Youth Exchange candidates are young, open-minded individuals who demonstrate leadership qualities that will enable them to become excellent cultural ambassadors for their country and the Rotary club or district that supports them. Applicants are not required to be involved with Rotary in any way before applying. Children of Rotarians are welcome to participate but are not given any preference. Students with disabilities are encouraged to apply.

## What types of exchanges are available?

There are three types of exchanges:

- **Long-term:** This exchange is open to students ages 15-19 and usually lasts 10-12 months. Most students are 16-18 years old during their exchange year. The student lives with more than one family in the host country and is required to attend school. Long-term exchanges may be extended to include part or all of the holiday/vacation periods immediately before or after the academic year.
- **Short-term:** This exchange is open to students ages 15-19 and ranges from several days to several weeks. It often takes place when school is not in session, and usually does not include an academic program. Short-term exchanges typically involve a Rotary district-organized exchange of a son or daughter between two families, but they may also take the form of international youth camps or tours that bring together students from many countries.
- **New Generations:** This specialized short-term exchange lasts from three weeks to three months and is open to young people ages 18-25. This program may include a vocational element.

Each district chooses the types of exchanges it participates in. Because each district administers its own Youth Exchange program, age requirements may differ from one district to another. Contact local Rotarians for details.

To locate the nearest  
Rotary club, use the  
Club Locator at  
[www.rotary.org](http://www.rotary.org).



## **When and how do I apply?**

The application process varies by district, but students are encouraged to apply early. The program is highly selective, and the application process can begin more than a year before departure. Interested candidates should contact local Rotarians to learn more.

## **Where can I go on an exchange?**

The Youth Exchange program is active in over 100 countries and geographical areas. Selected students are placed in communities where a local club has agreed to host a participant. Because of the need for a host, applicants do not determine their exchange location, but they may identify preferences.

## **How much does it cost?**

Cost varies by country. Students and their families are required to provide round-trip transportation, clothing, health and travel insurance, and spending money. For long-term exchanges, the host club will pay any school tuition fees for required academic programs and provide a modest monthly allowance. Free room and board are provided by host families selected by the host club.

## **What are the rules?**

Each district and club sets rules that students are expected to follow to preserve the exchange structure and ensure safety. To help students understand the rules and expectations, districts conduct mandatory program orientation sessions.

In addition to club and district rules, Rotary International has set forth the following expectations:

- Follow the local laws and customs in the host country.
- Follow the host district and club rules.
- Follow the host family's rules, such as curfews and household chores.
- Do not drive or operate a motorized vehicle of any kind.

If a student disobeys agreed-upon rules or an insurmountable problem arises, the host district may decide that it is in the student's best interest to return home early.

### **What if I am not sure if I want to go on an exchange?**

It is normal to be anxious when considering living abroad for an extended period of time. However, students must be sure that they are comfortable with the program before they leave on an exchange. Students who have serious reservations about any aspect of the exchange or feel that they cannot meet their obligations should seek the counsel of a local Rotarian or former program participant. Youth Exchange is a wonderful opportunity, and students should feel fully comfortable before they embark on their exchange.

### **Do I need to be fluent in my host country's language?**

Though most host districts do not require students to be fluent in the local language on arrival, students are strongly encouraged to enroll in classes to develop a basic competency before departure. Language proficiency is sometimes needed to obtain a visa, and host districts may require exchange students to take language classes after they arrive. An ability to understand the language will help students become comfortable with their new surroundings and ease homesickness.

# Preparing for an exchange

## What should I do once I am accepted into the program?

The following list includes several important steps that students should take when they learn that they have been selected for the program.

- **Passport:** Students should apply for a passport as soon as they are accepted into the program, as the process may take several weeks.
- **Student visa and guarantee form:** Students may be required to complete a visa application and, as part of the formal Youth Exchange application, will be required to complete a guarantee form. Rotarians will facilitate this process.
- **Airline tickets:** Students should check with their sending district to determine how and when to make travel arrangements and what type of airline ticket they should purchase.
- **Health insurance:** All students must have travel health insurance before departure that meets the level and limits set forth by the host district. Students should always carry a copy of their policy during their exchange.
- **Immunization documentation:** Most students are required to have immunization documentation. Local health departments and consular officials can help students determine the required or recommended immunizations for the countries they are traveling to. Students should check with Rotarians to determine whether additional health documentation will be necessary in the host country.
- **Dental/medical examination:** Students may need to have a thorough pre-exchange medical and dental examination. The application includes an examination form that must be completed by a health care provider.



