

# The Homestay Times

A tall, white, tapered lighthouse stands on a rocky shore. The lighthouse has a red lantern room with a glass-enclosed light source. The sky is overcast with soft, grey clouds. The foreground shows large, dark grey rocks and a set of concrete steps leading up to the lighthouse base.

**Resources for Homestay  
Coordinators Across  
North America**

A compilation of newsletters from 2013-2020  
from ESQ Educational Services

**By Doug Ronson**  
January 2021

## Welcome and introduction

We're delighted once again to offer our compilation of the Homestay Times newsletters. It includes all of the tips, advice and news for homestay staff from 2013 to 2020.

Of course, last year was unique – with many of our newsletters focusing on the Covid crisis that hit homestay programs across the globe. Hopefully, the world will start to return to normal in 2021 and you will find our library of newsletters from “normal times” to be useful.

This booklet is available free to homestay coordinators in Canada, the United States and other countries. It is designed to offer some ideas and advice. Hopefully, you will find the suggestions useful. This publication is not intended to be a comprehensive manual for homestay coordinators.

Our newsletter, which features articles about some of the issues faced by homestay coordinators, is published monthly and is sent via email. If you would like to subscribe, please contact us at:  
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ESQ Educational Services provides a wide range of services to homestay programs and international education organizations. These include homestay guides and professional development online and in-person workshops. For our latest offerings, please visit the website at:  
[www.homestayguide.com](http://www.homestayguide.com)

We welcome your feedback and questions. Please let us know if there is a topic you would like to see addressed in our monthly newsletter.

Warm regards,

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We welcome requests to reprint part of these newsletters as a service to students and/or host families. However, we do ask that you contact us for permission before reprinting any of the material.

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## Agents prefer safety and dollar value of homestays for their student clients

As most international educators know, agents can play a key role in helping students to choose a destination country and educational institution. That influence can also extend to the type of accommodation.

So it's of particular interest that the Canada Homestay Network last fall conducted a survey of 617 agents from 47 countries about their impressions of homestay in Canada. The survey has a confidence level of plus/minus 3.8 percent, 19 times out of 20.

Student safety topped the list of benefits with homestay. According to the survey, 83 percent of agents felt that homestay is safer than alternative housing options. The other benefits of homestay included:

- Immersion in the culture and an English-speaking environment
- Being in a caring family environment
- Having support in adjusting to a new culture

Agents appreciated the linguistic and cultural components of homestay. "The cultural and family experience is usually more important to our clients than the academic experience," commented one German agent.

"Homestay can provide the key to unlocking your potential with a language," said a Vietnamese agent. About 88 percent of agents agreed that homestay helps students improve their English.

The agents also liked the value that homestay provides, with 67 percent agreeing that it offers greater value for the money than other types of accommodation. A further 21 percent felt it was comparable to other options, leaving just 13 percent of respondents who believe that homestay has lower value than alternatives.

Indeed, monthly homestay fees in large Canadian cities are typically in the \$900 to \$1,000 range. That compares to the average cost of a one-bedroom apartment in Toronto at \$1,359 and in Vancouver at \$1,385 per month. Of course, homestay fees usually include meals, which makes them even more economical than apartment living.

Homestay is a bargain compared with university residence. At Queen's University in Kingston, a dorm room with meals costs \$1,875 monthly.

Finally, the survey asked agents whether they prefer an in-house homestay program compared to one operated by an external provider. Here's what they said:

- 45 percent favour in-house programs
- 41 percent expressed no preference
- 14 prefer independent providers

Canada Homestay Network director Jennifer Wilson says the data suggests that the most important benefit of an in-house program is the relationship between the agent and the homestay managers; they perceive this to be stronger when the program is run in-house. However, she feels that external providers like CHN can make up for this gap by building strong relationships with agents directly.



## Helping hosts with their No. 1 worry: Food costs

Former Homestay Coordinator Malvina Rapko shares her tips on helping hosts to manage and reduce food costs:

### Batch Cooking & Freezing

- Preparing food ahead of time saves time and money. It allows you to use up more ingredients and helps the food last longer.
- Making soups, chili, stews and other freezer friendly dishes fills the freezer and provides food that lasts for days. It's a budget bonus.

### Discounted Food

- There is a big difference between Best Before and Expired. Grocery stores do not discount items that are actually expired. Best Before is a very broad time stamp. The absolute rule of thumb is to look at the items and smell them before consuming.
- If you plan to use something right away go to the discounted section of the fridge aisles. They have all sorts of items like sandwich meat, cheese, yogurt, milk, fresh pasta and other perishable foods.
- Even if you don't plan on consuming it immediately but would like some yogurt for breakfast, lunch or snacks you can buy them at a discount and they will be gone in no time.
- Here's another tip: you can actually freeze items like fresh pasta, sandwich meat, grated cheese and yogurt so if you find something discounted but won't be using it for a while then you can freeze it and use it later while it's still good.
- Don't forget to check the back section of most grocery stores. This is where they keep discounted dried goods. Besides nearly reaching their Best Before these items are usually discounted because the store is no longer selling the items, the company is changing the packaging or they weren't best sellers at this particular store.

### Coupons

- Check out coupons at the front of most grocery stores.
- Buy coupon books that are usually sold by schools and sports teams.

### Student Grocery Shopping

- Take your student shopping with you. They will see how much things cost and have a greater appreciation for how expensive food is in Canada.
- The students can also help make food choices for items they like to request or complain about not having enough of in the lunches or for snacks.

### **Breakfast for Supper**

- Who doesn't love pancakes, waffles or bacon and eggs for supper?!
- It's less work and it's a fun and cheaper alternative to a traditional supper

### **Canadian Comfort Food**

- As adults, this may not sound like the most appetizing option - but kids of all ages still love mac & cheese with wieners, grilled cheese and tomato soup, and ichiban noodles.
- These are definitely cost effective and the students will be happy.

### **Customer Appreciation**

- If you haven't done so already make note of when your grocery store has customer appreciation days. Those usually offer 10 percent off.
- Try new grocery stores on their customer appreciation days.

### **Store Apps**

- Download and sign up for your favourite store apps and shop according to their feature items. Even if you shop mildly strategically, you will get huge savings.

### **Drug Stores**

- Most drug store chains offer substantial sales all the time. Don't forget to stop by once in a while and check those out.

### **Everything in Moderation**

- Don't be shy about limiting the amount of meat your student puts on their plate. It's okay to portion control the meat so that everyone gets a share.
- Remind students that eating vegetables is important.

### **Veggie Days**

- Add Meatless Mondays to the weekly schedule.
- Have Salad Days.
- Having a few veggie only days will help cut costs and add more nutrients to everyone's daily diets.

### **Dining out - Students Only**

- Encourage your students to go out with friends once a week or twice a month. They have to pay for their own meals, you get a break AND most importantly they are out socializing and getting to know their new city.



## Is it time to offer different homestay options?

Across North America, homestay has traditionally been fairly standard – hosts are expected to provide a room, two or three meals a day and show students around their community.

As the international education sector grows, some programs are expanding the range of homestay offerings – and the compensation that they provide to hosts. At the recent Toronto Homestay Professional Development Workshop, one university stated that it will be giving students the choice of “Basic” (a room and meals) or “Plus” homestay.

Some of the potential features of a “Plus” homestay are:

- Hosts take students on a wide range of activities, such as skiing, hiking and watching hockey games
- Location near school so that students can walk or take a short bus ride
- Hosts make hot meals for breakfast and lunch
- Private washrooms
- Caring hosts who are willing to spend extra time with their students

Under this particular university’s plan, “Basic” hosts would receive compensation of \$800 per month. Those in the “Plus” category would get \$1,000 per month. The school plans to monitor whether Plus hosts are meeting expectations by having students fill out exit surveys when they complete a homestay.

I have also heard of some programs offering hosts up to \$2,000 per month to offer a deluxe service of hot meals and driving the student to school every day.

Needless to say, this proposal generated a lot of discussion at the Toronto workshop. Some participants felt that hosts would be disgruntled if they were not “Plus” hosts. Others felt that it would be difficult to monitor whether hosts took the time (and spent the money) to participate in activities with hosts.

As well, there is the question of student expectations. Would students enrolling in the Plus homestay have unrealistic expectations of the level of service that hosts provide? After all, hosting is supposed to be about sharing – not serving students. Since students in a Plus homestay are paying more, they might be expecting a lot more.

## Supporting hosts and students once the honeymoon is over

A new batch of students arrived a few weeks ago and settled into their host families. At first, everything is going great but then a few complaints surface – some students may not like the food, the commute to school is too long or the host family is too busy with their own children’s activities.

Like any relationship, there is a “honeymoon” period between hosts and students. Once that’s over, it doesn’t mean that the placement is doomed to failure – but it does require that everyone works to build the bond.

As homestay coordinators, you must do your part by continuing orientation, organizing activities and supporting both parties.

Encourage hosts to spend time regularly with their students:

- The fall is a great time for hiking, canoeing and other outdoor pursuits. A little exercise and fresh air is great for both physical and mental health
- Games are a great way for people to connect. With our homestay students, we have found that Sequence is an excellent choice – it’s fun and challenging, and can be played by students with basic English proficiency.
- Make some popcorn and schedule a regular movie night

Support your students. You probably had an initial orientation session when they first arrived, but it may have been difficult for them to absorb all that information in the face of jet lag and the excitement of experiencing a new culture.

Therefore, this is a great time to continue orientation with a session on culture shock. Students may be feeling homesick, lonely and be yearning for their own culture. Give them an opportunity to share what they like or dislike about North America.

At the same time, you might wish to hold a webinar for hosts. Explain that students may be going through culture shock and discuss how hosts can support them. The webinar may give hosts an opportunity to raise concerns about their student. They may just need a chance to vent!

## Average host fees jump 13 percent over last year

The dramatic increase in the number of international students coming to Canada has boosted the demand for homestay accommodations. As a result, host payments are on the rise, jumping 13 percent over last year.

Canada currently has more than 500,000 international students. Of course, many post-secondary students stay in dorms or apartments – but homestay is a key component of K-12 programs, private language schools and college/university English-language institutes.

ESQ Educational Services asked homestay staff to answer a survey about host compensation in May. More than 40 programs across Canada responded. The result: The average fee paid to hosts is currently \$845 per month. In last year's survey, the average was \$750. That's an increase of \$95 (13 percent) in just one year.

Whistler, British Columbia, continues to be the location with the most expensive homestay program. Fees there are \$1,200 per month, with the local school board planning to raise it to \$1,500 due to strong demand and a limited supply of host families.

Across Canada, a monthly fee of \$900 was the most common, followed closely by \$800.

The survey also asked whether low host compensation made it difficult to recruit hosts. A whopping 81 percent of respondents said it does.