## **What should I know about my own country?**

Exchange students are seen as cultural ambassadors and are often asked questions about their home country's customs, culture, history, geography, and government. Students are encouraged to learn about these topics before departure.

## **How many host families will I live with?**

Students who participate in the long-term exchange program live with at least two host families to help achieve a maximum amount of cultural immersion. Be sure to discuss rules and expectations with each host family when entering the household.

## **How do I contact my first host family?**

Students will receive contact information for their first host family before they depart on their exchange. They should take this opportunity to make contact. The host family can help answer questions, and the communication will help everyone feel more confident about this exciting new adventure.

Many Youth Exchange students are recognized by their unique Youth Exchange blazer, obtained through the sending district. During the exchange, participants cover their blazers with pins and patches they receive from others. Students should plan to wear it when visiting clubs or attending Rotary events.



## **Should I bring any gifts?**

Many students bring small gifts for their host family and members of the host club. Gifts need not be expensive and should embody the student's culture. Many students bring lapel pins, buttons, patches, or other creative items that represent their homeland to share with other exchange students.

## **May I participate in extracurricular activities?**

Extracurricular activities are encouraged, as they help students become acquainted with their host community. Meeting and talking to people at school is another great way to become familiar with a new country and its customs. Students may also participate in activities that they enjoy in their home country, such as religious services or sports, to ease the transition to a new culture.

## **What clothing and personal items should I pack?**

Packing for a year abroad can seem daunting. Students should speak with Rotarians and former Youth Exchange students to determine what clothing and personal items to bring.

All students are encouraged to bring the following documents and health-related items in addition to clothing and other personal effects:

### **Documentation**

- Passport and several photocopies
- Visa and other documentation for immigration, and copies of the visa
- Health insurance card or policy number, with contact information
- Plane tickets and flight information
- Emergency contact information
- Immunization records (if needed)
- Copies of prescriptions for medications, eyeglasses, and contact lenses (if needed)
- Rotarians' contact information and the name and address of the first host family

### **Health-related items**

- An extra pair of glasses and extra contact lens solution (if needed)
- Sufficient toiletries for at least one month (It may be difficult to locate some items in the host country.)
- First-aid kit

## **How much currency should I bring?**

Students should bring a small amount of their host country's currency with them, at least enough to purchase meals or forgotten toiletries en route. It is recommended that they wait until they get into the country to exchange additional funds. Students should consult with their host district to determine the best ways to obtain local currency.

## **How should I do my banking abroad?**

Some students travel with a credit or debit card, but these methods of payment are not widely used in all countries. Exchange students should ask their host district and host parents what is recommended for their country.

If students do get a credit or debit card, they need to discuss with their parents how they will use these cards while abroad and who will pay the credit card bill. Also, they should review procedures for reporting and replacing a damaged, lost, or stolen card.

Automated teller machines (ATMs) permit students to withdraw cash directly from their bank accounts. Students should confirm with their bank that their debit cards will be accepted in their host country and ask about fees incurred when using ATMs outside their network.

It may be a good idea to carry traveler's checks in some countries. Students should know how to replace lost or stolen traveler's checks.

## **Can I bring electric items?**

Students may bring items such as electric razors, hair dryers, MP3 players, and laptop computers. Often, the shapes of plugs and outlets and the voltage vary from one country to another. To overcome these differences, students can purchase plug and voltage adapters before leaving for their exchange. They may also wish to purchase inexpensive electronics in their host country to avoid this potential problem altogether.

## **What should I know about my host country?**

Students should be able to answer the following questions about their host country before starting their exchange:

- How do you say hello and goodbye?
- How do men and women generally dress? Which types of clothing are considered appropriate and which are not?
- What is a typical day like in the host country? When do people eat meals? What meals do they eat?
- What is considered taboo?
- When are national holidays, and how are they celebrated?
- Is there a predominant religion? If so, what important religious events are observed, and how are people with different beliefs received?
- What are common leisure activities? Which sports are popular, if any?
- What is the government structure? Who are the current leaders?

# During the exchange

## How can I best get along with my host family?

Students are accepted into the program based on their ability to be open-minded and flexible. These traits are important as the student enters the household and adapts to a new culture. Though students may initially find some customs of their new family unnatural, they should remember that they are often part of the learning and overall exchange experience. Students may share how things are different at home, but they should remember to keep an open mind, immerse themselves, and experience an entirely new lifestyle. Host parents are generally advised to treat students as members of the family and not as honored guests. It is the responsibility of the student to adapt to the family, not the other way around.