"If you don't compensate families enough they will say it's costing them money to host a student so not worth it," says Lois Aitken of Mountain View School Division in Manitoba. "However, not everyone does it for the money, but for the most part families need the money to help cover their costs."

When asked to consider the statement that "low compensation makes it hard to retain hosts," 81 percent of respondents agreed.

Commented Rosemary Mooney at Columbia College in Vancouver: "Unfortunately, a host family's loyalty lies to the amount they are being paid. I have lost many good families because our rates are too low. Vancouver is extremely expensive and hosts shop around for schools that pay the most."

Very few programs pay hosts extra for special diets. About 85 percent do not offer additional compensation for vegan, Halal or athlete diets. The remaining 15 percent provide hosts with less than \$5 per day.

More than 85 percent of respondents said that they do not collect a damage deposit or charge a room cleaning fee. For those that did the amount and conditions varied widely.

## Lessons learned from a homestay experience in India

*By Karlee Heath, Whatcom Community College, Bellingham, Washington*

As a former international student now working with international students, I notice that many experiences are similar to mine. Despite being from different countries and in different host countries, I believe most international students share these experiences and they might be helpful for homestay staff and hosts to understand.

In addition, while acknowledging these tendencies are normal, I sometimes regret the way I spent my time in my host country. For that reason, I hope that those working with international students will read this and also take away important lessons.

Here are two truths and a lie about being an international student:

**Truth:** Language learning is exhausting, but you have to be completely committed to it. I spent the first three months of my fellowship in India sleeping 10 plus hours a day. At first, I could not figure out why I was so exhausted. Granted, it was summer in the desert in India, and I can probably chalk most of it up to heat exhaustion, but language learning played a role as well.

Even once the heat subsided, there were days when I would lock myself in my room after a day of Hindi language class so as to not have to try to converse in Hindi with my host family, or I would be interacting with them, but making little or no effort to keep the conversation in Hindi.

Many times, my hosts would speak to me in Hindi and I would respond in English and truthfully, they too sometimes gave up trying and we would converse entirely in English. So, it was both a blessing and a curse that my host family spoke my native language. On the one hand, I likely spent more time with them because of this. Had Hindi been the only option for communication, I might have spent more time locked up in my bedroom avoiding them. At the same time, I can imagine my language skills would have been much stronger had I not been able to “cheat” and use English.



**The takeaway:** Hosts, be understanding of your student needing their space to decompress. Offer options for family activities in the evening that don't require much conversation, such as cooking, playing cards, or watching television. If you happen to speak your student's native language, restrain yourself and keep to English.

Students, give yourself alone time when you need it, but check in with yourself. How much time have you spent in your room the past week? If you were to go home tomorrow, would you feel you made the most of your time here? I regret the time I spent in my bedroom rather than with my hosts, and you probably will too once you return home.

**Truth:** Students have lives back home that are sometimes difficult to let go of. My first trip to India, I had no problem leaving behind my life at home. I had just graduated high school, and I was ready for change. I had wanted to go to India for so long that all I could feel was excitement. I didn't even have an Indian SIM card for a month, so for that first while I didn't check social media, email, or contact anyone from home. This was one extreme, and something I still have to apologize to my at the time very worried mother about. My second trip to India, I was equally excited leading up to it.

I had applied and received a fellowship that would pay for my flight, tuition, and living expenses and I was set on that as my post-graduation plan. Then, as the year wrapped up, I realized I really enjoyed my life in Seattle, my part-time job, classes, friends, etc. and would miss it greatly.

Further, the looming responsibility to begin paying off my student debt made me feel like I was just wasting time when I should be earning money. I lived in two places at once, often on my phone, constantly thinking about what I was going to do when I got home, and not fully living the experience I was so lucky to have. All of this is so easy to see in retrospect, and I hope that students can read my experience and learn from it.

💡 **The takeaway:** Hosts, be understanding that your student is adjusting at first, but after some time, remind them to be mindful of how much time they spend on their phones talking with friends and family back home rather than making connections here. Students, find a healthy balance. Check in with loved ones and let them know you are okay, but don't see your experience as an international student as a "break" from your life. This is your life – live it now.

**Lie:** All of my problems exist in one place, so if I leave that place, they will not follow me. I have experienced the backlash of this false belief through many classmates who travelled to India with me. India specifically, I believe, is a place that draws many looking to "find themselves," and lose their problems. I imagine for many foreign students, the perception of the United States as the land of promise may give it a similar draw. The point being, for my classmates and I'm sure many of our students, they soon found that this expectation was unrealistic. Superficial issues like roommate troubles at home may not travel with you, but mental health problems do. In fact, an uncomfortable and foreign environment along with homesickness and exhaustion can exacerbate these to the point where the logical first step in tackling the issue is to return home.

💡 **The takeaway:** Hosts be on the lookout for signs of mental health issues in your student such as depression. Be in contact with the housing staff if you have concerns and be familiar with the resources available to students.

Students: It is normal to not be okay all of the time, especially when adjusting to a new environment, but be aware of what is simply homesickness, or something more.

## Mennonite hosts delight teenage girls from Madrid

Talk about culture shock. Take a group of teenage girls from big cities in Spain like Madrid and set them up in homestays with conservative Mennonite families living on farms in rural southern Ontario. No television, no radio and must wear a dress to church every Sunday.

For Diane Hahn, Homestay Manager with the Avon Maitland District School Board, the goal was to find suitable families for a six-week summer homestay program without any ESL classes. While she was able to recruit a few families outside the Mennonite community, many parents work during the summer and were not able to devote time during the day to the Spanish students.

She turned to the one Mennonite family already on her roster and they helped spread the word in the tightly knit community in the area around Stratford, west of Toronto.

While some Amish shun all technology by getting around by horse and buggy, the school board recruited families who drive farm trucks and cars and use phones. The district also requires that every host family has internet service available, although some of the Mennonites restrict use to certain times of the day. The Spanish students also had to make do without TV or radio for their entire stay.

“When we first placed the students, we thought: ‘Oh, is this going to work?’” Hahn recalls about the program two years ago.

The parents in Spain were worried too. Many did not want their children placed in such conservative families. “They expected that hosts would be white liberal Canadian couples with two children and a dog. However, our area is becoming increasingly multicultural – and the Mennonites are just one example of this.”

So how did it go? “The Mennonite families were very welcoming even when the teenage girls arrived wearing shorts and halter tops,” Hahn says. “It didn’t take long before all of the students warmed up to it.”

The Spanish girls were kept so busy that they didn’t have time to miss modern technology. The Mennonites engaged the students in church activities several days a week, in addition to Sunday services, allowing them to meet a wide group of people. The students went on hayrides, went for a dip in local swimming holes and picked fresh vegetables from the farm gardens. On Sundays, the students had to dress up for church – but even that was a cultural experience.

All of the homestays were successful – not a single student requested a move to another family.

The program lasted only one summer at Avon Maitland. It proved to be challenging to engage students all day without having them in class. As well, the board decided to change its focus to work with international students who are interested in coming to Canada for a semester or a full year of schooling plus homestay.

Hahn says the experience did present some lessons learned for the school district. “If we do it again, we would need to prepare both sides better. In our host profiles, we would include a lot more information for students/parents about what to expect. Many overseas parents are not even aware that the Mennonite lifestyle exists.”

As with many homestays, it was a learning experience for all parties involved.

## Take your hosts out to the ball game!

Summer is coming soon and with it the umpire's cry: "Play ball." For Whatcom Community College, it's also a unique opportunity to thank its host families by sponsoring a Bellingham Bells game and providing everyone with free tickets.

It's a lot of fun and spreads the word to potential hosts, says Lynnette Berry, International Housing Manager at the college in Bellingham, Washington, a town of 89,000 near the Canadian border.

The Bells are a summer collegiate team in the West Coast League and play a 57-game season against squads in Washington, Oregon and British Columbia.

For \$2,750 to sponsor a game, the homestay program receives:

- 400 tickets for the game to share with hosts, prospective hosts and staff
- Selection of someone to throw out the first pitch. One year, Whatcom chose a host who had been with the program for 20 years and whose dream was always to deliver the first pitch at a game
- Selection of a national anthem singer. One host played the Star Spangled Banner on his saxophone
- A chance for an international student to dress up as the college's whale mascot to hang out with the team mascot. (A student tried to throw out the first pitch one year but it turns out it's very hard to throw a pitch with a whale flipper)
- During the game, the announcer reads three ads about the Whatcom hosting program and the contact info is displayed on the stadium's video screen

In addition, the team provides Whatcom with two season tickets, allowing the program to thank hosts throughout the season from June to August.

"I like to spend our advertising money where I know it is supporting the community directly," says Berry. She notes that an ad in the local newspaper seeking new families would cost a similar amount – minus the fun for students and hosts.

"Over the past 10 years our baseball team has really brought our community together, growing in popularity each year. Many families attend and local small businesses support the team."

In addition, the homestay program sets up a booth at the game to give information to prospective families and chat with existing hosts. "They tell us what's happening with their students and it gets a lot of problems solved in one night," Berry says.

"We have so many great hosts that I don't need to do a lot of recruiting/marketing these days. A good program tends to sell itself and we get many hosts through word of mouth."

At Whatcom, hosts, faculty and staff are already looking forward to the upcoming ball season.



## Phone screening saves you time and weeds out unsuitable hosts

Karen Luther of St. Mary's University in Halifax is such a strong believer in screening potential hosts by phone that she does not even have them complete an application form prior to the call.

"Looking at a paper or online application doesn't give me the same kind of feeling that I can get over the phone," says Luther, the accommodations coordinator with the Language Centre at St. Mary's.

A 15-minute phone conversation can save homestay coordinators from having to conduct a two-hour home visit (plus travel time) to a host that may not be suitable for the program.

There are many issues that can be addressed on a short call:

- Whether the home is on a bus route with a reasonable commute to the school
- The potential host's English proficiency
- The reason they want to host a student
- If the host will be at home most evenings and on weekends to make dinner and socialize with the student

In addition, the call gives Luther a stronger sense of personal security rather than going directly to visit the home of someone she has never spoken with.

At Whatcom Community College in Bellingham, Washington, Lynnette Berry does require potential hosts to complete an application form first. Then she conducts a 10-30 minute phone conversation to provide information about the program and answer any questions prospective hosts may have.

"Often, people will drop out when they realize that they have to provide three meals a day out of the homestay fee," Berry says.

"Each call that I have is a little bit different," Berry notes. She tries to get a sense of why they want to host, whether they have hosted before and their experiences overseas (if any).

After the call, Berry invites them to a one-hour group info session where she provides details about the program and host responsibilities. Again, some will fall off by simply not showing up for the info session.

"Once they have completed the info session, they have demonstrated their commitment to the program and it's pretty much a done deal," Berry notes. "The home visit is just to confirm that their house is suitable and that they will be good hosts."

At St. Mary's, Luther also focuses on the types of questions that potential hosts ask. "Do they ask student focused or cultural questions or do they only ask questions concerning the monetary aspects of hosting?"

One prospective host responded to the question, “What do you hope to gain from hosting?” with the answer: “\$700 for my downstairs bedroom.”

“If they ask a lot of questions about the program, it’s a sign that they are quite keen,” Luther says.

Both Berry and Luther feel that the time spent on a call – whether it lasts 15 minutes or 40 – is a great investment in screening hosts and to determine whether they are hosting for the right reasons.

## Raising sheep generates ideas for hosting students

*By Sarah Dalrymple, Canada Homestay Network Relationship Manager, Winnipeg*

I grew up in the small town of Minnedosa, Manitoba, but my parents are originally from Northern England and emigrated to Canada just before I was born. I come from a long family line of sheep farmers and sheepdog trainers. My grandfather and uncle would compete in sheepdog competitions around the world, so naturally I would get them to show me the ropes every time I went to visit them. When I turned 15 years old, I decided I was ready to take on the family challenge of sheep farming and by the next year, I had purchased my first flock of sheep. I still have them to this day! They enjoy a quiet life out on the farm and every spring we get some new additions to the flock.

I remember distinctly the warnings from my dad when I approached him with the idea. I had spent weeks preparing pie charts and graphs of how it would work financially, sheep shearing classes, how much land area they would need, and fencing practices. I can only imagine what went through his head when I asked him, and I think he only agreed because his ideas are just as crazy as mine. Thick as thieves, we convinced my mom and a year later, I had fenced a couple of fields and purchased twelve ewes and a ram. I had absolutely no idea what I had gotten myself into, a feeling I am sure most host families can relate to, but it was even better than I had imagined it would be.

Don't get me wrong, there were many ups and downs. My first ram was an absolute terror. My entire family fell victim to his playful shenanigans at some point or another. When you ventured into his enclosure, you had to make sure you had your running shoes on and that the laces were tied tight. My first spring soon arrived and with it I had 12 perfect little lambs. This was an amazing bit of luck and I secretly think the sheep were aware that this was my first time and they should go easy on me. Afterwards, it was fair game! There were nights I would set up a cot in the barn to keep an eye on a sheep that was close to delivery. Lambs whose mother had trouble feeding all of them or decided that this was not the lamb for her, would have to be bottle fed every three or four hours. We called them pets because they would follow us around the farm and related more to our dog than to the other sheep.

Despite all of the challenges, the late nights, the hard work, and the frustration, I have learned more from my small sheep family than I thought was possible. Many of these lessons I bring with me into my role as a Relationship Manager as I tend to my flock of students and host families.

### **Lesson # 1: Patience**

Sheep like to take their time, they run around, get lost, and are easily distracted. Even though they often can't understand what I am trying to tell them, they are incredibly smart and intuitive creatures. Time and time again I have underestimated this little flock and I am no longer surprised to see them running across the field after finding a hole in my fencing. I believe the same can be said for our students. Patience is very important as they can often sense our frustration and disapproval when they don't understand.

## **Lesson # 2: Responsibility**

Nothing teaches you responsibility like looking into the eyes of an animal that depends on you. I found this responsibility scary. I still do! What helps the most is having people around that I trust to reach out to for help and support. Even if it is just a friendly ear to listen to my concerns or to get a second opinion. My uncle was always there to give me feedback or advice. Even when that advice was tough to hear, I found he made me a better sheep farmer in the end.

## **Lesson # 3: Individuals**

Tend to the flock, but care for the individual. It is important that everyone has food, water, and shelter, but each one has different needs as an individual and that requires you to be observant and persistent. Every student that we encounter is unique and each hosting experience is different from the last. I have learned to be accepting of the differences among our students and to expect that not everyone will adjust right away.

## **Lesson # 4: Generosity**

Generosity in the eyes of sheep is not about the amount of money that you put into it. It is to be generous with your time, with your space, and with your compassion. Similarly, with a student, small displays of generosity, like providing their favorite brand of comfort food or leaving a welcoming note in their room, goes a long way to making each student feel special and cherished.

Lastly, the biggest lesson I learned was the lesson of stubbornness. Moving a sheep that does not want to move is nearly impossible. They will lean against you with all of their immense weight and refuse to take even one step forwards. How often do I get stuck in my own mindset (or field in the case of a sheep), unwilling to budge or see a different perspective? Most of us just want to feel heard, to have our worries acknowledged, and to break down that communication barrier one heartfelt conversation at a time. It is a vulnerable process to put yourself out there, or venture somewhere you have never been before. Whenever I feel hesitant about making the first move or taking that one step forward, I remember the days of moving a sheep from one pasture to another and that sometimes, you just have to have faith that the grass is greener on the other side of the fence!

## Children can add to the experience – but there can be issues

As with many aspects of homestays, managing expectations around children is essential – for both the student and the host family. Students can benefit from having children in the house. Young children can help the student improve their English without sounding critical, while teenagers can help with social interaction, taking the student to the gym or to the mall with friends.

Sometimes sibling-like relationships can blossom. “We had one host family in which the daughter still keeps in touch with the homestay student. Now that they are both young adults they meet in different places for vacations together,” notes Evelyn Sieben, Homestay Coordinator at the Louis Riel School Division in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

However, she notes that it is important to keep expectations realistic for both the homestay student and the children. “We’ve had other families where the teenager has stated that the homestay student doesn’t fit in with the friends.” Sieben prepares both parties to have a positive homestay experience but one where long-lasting friendships are not guaranteed.

At EC Language Centre in San Francisco, Operations Manager Ashley Sawyer says that young children can be beneficial. “Often, they make great connections with the student and are helpful in overcoming language challenges for ESL learners,” she notes. Young children often love to be read to, and reading children’s books can be great language practice for ESL students.

Sawyer cautions that it is important that teenagers be involved in the decision to host a student. “We had one situation where a teenage girl did not want to host students and caused a number of problems. We eventually had to stop using that home until the girl left for college.”

Obviously, it is not possible to consult with young children about hosting. Nevertheless, host parents can prepare their children by explaining different scenarios and urging them to welcome the student. Teenagers however, should not be expected to include the student in all of their activities. As well, the student should be encouraged to make friends outside the family.

It is important that homestay coordinators send the student information about the family prior to arrival, Sawyer says. “We’ve had situations where young Japanese females do not want to be placed in homes with boys from age 14 to 25. If they don’t let us know in advance, it can be very awkward when they arrive because we then have to find an alternative homestay.”

Homestay students from countries where single-child families are common (such as China) may have unrealistic expectations. Sieben says that some Chinese students arrive expecting that the host parents will be able to spend a lot of time with them, but are disappointed when some of their attention is diverted to their own children.

With all of these issues, effective communication and training are essential. Host families need to receive orientation around potential issues with their children. Similarly, homestay students must come to North America with realistic expectations and be prepared to adapt.

## Managing expectations in homestays: Keeping everyone happy

To ensure that students have reasonable expectations, Fran Golden of the University of Missouri at Kansas City communicates with them in advance. She provides a Q&A sheet outlining some of the amenities that hosts will provide – and what they don't offer.

"I make it very clear to students that hosts will not drive them to school. I tell them that the host is not their taxi driver." However, to make it easier for the students Golden selects host families that are on a bus route between 10 and 15 minutes from school.

Her program has many male students from Saudi Arabia and meeting their needs for a special diet can be a challenge. She tries to make it clear up front to the students that hosts will not be able to make halal meals, but agrees that the host will not provide them with pork or wine.

Student expectations sometimes change once they start chatting with classmates. "They want to know if they can have a private bathroom like their friend has. So, I have to sit down with them, show them the Q&A sheet, and explain that homestays will have either a shared or a private bathroom."

Golden provides students with The Essential Guide for Homestay Students, which covers family life, food and other aspects of North American culture. "The booklet really helps students to have realistic expectations," she says.

Many host families expect that students will stay for the whole semester. Golden tells families that students commit for just a month. "We make it clear on the student application that we want them to stay at the same homestay for the entire semester, but ultimately it's their decision."

Golden finds that special groups can sometimes pose challenges. If there is a problem at a homestay, word spreads very quickly and students in the group quickly jump to conclusions. "I talk to the students about the issue and try to resolve it, but let the student move if they insist – it's really not worth the fight. Again, my ultimate goal is for the student to feel safe and happy. If I can change things in the home, that's my first try. If the student is set on moving, then I move him or her."

At the Global Language Institute in St. Paul, Minnesota, Mary Guion emphasizes to students: "We want you to be happy with the family and want them to be happy with you."

She finds that students sometimes think that the more liberal society in North America means that they can do whatever they want. "Some students think that they can just not show up for dinner or stay awake all night playing on their computer." Guion emphasizes that students are joining the host family, with responsibilities to keep their rooms clean and help with the dishes.

In order to manage expectations, Guion provides an information sheet to students, letting them know about food, responsibilities and other concerns. As well, she emphasizes the value of early and frequent communication. Before arrival in the United States, she encourages hosts and students to share information and learn about family life. "This makes for a nice bond before the student arrives," she notes.

## Best practices in selecting host families

Choosing great host families is important because a student's living experience can have a huge impact on their overall satisfaction with your program. We spoke with three program directors who shared how they screen host families.

All three emphasized that thoroughly interviewing prospective families during the home visit is time well-spent. Karen Luther, accommodations coordinator with the TESL Centre at St. Mary's University in Halifax, invests up to three hours speaking with families. She brings a complete binder about the TESL and Homestay program, including Ethical Standards and Best Practices for Host Families. She goes through it with the families so that they get a clear understanding of the expectations of spending time with a student. At the conclusion of the meeting and the home inspection, both sides decide if they want to move forward.

Paula Medina, director of the London Language Institute, encourages homestay coordinators to follow their instincts about prospective hosts. She always asks herself: "If this was my child, would I feel comfortable having them live with this family?"

Medina pays attention to the types of questions that the families ask. "If one of the first questions they ask is about financial compensation, we become quite wary. Money should not be the primary motivation for hosting."

Malvina Rapko of Saskatoon Public Schools uses her extensive interview to determine if the parents relate well with young people. "If they are either too strict or too hands off, that will raise a red flag for me."

She likes to engage the family in conversation, rather than conducting a formal interview. This allows her to determine if they have ever lived abroad, travelled or if they hold any cultural stereotypes and have any other experiences that would benefit or cause issues with hosting an international student.

St. Mary's follows a multi-step process to ensure prospective hosts are vetted thoroughly:

Potential hosts email or phone the program, which does not advertise for host families. Luther conducts an initial screen by phone. This gives her a chance to weed out unsuitable families without investing a lot of time.