Students should be prepared to discuss household rules with their host family. This conversation is often best accomplished using the “first-night questions” offered by many districts. Examples of these include “Should I wash my own clothes?” and “May I help myself to food and drink at any time, or should I ask first?” Some families may expect everyone to share tasks such as bed making and house cleaning, while some may not. Students’ acceptance of whatever chores are assigned to them will make the exchange experience more enjoyable for all involved.

## What are my Rotary obligations?

Youth Exchange students are expected to attend Rotary functions, such as club and district meetings, conferences, and orientations. Students may be asked to give speeches to Rotarians in their host and sending countries. Rotary obligations should take precedence over other extracurricular activities.



## **What will Rotarians do?**

Rotarians will

- Ensure students have a host family
- Provide a trained Rotarian counselor to act as part of the students' support network abroad
- Work with students to obtain a visa and necessary documentation for traveling abroad
- Conduct orientation sessions for students and their guardians before and at the beginning of the exchange
- Do whatever they can to make sure the experience is safe and successful

## **Do I have to attend school?**

Students participating in the long-term program must attend high school. The host club makes the necessary tuition arrangements with the local school. It is the students' responsibility to register for classes, attend regularly, and take their studies seriously. When registering for classes, students should understand that adapting to a new culture is very demanding and may consider taking a lighter course load than they would in their home country. Host families and Rotarians in the host district will help with registration.

## **How often should I talk to my family and friends at home?**

Students may think that they should e-mail or call friends and family in their home country often, but they should limit these forms of contact. These services may be expensive, and it is impolite to abuse a host family's generosity. Also, spending too much time talking with people at home limits students' ability to fully integrate into their host country's culture. Many students use online journals to update people at home about their exchange experiences.

Students should inform their parents or guardians of any concerns they have, tell them about any trips their host family or host club is participating in, and share their exciting exchange experiences.

## **Who do I talk to if I am having a problem?**

Students who are having difficulties of any kind should seek help immediately. The Rotarian counselor can help with any questions, concerns, or problems that arise during the exchange. Also, the district will provide students with two non-Rotarian contacts who are willing and able to listen and help with any worries or questions. Host families are another great resource for exchange students.

The host club will provide students with a list of local social services that may help in the event of a safety or medical problem. School counselors can help students with any academic or social issues that may arise at school. They may also be able to direct students to other resources to help them during the exchange.

Ultimately, if students cannot resolve the issue through their host country support system, they should contact the Rotarians in their sending district.

It is important to remember that students have a broad support system to ensure that any problems or difficulties are addressed.

# A note about culture shock

Exchange students often experience culture shock during their stay abroad. Though culture shock can be uncomfortable, it is natural when living in a different country. It is quite common for students to have a very positive and rewarding experience despite having adjustment problems related to culture shock.

Culture shock usually involves at least four stages, which sometimes repeat as students become more and more immersed in the host culture. The stages are:

- 1. Excitement and Enthusiasm.** This is the feeling of exhilaration that accompanies travel to a new place, seeing and doing many new and different things, and meeting new people.
- 2. Irritability.** This occurs when the initial excitement wears off and real cultural differences become evident. No matter how understanding and accepting the student may try to be, there will be times when the negative feelings seem like they will not go away.
- 3. Adaptation.** This is when students learn to accept that they will need to adapt if they are going to be successful in their host culture, then work at adjusting to local customs and habits.
- 4. Biculturalism.** Students in this stage realize that they have become competent in another culture and can see the world and function from another, very different, point of view.

## Homesickness

Most students will experience homesickness, especially at the beginning of their exchange. Students may feel lonely and become overwhelmed with the day-to-day challenges that accompany the transition to a new culture. The best remedies for acute homesickness are to keep occupied with a variety of enjoyable activities. Students may also find comfort in talking

with someone locally who speaks their native language or understands what they are going through.

It is important for students to understand that it is natural and acceptable to go through low periods during their exchange, and that culture shock and feeling homesick are normal. It can be extremely helpful to students to express their feelings to someone they feel will not judge them. Their Rotarian counselor is trained in these matters and can be a great resource. Also, students must realize that the situation will improve as they continue to work at adjusting to their new culture and gain a greater understanding of the host country's language.

## **Reverse Culture Shock**

Readjusting to the home country can be very challenging, partly because of the false expectation that nothing will have changed during the student's time away. Below are some of the common feelings and concerns students have when they return. They may be reluctant to express some of them, but none are unusual or harmful.