She then sends out the application form with complete information about the steps that the family has to take to be approved. Sometimes, families drop out when they realize that they will need to invest considerable effort to apply and host a student.

Once the application is received, she conducts the home visit and meeting. If both sides want to proceed after the meeting, she calls the three references provided.

The final step is to conduct a check to ensure that all of the adults in the household do not have a criminal record.

All three program directors emphasized that the home visit and lengthy interview are both worthwhile. "We want to make sure that hosts are in it for the right reasons," Luther concludes.



## Interviewing host families

Recently, I was talking with a homestay coordinator about a family that just didn't work out. At first, it seemed that everything was ideal – plenty of international travel experience, a spacious and well-kept home and friendly family members.

However, there was a challenge. The host father was enthusiastic about the idea but was not home that often. That left the host mother with all the responsibility of making dinners, conversing with the student and helping him get to activities. Eventually, she got fed up and didn't want to do it anymore.

Could this have been avoided during the interview process with the prospective host family? Perhaps. Here are some tips for interviewing hosts to ensure that host families will stick with it for the long term:

- Everyone on board: Meet with all members of the household. A disgruntled teenager who did not want to share the home has been known to sabotage a homestay.
- Manage the interview: Ask questions of everyone – don't let one individual dominate the conversation. Listen carefully to each person's responses.
- Expectations: Determine why each family member wants to host a student. Make sure that they are aware of the responsibilities involved in hosting.
- Acceptance of diversity: Students will bring their own culture to the home. Are all members of the host family open and accepting?
- Empathy: The student will likely go through some culture shock and other challenges. Host families must be able to empathize and support the student.

## Singles can make great hosts

When it comes to her roster of people sharing homes with international students, Ann Friesen prefers the term "homestay hosts" over "host families."

The Homestay Coordinator at the English Language Centre at the University of Manitoba, Friesen has quite a few single hosts and finds the term "homestay hosts" more inclusive.

While families are the traditional homestay providers, she feels that singles can also make great hosts. "Often, singles have more time to spend with the student than host families who have children," she notes. They are able to do activities together and show the student around town.

Sometimes students will request a home with a single host so it's good to have a mix of options available. "Many students want a quiet place with no children where they can study," she notes.

Of course, a couple is able to ensure that at least one host is home most of the time. "Our hosts are not required to be home every evening. In fact, we allow them to be away for a few days, as long as the student is OK with this and the host has someone available to check in."

At the University of Manitoba, all of the students are over 18, making it more appropriate for them to be home alone in the evenings. Friesen agrees that it would be more challenging to have a lot of singles as hosts for international high school programs since younger students need more supervision.

For many single hosts, having a student provides company. "It's a great way to share their home," Friesen says.

Here's what one host told her: "This is the most fun I've had in years. The joy of hearing infectious laughter in the house, the pleasure of establishing new friendships and the stimulation of discussing their courses and different philosophies is hard to beat. I hope to continue for years to come and look forward to meeting new students from many parts of the world."

## Orientation and Training for Host Families

Ensuring that each host family is well-prepared to host a student is like an investment – it pays dividends throughout the duration of the student's stay with the family.

Luke Botzheim, Housing Director at Edmonds Community College in Lynnwood, Washington, integrates training into the college's host family application process. Potential hosts are invited to a five-hour orientation meeting, which covers college policies, student expectations, culture shock and more. Not only does the meeting ensure that hosts are thoroughly trained, it also helps them decide if hosting is truly for them at this time. After the orientation, potential hosts complete the application form, Background Check Forms, and receive a home visit.

Once families are approved, college staff members work closely with them while they are hosting their first student, providing support and advice. "We ask questions of the student to find out how they are doing," Botzheim says. "If there is a concern, we go out to the house and see what's happening."

Edmonds housing staff also tell families about the importance of keeping them informed about any changes in the household, such as getting a new puppy or having a relative move in. "These can have an impact on the student experience so it's important that we know about it," notes Botzheim.

Host families at Edmonds are invited to attend talks given by guest speakers who explain about the culture of a country and indicate what families might expect to see in students from those countries.

Jenny Thompson, Accommodations Coordinator at Global Village English Centre in Calgary, Alberta, meets with new host families to discuss scenarios that may play out with students. She advises about cross-cultural communication and helping students adapt to North American food. Thompson suggests ways to communicate effectively with students with low English levels, such as using pictures or writing down key information in point form. The most important thing is that students feel included as part of each host family. GV Calgary ensures that its homestay program more than exceeds the minimum standards as set out by Languages Canada, the language industry association.

Global Village Calgary provides homestay participants with a copy of The Essential Guide for Host Families or The Essential Guide for Homestay Students, which is available in eight languages. The Accommodations Coordinator conducts a home visit prior to a new family accepting its first students and aims for a "refresher" visit with each host family every two years. Thompson says that this is a great opportunity to do a house inspection, discuss any concerns and make suggestions for improvement.

## Student homestay orientation

There are many ways to approach student homestay orientation but all programs have the same objective: To ensure that students are well-prepared and have a great experience.

A good orientation program takes a lot of time to prepare and deliver. However, it undoubtedly pays off in reducing the number of problems that homestay coordinators have to deal with.

Here are some tips for a great orientation:

- **Start early:** A couple of months before arrival in North America, students can be encouraged to start thinking about their expectations for homestay and given some information about rights and responsibilities. If the students are part of a group from a particular country, the agent or school can organize an orientation meeting. We have recently introduced e-versions of The Essential Guide for Homestay Students so that you can send them to students in advance.
- **Involve parents:** Parents want to be involved in their child's experience. By providing parents with information, you can encourage them to coach their son or daughter on how to be a respectful guest in the homestay.
- **Make it fun:** Orientation does not need to be a lecture. You can use videos, skits, games and quizzes. One homestay program asked students: "What do you do if you are going to be late for dinner?" The choices are: "A) Phone your host. B) Phone your host. C) Phone your host."
- **Keep it simple the first day:** When students arrive, they are often jet-lagged and feeling overwhelmed. You can give hosts a checklist about how to use the microwave and the bathroom and where to find the breakfast cereal. However, restrict it to a few items. Students can learn more later, including how to operate the washer, dryer and dishwasher.

## Sometimes students are afraid of Fido and Fluffy

Eve Herman, owner of Student Homestay Services in Toronto, has a challenge. While most host families have at least one pet, students may be afraid of them or feel they are unclean.

As with many homestay issues, good communication and education can help. Herman works hard to reassure agents and students that pets can be a positive aspect of the homestay experience. “Often, the student will put on their application that they want to live in a home with no pets. Once I explain to them that if they keep their bedroom door closed the dog or cat won’t enter, they are more willing.”

Herman finds it’s useful to include details about the pet in the host family profile. “Students are comfortable when they realize that the pet is friendly and part of the family.”

Small things can make a big difference. “The initial meeting of the student and the host family is critical. I find it’s very useful if the family warns the student in advance that the dog may bark when the student arrives.”

However, sometimes there is no solution. She had one family who said they had no pets but had not informed her that they occasionally dog-sat. This family was hosting an Islamic student and under his culture he was not permitted to live in a house with a dog. “The host hadn’t even thought about it but there was no choice – I had to move the student to another family.”

Dealing with students who don’t want to live with pets is even tougher in British Columbia’s Gulf Islands School District, a rural area where almost every family has a pet. Sheri Wakefield, Student Services Coordinator, says that students often are concerned that a house with pets will be unclean. “I reassure the students that the house is not messy and I send them pictures. Usually, that convinces them.”

Ironically, the students who were very nervous about pets often end up liking them the most, Wakefield says. “Students can talk to them in their own language. Like children, pets are accepting of the person and don’t judge.”

For both Herman and Wakefield, the keys are to be honest up front and communicate with the students before they arrive. “There should be no surprises,” Wakefield says.

## In Good Faith: Dealing with Religion in Homestays

Homestay is a great opportunity for intercultural learning around religion – but it must be handled carefully. Host parents often try to include students in family activities by inviting them to religious services. However, families must make it clear that the outing is not an attempt to convert them to their faith.

Students can have very diverse religious needs. Homestay coordinators can help by preparing a list of worship centers and social groups for their students' religions. Muslim students may need separate prayer rooms as well.

Homestay coordinators can do their part by managing expectations. Application forms can include questions about religious beliefs so that students can be matched with appropriate host families. However, it is important to indicate it if the program cannot guarantee a religious match.

Sometimes the experience can be enlightening for both students and hosts. Commented one homestay student: "One of the most interesting parts of my stay was the Christmas party. About 30 people from my host family came together and celebrated a traditional Christmas. I'll never forget it."

## Conflict resolution in homestays

As a homestay coordinator, part of your role is resolving conflicts between students and host families. However, few people enjoy mediating disputes and you undoubtedly have many other tasks on your plate.

Here are a few tips to help you resolve conflicts – and avoid them in the first place:

1. **An ounce of prevention:** Training for host families and orientation for students can be invaluable in preventing conflicts before they happen. It's important to recognize that everyone has good intentions and wants the homestay to be a great experience.
2. **Understanding cultural concerns:** In some cultures, such as Japanese, students will prefer to maintain harmony rather than start a conflict. They may avoid saying “no” directly or remain silent. Encourage students to be as open as possible with the host family. On the other hand, hosts need a good reserve of tolerance, patience and perseverance in order to have effective communication with students.
3. **Work it out:** Hosts and students should be urged to resolve their issues independently prior to contacting you. Hosts should be asked to take the lead on this since they are the adults in the situation.
4. **Sooner rather than later:** Conflict can worsen if it is ignored for too long. Again, students from some cultures may prefer to avoid confrontation. Hosts should watch for signs that their student is troubled about an issue – and be persistent in asking about it.
5. **Hosts should pick their battles:** Like North American teenagers, homestay students can sometimes be frustrating. Hosts should ignore minor irritants and focus on the most important issues in the relationship.
6. **Communicate in person:** Texting, emailing and even phone calls can lead to miscommunication because they do not provide people with a chance to view body language and facial expressions. If there is a conflict, discuss it in person.
7. **Ask for help:** Students can become frustrated as they struggle to express their views about a conflict using their emerging English skills. In these cases, it is useful to call on a native speaker to help with translation, whether they be on staff or a volunteer from the community.
8. **Your role:** If hosts and students have tried all of these methods and are still in conflict, you should step in to help. A few golden rules: Remain calm and respectful. Urge both parties to forgive and move on. Solutions should involve compromise and allow for face-saving.



## Every party must help to ensure good communication

A minor issue between a host and a student can escalate into a time-consuming battle for the homestay coordinator. That's why it's essential for the program to set out expectations around communication roles.

For example, recently a host took a package of meat out of the freezer to thaw for dinner. The student examined the packaging and noted that the best before date had passed four weeks ago (the meat had been frozen since purchase).

The student was apparently not familiar with the concept of freezing foods and was alarmed about the expiry date. Instead of asking the host about it, he raised a stink with his parents back home and the agent. It ultimately involved hours of time for the homestay coordinator and the school to satisfy both the agent and the school.



This cautionary tale suggests that all parties must take some responsibility for ensuring that communication is effective. Both the homestay program and the school should have a communications plan that covers how communication should flow.

There can be six different parties involved with homestays:

- **Students:** Students must be encouraged to resolve questions with the host parents before turning to an agent, natural parent or homestay coordinator. They should receive guidance during orientation about how to address their concerns. The Essential Guide for Homestay Students can be a useful tool since it includes information about student responsibilities and effective communication.
- **Agents:** The agent is responsible for advocating for the student and the natural parents. The school must make clear to the agent where the lines of communication should be and when the agent should get involved.
- **Natural parents:** Of course, parents are concerned that their children are cared for, especially if they are still in high school. Make it clear to parents with whom they should communicate if there are any issues.
- **Hosts:** Families should try to resolve concerns with a student, but if they can't they should work directly with the homestay coordinator. It can complicate matters if they get involved with the natural parents.
- **School:** What is the role of the teacher or the principal? Be clear about expectations.
- **Homestay coordinator:** Of course, the homestay coordinator is responsible for making sure that the lines of communication are clear. The homestay coordinator must take the lead in resolving any issues and involve the appropriate parties.

## Host guides to discussing issues with students

A simple handout can help your hosts to stay positive in discussing issues with their international student. When hosts and students resolve issues on their own, it can save you time.

Here's a sample situation that could be used on a handout:

### **Communicating Effectively With Your Student**

You may experience some challenges communicating with your student. There can be language barriers as well as different cultural expectations. Students expect that hosts will be direct but polite in trying to resolve issues.

Here's a simple step-by-step process for working with your student:

**Issue: Student does not come home for dinner on time.**

**Step 1: Start with a positive statement**

*We enjoy talking with you at the dinner table.*

**Step 2: Tell your student about the issue**

*However, it is hard for us to plan our evening if we don't know when you are going to be home.*

**Step 3: Propose solutions or ask for ideas**

*Can you help us with this? Perhaps you can call us by 3 pm and let us know if you are going to be late?*

**Step 4: Work towards a solution**

*Student: That sounds fair. I will call you by 3 pm if I will be late.*

## Identifying and dealing with student mental health issues

An increasing number of homestay coordinators are becoming certified in Mental Health First Aid to better understand signs and symptoms of mental health issues in international students.

Jennifer Wilson, Managing Director of the Canada Homestay Network, told the Languages Canada conference last week that many of the organization's homestay coordinators are required to complete the MHFA course offered by the Mental Health Commission of Canada. In the United States, the program is delivered by the National Council for Behavioral Health.

Just like North American students, some international students may face mental health concerns. For international students, the problem can be exacerbated by culture shock and a lack of a support network of family and friends while overseas.

The Mental Health First Aid course helps front line workers to identify problems and take initial steps.

It is important to note that it does not train participants to be therapists. It does teach people to:

- Recognize signs and symptoms of mental health problems
- Provide initial help confidently and calmly
- Guide a person to appropriate professional assistance

Homestay coordinators should educate host families about identifying potential concerns among their students. Some of the signs are:

- Persistent feelings of sadness
- Excessive fears
- Mood swings from high to low
- Withdrawal
- Difficulty sleeping

Some of these symptoms can overlap with culture shock, which happens to many international students on arrival. However, feelings of culture shock usually dissipate after a few weeks. Persistent symptoms may be signs of an ongoing mental health issue.

Of course, it is not the role of the host parents to act as therapists. If they identify a concern, they should contact the homestay coordinator, who can then seek appropriate assistance.

Information about the Mental Health First Aid course is available for [Canada](#) and the [USA](#). There is a course specifically designed for those who work with youth age 12-24.

## Supporting Gay Students

Our family was sitting around the dinner table one day discussing a movie actor who is gay. Our homestay student chimed in confidently: "There are no gay people in my country."

This anecdote indicates the challenges that gay homestay students may have. Countries around the world have a range of opinions and laws regarding homosexuality.

When they come to North America, gay students find they have more freedom to express themselves. However, this comes with its own challenges. Should the student come out to friends, teachers and classmates? What if some people in North America make anti-gay comments?

Part of the homestay coordinator's job is to support all students, including those who are LGBTQ (Lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer and transgender). Here are some tips:

- Be supportive and make sure that all international program staff and teachers are.
- Help students to feel safe. Make sure that other students do not make anti-gay slurs. It is important to speak up rather than remaining silent.
- Maintain complete confidentiality if homestay students disclose their sexual orientation to you. The student may not wish to be out in public with other students and teachers.
- Offer support to gay students but do not assume that they need help. Be there to listen first.
- The host family does not need to know the sexual orientation of their homestay student. It is up to the student to decide whether to share this information.
- Familiarize yourself with resources in the school and community that support gay students.
- Be a role model of acceptance.
- Teach respect in your classes.

If you need help, reach out to gay organizations in your community for advice.

## Student safety and homestays

I was working in my garden recently when I heard a terrific crash down the street. I ran to the scene to find that two cars had collided, throwing pieces of the vehicles across the road. Fortunately, all four people in the cars had been wearing their seatbelts and no one was hurt.

It made me think that homestay student safety would be a good topic for this newsletter. While not intended to be comprehensive, here are a few tips for ensuring that your students are safe:

- Make sure that they use seatbelts in cars and wear helmets while riding bikes.
- Most high school programs prohibit students from driving; older students should be encouraged to ride public transit, cycle or walk.
- Families should warn students about avoiding busy roads or sketchy neighborhoods, especially at night.
- Students should not be allowed to use dangerous equipment such as lawnmowers or snowblowers. If they will be helping outside, families should have them use a snow shovel or rake.
- Your students should know about smoke detectors in the home. They should receive instructions on how to call 9-1-1 or the local emergency number.
- Host families must provide a demonstration of how to operate household appliances, such as microwaves, blenders and washing machines.

## Cooking up a storm: Students in the kitchen

At our house, every time one of our Asian students made rice it would be a disaster - she would put the rice and water in a pot, leave it on the stove and return an hour later to find a blackened mess. Not only was it a big clean-up job, it was dangerous. Finally, we realized that we needed to go the store and get an inexpensive rice cooker because that was the only way she knew to make rice.

Hosts need to provide guidance to students on how much cooking is acceptable. Generally, students should be expected to eat the family meal prepared by the host parent. When students make their own meals, it can add to the grocery bill and also be a barrier to integrating into family life.

Breakfast in North America can be quite different from other countries. Host families can help by setting out breakfast foods the night before, such as cereals and bread for toasting. As breakfast in other countries is often substantial, providing additional protein foods, such as meat, eggs or yoghurt may be helpful. Packed lunches may also be a challenge as many homestay students are accustomed to a hot lunch. Providing chili or hearty soups in a thermos is an option and it is useful to discuss with the student what lunch options are possible.

Students may be used to a different schedule of eating, with the evening meal often being served between 7 to 10 pm. Eating at 6 pm may initially be difficult for the student.

Of course, it is always appreciated if a student offers to cook a meal from their own country for the host family. This gives the hosts a break from cooking and allows the student to explain about the meal and its ingredients. This is a great opportunity for intercultural learning.

## Students and household chores – what is reasonable?

Trudy Stevens uses a guiding rule when it comes to household chores – students are responsible for keeping clean the areas of the house where they have had an impact. That means that they should tidy up after themselves in the bedroom, bathroom and kitchen.

Stevens, the Homestay Coordinator in the English Language Program at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, emphasizes that it is critical to set out the expectations in advance. “Host families do receive payments from students but it is not so much money that students should expect service like in a hotel,” Stevens says.

Many students volunteer to help with chores. “Students love shoveling snow because it is a new experience for them,” she notes. The students like having a photo of themselves clearing snow so that they can post them on social media and send to family members. (Students should not be permitted to use dangerous equipment such as snowblowers or lawn mowers).

Sometimes students approach Stevens to ask if they should help with the dishes or cook. “I tell them that hosts always appreciate assistance. As well, it is a great cross-cultural experience to prepare a meal from their country.”

Occasionally, issues arise with students who come from wealthy families with household staff. These students are accustomed to doing very little around the house. “Once they are told about household chores, they understand pretty quickly. It’s really an issue of cultural expectations.” If a student is unable to adapt, Stevens may suggest that they move to an apartment where they can hire a maid service.

For high school programs, the age and maturity of the students can influence expectations around chores. Denisse Parra, Homestay/Program Manager at the Lord Selkirk School Division in Selkirk, Manitoba, suggests that a 13-year-old should be able to clean his room and empty his garbage can.

Parra finds it’s important to establish expectations early. Younger students are eager to learn and often willing to participate in basic chores. Older teenagers are less interested in tidiness – just like North American adolescents.

In some families, the host mother sees herself as the manager of the household and wants to take care of the student. Notes Parra: “We had one family in which the mother preferred to do the laundry but the student was not comfortable having someone wash her clothes.” After some discussion with Parra, the host agreed to provide a time when the student could use the washer. The host mother continued to launder sheets and towels.

Both Parra and Stevens prohibit students from babysitting, noting that it is not appropriate for students to take on this serious responsibility.



## Dealing with technology

Today's technologies make communicating easier than ever, but also bring challenges for homestay coordinators and host families.

When students set up their cellphone in North America, it is important to emphasize that host families are not responsible for cellphone costs. As well, students should not ask to be added to the host's account or for the host to co-sign a contract. An easy option is to buy an inexpensive phone with pre-paid minutes. Students should be warned to be careful using their phone, since there may be hefty charges for calling or internet browsing that exceeds the plan limit.

Educators and homestay coordinators sometimes are concerned that students spend so much time online that it hurts their ability to complete homework, improve their English and socialize with their host family. Homestay coordinators should encourage students to limit their usage.

To prevent students from staying up all night using technology, hosts could ask students to leave their electronic devices outside their room at night. This will remove any temptation to use them and enable students to get a good sleep. Another option is for hosts to turn off internet service at night, although students could still use smartphones.

## Avoiding conflict of interest in homestay

At first glance, it may seem simplest to have a teacher at the school or even the homestay coordinator serve as host parents. After all, those who work with the program are familiar with the rules and with the needs of international students.

However, in my opinion this is a conflict of interest and is potentially risky. Will a student feel comfortable raising a concern about a homestay situation when the host is in a position of authority at the school? It can be challenging enough for young students who are in a foreign country to speak up about their concerns without this awkwardness. If the student is hosted by the homestay coordinator, with whom do they discuss an issue?