- My parents don't understand me. They expect me to be the same person I was when I left.
- I feel closer to my host family than I do to my own parents. I'm afraid my parents will be hurt if they find out.
- It's difficult for me to readjust to my old lifestyle.
- I made so many friends, and now I'll never see them again.
- I don't like it here. I want to go back.
- I didn't have an easy time in my host country. Now everyone is discussing what a wonderful experience I had. They don't know what it was really like.
- I don't find my old friends very interesting anymore. We don't have much in common.

Trying to fit into life before the exchange will take time. It's often helpful for students to share their experiences with their friends and family in an effort to re-establish relationships. It is especially important for students to talk with others who have studied abroad and to keep in touch with people they met during their exchange. Past exchange students in the district are a good resource.



# After the exchange

## **What are my obligations to Rotary after I return?**

Rotarians who helped send a student on an exchange are often interested in hearing about the experience. Presenting at the sending club and other clubs in the district is an excellent way to share.

## **How can I stay connected to Rotary?**

The sending club may also participate in Rotary Youth Leadership Awards (RYLA) or sponsor an Interact or Rotaract club. (RYLA is open to participants ages 14-30, Interact clubs are for youth ages 14-18, and Rotaract clubs are open to people ages 18-30.) These additional youth programs are a great way of maintaining a connection with the sending club and staying involved with Rotary. Also, some districts have a rebound program specifically for former Youth Exchange students.

Talking to other exchange students who have experienced the shock of returning home after a year abroad may help in the readjustment process. Eventually, former Youth Exchange students may be asked to help prepare others for an exchange experience.

# For parents or guardians

## **What can I do to help my child prepare for the exchange experience?**

One of the most important ways for parents to help their child prepare to go abroad is to be involved in the preparation process. Reading all Youth Exchange materials, asking the student questions, and participating in the visa and passport process are all great ways for parents or guardians to be involved.

Parents and guardians should look at the packing list carefully and keep copies of all documents, such as prescriptions and the student's visa and passport. They should also speak with local school administrators before the student's departure to learn about how the Youth Exchange program ties in with the curriculum, and ask about credit transfers and required course work. These steps may be important if the student has not yet completed secondary school. It is extremely rare for studies taken abroad to be credited to the student after returning. Rotary districts cannot make any guarantees or assurances.

Parents and guardians should also study the host country to gain perspective on the student's experiences abroad, but they should try to limit communication. It is important that an exchange student become involved and comfortable with daily life in the host country to move quickly through the homesickness stage. Limiting communication helps students integrate into their host country's culture.

The members of the sending club can help answer questions and provide support if necessary. Parents or guardians should stay in touch with the sending club while their child is on the exchange.



### **Can I visit my child during a long-term exchange?**

With the approval of the student's host club, it may be possible to arrange such a visit. However, it is usually acceptable to visit only during the second half of the exchange year. Traveling any earlier may be emotionally disruptive to the student. Parents and guardians should also know that some students see such a visit as an intrusion on their exchange year, though many may be reluctant to voice these feelings.

### **How does the district's Youth Exchange program ensure the safety of my child?**

Rotary International strives to create and maintain a safe environment for Youth Exchange students through a support structure. This structure includes the following elements:

- All students have a Rotarian counselor who maintains regular contact with them and serves as a liaison between them and the club, host family, guardians, and the community. The counselor is trained in responding to problems that may arise during the exchange.
- The district provides abuse and harassment prevention training to all Youth Exchange program participants and ensures that all participants undergo background checks and screening procedures in accordance with the laws or legal requirements of the host country.
- Each student has access to a female and a male non-Rotarian who are alternative resources in the event of a problem.

- The district ensures that students can contact a district representative 24 hours a day, and it has guidelines for reporting problems and incidents that may arise during the exchange.
- Districts are required to immediately report all cases of sexual abuse and harassment first to the appropriate law enforcement authorities, then to the club and district leadership for follow-through. In all cases, the students' legal guardians are to be contacted as soon as possible.

The Youth Exchange program can be an extremely rewarding experience that changes a student's life through increased international awareness and understanding. Congratulations on taking the first step toward seeing the world in a different way!

### **Statement of Conduct for Working with Youth**

Rotary International strives to create and maintain a safe environment for all youth who participate in Rotary activities. To the best of their ability, Rotarians, Rotarians' spouses and partners, and other volunteers must safeguard the children and young people they come into contact with and protect them from physical, sexual, and emotional abuse.



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