If there is an allegation of a serious incident in a homestay, the situation becomes very complicated. While host families can be “put on the shelf” or have their contracts terminated, this becomes a challenge when the host also works at the school.

In preparing for next month’s homestay workshop at the conference of the Canadian Association of Public Schools – International, we were presented with a case study that’s even more dangerous. While the details will be shared at the conference, the case study involved a school board trustee acting as a host family. When problems arose in the home, the homestay coordinator was left in a quandary of how to deal with a high-ranking superior.

It may be a bit more work, but it’s best to keep it clear and avoid conflicts of interest - don’t have school staff or officials act as host families.

## Does your program need to collect a damage deposit?

When a homestay student left the shower curtain outside the tub, spilling water and causing severe damage to the floor, Malvina Rapko of Saskatoon Public Schools knew she had to consider implementing a damage deposit.

The student had been repeatedly told about the shower curtain and was even given the instructions in writing in her native language. Nevertheless, she failed to be careful and water got on the floor. It was so bad one day that the water spilled out of the bathroom, damaging the hardwood floors in the hallway and the ceiling on the floor below. Total cost: \$1,600.

A survey of school districts, language schools and universities shows that there is a wide range of policies around damage deposits. Some programs collect a refundable deposit of \$500 or more; others do not require a deposit at all.

The Saskatoon board considered a number of options. One possibility was to collect a damage deposit from each student and return it if there were no incidents. However, this would create a fair bit of paperwork for the administration and it is not always easy to find an appropriate way of sending the money once the student has returned home.

Eventually, Rapko and her board decided to implement a non-refundable maintenance fee rather than a deposit. The cost is \$100 for students staying a full year and \$75 for a semester. At the end of a stay, the host family receives \$50 of this fee to cover cleaning of the student's room and the bathroom that they used. The family can choose to clean the room themselves or hire a service.

The remainder of the maintenance fee is put into a fund to pay for any damages that occur in the future. If there are no incidents one year, the money is saved for the next year.

For Rapko, the primary benefit of the maintenance fee is that it is fair for students, host families and program staff. As well, it is easy to administer; the board does not have to worry about returning deposits at the end of the year.

Students may have insurance coverage to pay for damages as part of their medical insurance. Stephanie Hiltz of Ingle Insurance notes that all students registered with Ingle are covered for third party liability, which includes accidental and unintentional damage to property not belonging to a student. The policy works as a second payer in conjunction with a homeowner's insurance – if the damage is below the cost of the homeowner's deductible, the student's insurance covers the entire cost of the damage.

## Mediate to solve the problem – or move the student?

It's important to know when to try to resolve a homestay issue and when to simply move the student, Cheryl Lee of Muskoka Language International told the Canadian Association of Public Schools - International conference this month.

Most vitally, homestay coordinators should have a firm policy about when it is essential to move the student immediately. This includes:

- Violence
- Harassment or abuse
- Racism or discrimination
- Medical emergency on the part of the hosts
- Abuse of drugs or alcohol in the home

She told homestay coordinators that these other concerns also necessitate a move, although not urgently:

- Breaking rules of the host agreement
- Unreported people in the house
- Hosts not speaking English at home
- Undisclosed medical issues that make hosts unable to have a student
- Divorce or marital problems
- Student isolated and not involved with family
- Host too busy for student care
- Undisclosed pets

Here are some examples of issues that should be mediated rather than requiring that a student be moved:

- Food issues
- Personality conflicts
- Attitude
- Dynamic with children in the home
- Interaction poor for student or the family
- Weak student communication skills or low English levels
- Student cleanliness
- Too much screen time
- Natural parents not supporting homestay rules

## What to do when you must move a student?

Homestay coordinator Jennifer Pineo knows personally what it's like when a student asks to be moved from a host family. Before taking on the position, she served as a host parent. "I remember the first time that the student requested a new host family. You have this feeling that you have failed."

"It's important that you communicate to the family that they are not a failure. It just was not a good match for what the student was looking for," says Pineo, a teacher and homestay coordinator at the Annapolis Valley Regional School Board in Wolfville, Nova Scotia.

For Pineo, the challenge begins when students fill out their profiles. Sometimes expectations don't match up with what they have indicated. For example, a student who expressed an interest in sports may be happy watching them on TV; they may not be a match with a family that is on the run constantly to hockey and soccer practice. Once the student arrives, Pineo gets to know them better and can usually find a family that is a better match.

If the homestay is not working out, Pineo encourages the student to talk to the family first. "It's good if they can be an advocate for themselves," she says. If the student is not comfortable approaching the family directly, she will arrange a meeting and try to work out the issues.

Pineo will move the student if the problem cannot be resolved. "You are a spokesperson for both the student and the family. It's important to be clear that no one is to blame."

After the move, the student is asked to fill out a Homestay Reflection Form. It asks them to explain why the homestay did not work and to list the positive aspects. The student also writes a letter to the host family indicating the reasons for requesting a change. "We started it this year and it has been successful so far as there are a lot of positive things in the reflection."

At the Canadian Language Learning College (CLLC) in Ottawa, students are guaranteed to be satisfied with homestay. "If they are unhappy, we are willing to move them," says Dale Corley, operations manager.

CLLC uses a Quality Assurance Rating System to assess each homestay. There are six criteria: Food, cleanliness, distance to school, cultural sensitivity, family interaction and luxuriousness of the home. The school asks the student to set priorities. "If the student says he wants to be close to the school, we can match him with the appropriate host family."

If the issue is minor, such as the quality of the food, CLLC's Homestay Counsellor mediates between the student and the family. However, if the problem is more serious, such as inappropriate behavior by one of the hosts, the school will move the student immediately and terminate the contract with the family.

CLLC has found that careful screening ensures high-quality host families. "With effective communication, most issues can be resolved easily. We have been fortunate to have such great families in our program that we have not had to move too many students," Corley says.

## Saying goodbye: The end of the homestay

All homestays come to an end and homestay coordinators need to be prepared, whether they conclude on a positive note or with strained relations.

“From the very beginning of a homestay, host families should be thinking about saying goodbye,” emphasizes Ann Friesen, homestay coordinator at the University of Manitoba English Language Centre. “Host parents should be comfortable talking about all kinds of issues. Discussing the end of a homestay with the student will make it much easier for the student to talk about it when they decide to try a different type of accommodation.”

For high school programs, it can be simpler. There is a natural conclusion for homestays at the end of a semester or school year. However, adult students enrolled in a university language program or private language school may wish to move to an apartment with friends in the middle of a session. In some cultures, this may be the only opportunity for students to live independently prior to marriage – when they return to their home country they will be expected to again be under the parental roof.

At Internexus of Indiana on the campus of the University of Indianapolis, homestay coordinator Karen Emmett notes that it is not always clear why students are leaving homestays. “They give reasons like ‘saving some money’ or ‘helping out a friend by sharing an apartment’ but they may be just being polite.” It’s important for homestay coordinators to reassure host families that they should not be offended.

Some landlords may ask the student to provide a guarantor to co-sign the lease on an apartment. Friesen has a strict policy that host parents should not co-sign, citing the financial risks if the student fails to pay the rent or leaves the country.

The University of Manitoba also asks students to complete a form stating that they are leaving the homestay and that notice was given (in Friesen’s program, 30 days’ notice is required).

If the departure is on good terms, hosts are encouraged to have a special dinner together to share memories and perhaps exchange gifts. However, if there is tension saying goodbye can be trickier. “I advise host parents to try to have a good last week with the student,” Friesen says. “As the adult in the situation, I count on the host to rise above the issues and be kind to the student.”

In particularly difficult situations, Friesen will come to the home while the student is moving. This is time-consuming, but she finds it is worthwhile to ensure that there are no further problems.

At the end of each homestay, Emmett asks students to fill out a survey. Students are assured that the information will not be shared with the host family. Instead, Emmett uses the results to help hosts to have successful experiences. “It’s good to learn how to do things differently. Sometimes students just want more conversation with the family and this is easy to accomplish.”

## Helping students with mental health issues

Homestay coordinators must be prepared to help international students facing mental health challenges, Dr. Jennifer Russel told the Homestay Manager Professional Development Conference in Vancouver.

The adolescent psychiatrist with BC Children's Hospital informed attendees that 20 percent of Canadians will face mental illness in their lifetime. She noted that the statistics for other countries are similar, although in some cultures mental health issues are not acknowledged. Moving to a new country increases the risk because of the shift in cultures and the absence of a support network. Therefore, international students are particularly vulnerable.

During the conference, the 40 attendees had the opportunity to analyze case studies involving homestay students facing mental health challenges. In one of the case studies, a student believes that people on the street are laughing at him and want to steal his computer. He has a stomachache and is afraid that the host family is trying to poison him. He wonders if he should buy a knife to protect himself.

We explored options of how to support this youth. Dr. Russel emphasized that wherever possible we should try to develop a plan together with him. Options include talking with team members, going to the family doctor and accessing local mental health supports. If necessary, he could be taken to the Emergency Department or 911 could be called. It is important to protect both the student and the host family from potential risk.

Homestay coordinators attending the conference said homestay students in their programs had faced a range of mental health issues, including eating disorders, depression and suicide. Several participants have taken the [Mental Health First Aid](#) course (available in both Canada and the US) so that they could help students with mental illness.

## Case Study: Improving communication with an overseas parent

Alice is a 15-year-old student from a wealthy family in China. She is having trouble adjusting to living with a North American family. She doesn't like the food and her academic record is not strong. She has been at your high school for the past three months and plans to stay at least two years. Alice's mother is very concerned about her situation. She emails and calls the program about Alice on an almost daily basis. She has already made one trip from China to visit her daughter - this was disruptive because the girl missed several days of school during the visit.

In a parent/school Skype interview, you ask that the parent reduce the frequency of contacting the program. However, the parent says she is paying a lot of money for her daughter's education and wants to make sure that she is doing well. All of this communication is placing a huge strain on your program's resources. What do you do?

***Here's what our panel at the Vancouver Homestay Manager Professional Development Conference proposed:***

It's important to validate the mother's concerns. Emphasize that you care about her daughter and want to ensure that she is successful in the program. Set up a positive communications plan for the mother, which includes a regular call, such as once a week. If she calls more frequently, be firm about addressing her concerns in the next weekly call.

At the same time, it is essential to offer support and communication for the daughter. If the girl is happy and having a positive experience, her mother will be less worried and will not call as frequently. Engage with both the daughter and the host family to find solutions around food and any other issues. Help her to adapt to life in North America. Support her academically and arrange for tutors or after-school help.





## Case study about a homestay student and marijuana

Daphne is a bright and engaging 18-year-old Thai girl enrolled in language school and homestay. Eager to experience all things western, she has made a number of Canadian friends through her homestay sister, a girl of similar age in her last year of high school. They have gone to several house parties together. Lately, Daphne has lost some of her energy. She is staying in her room and sleeping a lot and is doing less schoolwork. She is irritable and impatient with the younger kids in the home. Normally proud of her fashionable appearance, she may be gaining a little weight and is dressing very casually. She left a sweater in the family room and when the homestay mother picked it up to return to Daphne, she caught a whiff of an unfamiliar smell. The homestay mother wondered if it was pot.

At the Vancouver Homestay Manager Professional Development Conference in March, participants considered this scenario. Here's what they suggested.

The change in behaviour and appearance is worrisome. It is important for the homestay coordinator to engage the student in a conversation about these changes. The homestay coordinator should ask specifically about the use of tobacco or marijuana. The program should provide a verbal warning if the student acknowledges smoking illegal drugs. The student could be referred to a school counsellor or community professional for counselling. At the same time, the homestay coordinator should speak with the hosts' daughter about being an appropriate role model.

## Accommodating homestay students with disabilities

An increasing number of international students with disabilities are coming to North America to study. As a homestay coordinator, you need to be prepared to find appropriate accommodations for them.

Students with physical disabilities cannot always be placed in the typical house, which often have steps at the front entrance and stairs to the upper floors. While apartment buildings do not appeal to the average homestay student who wants a suburban home with a white picket fence, they may be ideal for students with physical challenges.

It's a good idea to have a few host families who live in apartments or condos since most modern buildings are accessible. To find hosts in these buildings, you may wish to contact the building manager or condo board president.



You also need to determine how the student will get to school. Is he or she able to take a city bus or school bus? You will need to make sure that suitable transportation options are available for each homestay that you are using.

You should ask about disabilities on your homestay application form. If a student has identified as having a disability, try to find out as much information as possible. For example, a student who uses an assistive device such as a cane may be able to walk a short distance to the nearest bus stop. This will help you to determine whether a particular home will be suitable.

When looking for host families, you may wish to contact local organizations that serve people with disabilities. Families with a child having a physical challenge may have already made modifications to their homes and may be well prepared to host a homestay student with a disability. The organization may also be able to give you advice on how to accommodate a particular student.

## Students can't learn when jet-lagged, culture shocked

International students who have just arrived in North America may have difficulty absorbing orientation information due to culture shock, stress and jet lag, cross-cultural communication expert Madeleine Golda told the Toronto Homestay Manager Professional Development Conference.

She advised the attendees that the brain, when under stress, actually shuts down the ability to learn in a second language such as English.

As a result, students may not learn what schools are telling them during homestay and program orientations held immediately upon arrival.

Golda told the audience that programs should offer a brief orientation of essential points upon arrival and then provide more details once students have adjusted.

As well, she cautioned that students may experience reverse culture shock if they return to their home country for a holiday, such as over Christmas. Students may be uncertain whether they belong in the North American culture or that of their home country. When students come back to North America, they may be feeling homesick or confused. To help them, programs and host families are encouraged to provide a range of "honeymoon" activities to keep the students busy and to reintegrate them.



## Legalized marijuana: How your hosts and students will be affected

Is your educational institution and homestay program prepared for the legalization of marijuana in Canada in October 2018? A show of hands at the Languages Canada homestay session in February indicated that very few organizations have policies in place.

Once cannabis is legalized, it will no longer be possible to simply ban recreational marijuana users from hosting. As well, homestay programs will not be able to rely on "no smoking" provisions since cannabis can be baked into foods and consumed.

Cannabis was a hot topic at the Homestay Manager Professional Development Conference in Vancouver last week.

Kelsey Stewart-Reynolds, a homestay coordinator in British Columbia, advocates a "description not prescription" approach to gather information from hosts. She asks hosts to describe their use of alcohol, tobacco and marijuana in the home.

Educational institutions may need to approach the issue like employers. "The legality argument will no longer be valid once the legislation comes into force," says Daryl Cukierman of the law firm Blake, Cassels and Graydon in an article in the [Globe and Mail](#) about what employers should do.

A company can expect that an employee will not show up drunk - or high - for work. Similarly, homestay coordinators can require that hosts be able to assist a student in the event of an emergency. While it will be difficult for programs to ban marijuana completely, it's reasonable to expect that hosts will not be impaired.

Most high school programs prohibit international students from using marijuana due to their age. However, it is likely that some will experiment with the drug. In programs for young adults, it will be perfectly legal for students to head down to their local authorized outlet to purchase pot.

Kristina Jenei and Trudy Norman of the Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research told the group that it is important to start the conversation with students, whether they are in high school or have reached legal age. There is a need to discuss both the risks and benefits of cannabis.

"Strong relationships with caring adults are among the most important factors protecting your students against substance abuse," they said.

## Plan to deal with a serious injury or death

In January, a 15-year-old student from Brazil was struck and killed by a car in British Columbia. Unfortunately, tragic deaths happen regularly in the international education sector and dealing with them can be challenging.

When it does happen, there are many steps that must be taken to deal with the body, help the family cope with the loss and support the school's staff and students.

First of all, it is important to be prepared. Your program should have a plan in place so that you can act immediately when a serious incident occurs. Members of the Canadian Association of Public Schools - International all receive a copy of the organization's Critical Incident Response Guide. It covers how to respond in the event of a student death or other serious incident. If you are not a CAPS-I member, you should develop one on your own.

Your response guide should include:

- A checklist of actions that need to be taken
- A list of people to be notified and who will be responsible for this. This could include the host family, the school, the family back home and the embassy
- Will the family travel to North America following the death? If so, arrangements need to be made for flights, accommodations, translators and providing support
- What will be done with the student's remains?
- The student's affairs need to be settled, including personal possessions, bank accounts and any tuition or homestay refunds

Wendy Mohammed, a registered nurse and complex case manager with Guard Me insurance, recommends contacting your insurance provider immediately. Guard Me deals frequently with student deaths or serious injuries and is well-prepared to take all the necessary steps and provide support.

"Last year, there were five motor vehicle accidents in the space of a couple of months and all the students died," she says. "It can be very frequent for a few months and then we can go a few months without anything happening."

Once the insurance company has been informed, the case manager will put into place a series of steps. If family members are coming to Canada, Guard Me will make arrangements for transportation and support. Guard Me also offers 24-7 telephone support from expert clinicians in multiple languages - English, French, Spanish, Mandarin, Korean and Arabic.

The insurance company will also contact the funeral home. If the family wishes to repatriate the body back to the home country, it will coordinate the paperwork.

After the crisis is over, it's essential to provide mental health care for the international education staff, host family and students at the school. As well, the program should conduct a review and evaluation to determine what went well and what can be done better next time.

Of course, preventing deaths is the ultimate goal. Programs should provide safety information to international students during orientation and throughout the year. This could include:

- Never drive drunk (or high) and do not get into a car with an impaired driver
- Remain alert when walking or cycling. Stay off your phone and take the ear buds out
- Wear bright clothing and add reflectors to your backpack
- Cross the street at a stoplight or crosswalk instead of jaywalking

## Ways coordinators and hosts can identify eating disorders and help students

Many international students find North American food strange and go through a period of adjustment. This is often termed "disordered eating" and students usually return to normal in a few weeks.

However, this is different from an eating disorder - which is a serious mental health issue and can be dangerous.

Pamela Hoch, a licensed professional therapist, told an ESQ Educational Services webinar this month that eating disorders are chronic and pervasive psychiatric illnesses. Eating disorders are NOT about food.

The three major eating disorders are:

- Anorexia - An intense fear of getting fat
- Bulimia - An obsessive desire to lose weight. Bouts of extreme overeating following by purging
- Binge-eating - Eating large quantities of food and being unable to stop

Hoch spoke about how to identify students who may have an eating disorder. Homestay staff should not assume that a student who is thin has an eating disorder - many people simply have small builds. Warning signs of anorexia include brittle hair and nails, bone fractures and feeling weak. While eating disorders are more common in young women, males can also be affected.

"If a student disappears right after meals and locks herself in the bathroom - this is a dead giveaway for bulimia," Hoch told the webinar attendees.

### **What should homestay coordinators do?**

If a student is in homestay for a short-term program (such as one month) it is mostly likely disordered eating. It would be difficult to deal with a psychiatric illness in this time period.

For students who are in North America for a lengthy period, hosts and homestay coordinators should monitor the student. The first step is to speak with the student in person, gathering information rather than jumping to conclusions. Ask open questions rather than confronting them directly - this will simply bring denial and resistance.

Talk with the host family to learn more about the student's behavior. As well, it's important to keep records in case the illness becomes more serious. If you believe it may be an eating disorder, get professional help.

Homestay coordinators can urge hosts to talk about healthy eating. "It's OK to talk about food, but hosts should avoid using the word 'diet'," Hoch says. "Diet means success or failure and you want to avoid students thinking 'I must diet'." Hosts should never put a student on a diet or comment on their weight, even in the most casual way.

Families can involve students in planning meals, grocery shopping and cooking. This helps students to be less anxious about eating.

Hosts should also watch for danger signs. This can include the student purchasing laxatives or hiding empty bottles of weight-loss drinks under the bed.

When dealing with the family of origin in the home country, it's best to avoid talking about mental illness since this carries a stigma in many places. Instead, focus on the student's physical symptoms and the need for them to see a doctor.

## Eight host recruitment tips to make your job easier

### 1. Word of mouth

We recently surveyed homestay coordinators, who said that word of mouth is the most effective tool in host recruitment. Leverage this by emailing existing hosts for referrals and offering a \$50 gift for each host who signs on.

### 2. Your time is valuable

You need to devote time to recruitment but you have to use it efficiently. Some homestay programs display at multicultural fairs or home shows. However, you need to commit two or three days of time to such shows - so consider your return on your time investment.

### 3. Classified ads

Some programs love classified advertising sites. However, be prepared to weed out a lot of people who just want to host for the money.

### 4. Selling benefits

Be sure to promote the benefits of being a host - learning about other cultures, making new friends and the homestay fee.

### 5. Facebook

Many programs use social media. In fact, one board only posts to community boards and does not use any other recruitment method. However, watch out - Canadians are using Facebook less often, even before the privacy issue caused many people to quit the site this spring.

### 6. Local groups

Get organizations to sell for you: Church groups, sports teams, and school parents are often willing to spread the word that you need hosts.

### 7. Newsletters

These are great tools for providing tips to hosts, such as recipes, communications and dealing with issues. They can also serve as a recruitment tool and to keep in touch with prospective hosts.

### 8. Always be closing

Make sure that you are constantly recruiting. Include a link in your email signature. On your website, invite potential hosts to contact you on every page - not just on the "Contact us" page.



## Whistler host compensation is highest in Canada at \$1,200 per month

If you think your program has a tough time recruiting host families, take a look at the school board in Whistler, British Columbia.

The Sea to Sky School District offers \$1,200 per month to families to host a student. That's a whopping \$450 more than the average compensation in Canada of \$750, according to our recent survey. Even with the high fees, it still can't find enough hosts.

Lisa Bartlett, District Vice-Principal at the board, says the town of 12,000 people has a housing crisis on many levels.

"There just aren't a lot of large family homes where families have an extra bedroom for an international student," she says. While Whistler is known for its multimillion-dollar mansions, most of those are owned by out-of-towners who use them as vacation villas.

The few rooms that are available are rented out on Airbnb to Australians and Europeans who come to Whistler to work at the resort and enjoy a few months of skiing.

Homeowners can charge up to \$1,500 for a shared room located in walking distance to the village - and that's without meals.

The host shortage is not for a lack of marketing. Bartlett says the school district has posted on social media, sent out newsletters to parents, gone door to door in the community and spoken to service clubs.

Sea to Sky offers a referral fee of \$500 to any host family who recommends someone who ends up hosting a student.

### Books up a year ahead

Even these measures have had little impact. The district has been forced to reduce the number of students in Whistler to 30 per year, down from 45 a couple of years ago. Instead, it enrolls students at its high schools in Pemberton and Squamish, where the host fees are \$1,100 per month.

However, with its international reputation for outdoor activities and scenic beauty, Whistler is in higher demand than the other two communities. "Whistler usually books up a full year ahead," Bartlett says.

Sea to Sky is now considering raising host compensation beyond \$1,200 to remain competitive with Airbnb and other ESL schools in town. It is also looking at creative solutions. One idea is to rent homes for district teachers (who also have trouble finding housing) and have them act as host parents to international students.

Bartlett says the district remains committed to international education in Whistler. "It's great to have international students in our high school. It's an opportunity for Canadian students to make friendships with students from all over the world."



## Homestay programs helping students, hosts adjust to legalization of marijuana

Many homestay managers in Canada are unsure about the impact of legalized marijuana on their programs - but are proactively discussing the issue with both hosts and students.

According to a survey conducted in August 2018 by The Homestay Times, 89 percent of programs plan to cover the legalization of marijuana (which will occur on Oct. 17) at their student orientations. As well, 78 percent will include the topic in host training sessions or documentation.

Some homestay coordinators think a solution is to simply ban smoking and vaping of any products, including tobacco and marijuana, in homestays. However, that ignores the fact that marijuana can be ingested in foods such as brownies.

"We ask hosts not to smoke in front of students since in most students' countries marijuana is not legalized and some students are not comfortable seeing people smoking marijuana," says Sayaka Mizoguchi of the International Language Academy of Canada.

Vancouver Island University prohibits students from smoking tobacco and cannabis, as well as vaping, in hosts' homes.

"However, some hosts will allow smoking outside," says Danielle Johnsrude of VIU. "Students will be expected to follow the rules of their host family."



VIU has been proactive for several months in discussing legalization in its host newsletter. It has already begun asking hosts for information about their use of alcohol, cannabis and tobacco. States the newsletter: "Why are we collecting this information? Our program's philosophy is to provide the best possible match for student and host, and information like this helps us avoid potential challenges regarding alcohol, cannabis, and or tobacco. It is similar to diet or other health needs."

### **Marijuana will be equivalent to alcohol**

It's important to remember that marijuana will soon be a legal product - on a par with alcohol. This means that it would be difficult to turn down a potential host who uses cannabis. Nevertheless, programs can insist on moderate use by hosts.

"If they're not acting responsibly, we won't place students in their home," says one homestay coordinator.

It's perfectly acceptable to require that at least one adult in the home remain sober and able to respond in the event of an emergency involving the homestay student.

While some programs plan to include host marijuana use in profiles sent to parents and agents overseas, 55 percent will not do so.

As well, 44 percent of survey participants would allow a student's natural parents overseas to refuse to place their child in a home where marijuana is consumed.

## Many homes have guns: Keep your homestay students safe

It started around midnight when the homestay student got into the host's liquor cabinet and began drinking vodka. The family's adult son was visiting for the weekend – he brought his licensed handgun but forgot the storage case. So he placed the weapon in his nightstand. Without the son knowing, the homestay student took the gun and went onto the streets at 2 am.

A shot rang out – either the homestay student fired it deliberately or the gun went off accidentally. While the host family remained asleep, a neighbor heard the shot and called police. Officers arrived to find the drunken student carrying the gun and wandering down the middle of the road. Fortunately, they arrested him without incident – although the student could easily have been shot and killed by police.

The homestay coordinator was jolted out of her sleep by a call from the police at 3 am. Eventually, the police decided not to charge the student. Instead, he was dismissed from the college and sent home on the next flight.

This incident occurred in Washington State, but it could have been anywhere in North America. With guns posing safety risks, are homestay programs prepared? Some of the questions you need to ponder include:

- Do you allow people to host if they have guns in the home?
- Do you ask potential hosts on the application form about guns in the household?
- Do you ask how the guns are stored?
- Do you inspect the gun storage during the home visit?

Guns are an important concern. In Canada, about 22 percent of households have a gun. The number is higher in the United States – 37 percent. So that represents a significant number of potential hosts who may have a weapon.

Be sure to check your local regulations about gun possession and storage. In Canada, gun safety rules require that the gun:

- Be rendered inoperable by a secure locking device; or
- Have the firing bolt removed; or
- Be stored in a locked case or room

In addition, ammunition must be stored separately from the gun. In Canada, gun owners are required to pass a safety course and obtain a firearms licence. If you decide to allow them to host, you could ask for a copy of their licence as part of the application process.

## **Will COVID fundamentally change information sharing about hosts and students?**

Earlier this month, a homestay coordinator contacted a veteran host and asked her to take a student who had to find a new place to live when her college residence closed due to the pandemic. It was only after the student moved in that the host found out that the student worked in a takeout restaurant and took two buses to get there – raising the risk of exposure to COVID-19. The host was worried and told the homestay coordinator so.

In this time of heightened risk, do students and homestay staff have an obligation to share such important safety information with potential hosts? In this case, the student did not have to include any information about jobs or volunteer service outside the home. Under “normal” conditions, asking for these details would be unnecessary, perhaps even intrusive.

With information about an elevated risk in taking a student, a prospective host can decide if they are willing to take them into their home.

Similarly, the current practice is for homestay coordinators to match a student with a host – without giving the student (or their parents) the option of turning down the placement. If a host is a healthcare worker, or perhaps a cleaner in a hospital, the homestay staff may have an obligation to advise the student about any potential risk. And give the student the opportunity to refuse the placement.

## Coping with everyone being at home

With both hosts and students spending a lot more time at home during the pandemic, everyone needs to make a greater effort to ensure good relations. Here are some tips to help people cope during this challenging time:

- Encourage students to find regular activities. While there may be restrictions on what they can do, hosts can help them choose something suitable. This could include exercise such as walks or bike rides.
- Ask students to maintain a reasonable schedule. Without classes to attend, some students have reverted to their home country's timelines, sometimes staying up late at night to talk with friends and family. This can be disruptive to the host, especially if they can hear the student talking in the middle of the night. One host made a "house rule" that their student needed to get out of bed by noon.
- Hosts should meet with their student to discuss boundaries and rules. Spending so much time together is new for everyone so it's important to make sure expectations are clear.
- Homestay staff should be prepared to listen. The pandemic is a stressful time and everyone is prone to anxiety. Be flexible about responding to concerns in a timely way.
- Remind the students that they are guests in the home and that they must follow the family's rules around social distancing and wearing of masks. It can be very awkward if students are out socializing while the hosts are trying to minimize the number of contacts.
- Check in regularly with both hosts and students. You can hold a Zoom session with both hosts and students. Or you can call everyone on a monthly basis.
- Be sure to keep hosts updated about what's happening with your program. Hosts appreciate knowing whether classes will be online, what services are available and how international students can be supported. A regular newsletter or email to all hosts can go a long way in keeping the lines of communication open.
- Students with mental health challenges may need extra care due to isolation, stress or anxiety about the state of the world. Be sure that all students are aware of what support services are available.

## How to recruit new hosts post-Covid

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## Reopening protocols under Covid

*Note: This article discusses the regulations in place in November 2020. Please verify the current requirements with the appropriate government agencies in your jurisdiction.*

The Canadian government has begun allowing approved educational institutions to accept new international students travelling from overseas. For homestay staff, this was a huge step after months of hard work preparing to house students for mandatory self-isolation and for their post-quarantine classes.

“We’re so happy to be back,” says Carolina Cintra, National Accommodations Manager at ILSC Vancouver and Greystone College. After the COVID shutdown, the two schools resumed in-person classes in July, but only for current students and new students who were already in Canada.

Institutions must submit their reopening plans for approval to their provincial government. Some provinces are moving more quickly than others. ILSC and Greystone College Vancouver and Greystone College Montreal have received the green light from the Education Quality Assurance agency in BC and Quebec government.

Students arriving from overseas are given the option of undergoing self-isolation in a hotel or homestay, depending on availability. “The majority of students are requesting homestay for two reasons,” Cintra says. “First, the cost is usually cheaper than paying for a hotel room. Secondly, students feel safer knowing that there is someone in the home with them – even though there is little interaction.”

ILSC has about a dozen hosts providing quarantine and they are being paid extra for the service. They must meet stringent requirements – providing a private room and bathroom for the student, not being a member of a vulnerable group and following strict protocols. Hosts deliver three meals a day to the student’s room but otherwise have minimal contact. They must also agree to host the student just for the quarantine period.

“A few hosts have said that it’s awkward having a student in the house, serving them food but not really getting to know them,” Cintra says. Nevertheless, hosts are happy to be taking part in the successful return of students.

The homestay quarantine protocols are extensive. Some of them include:

- ILSC staff check in daily by phone with both students and hosts
- Students must monitor and report their temperature and any health concerns
- Both parties follow rigorous hygiene and cleanliness procedures
- Students must remain in their room/bathroom during the entire quarantine

While in quarantine, students take online classes and have the opportunity to receive mental health support and participate in online activities.

“Pre-COVID, we were careful about placing students,” Cintra says. “Now we have to be extra, extra careful and set out the expectations very clearly. We are working very hard to make sure that it goes well and that we are doing what the government has asked us to do.”

The ILSC quarantine guide is available online at: <https://content.ilsc.com/pdf/ilsc-canada-quarantine-guide.pdf>

## Thank you

Thanks for reading! We hope that you have found this newsletter compilation useful.

If you have any comments or suggestions, please contact us at [douglasronson@yahoo.ca](mailto:douglasronson@yahoo.ca)