

At the end of their AFS exchange in Country, we asked some recent AFSers from the USA to answer two questions:

- ❑ What elements of your host culture, compared to US culture, did you find most difficult to adjust to in the areas of family, school and/or social life?
- ❑ Please note any advice you would like to share with AFSers destined for your host country.

Here are some of their responses:

I found the German bluntness incredibly hard to get used to at the beginning. I thought people were just being incredibly rude, when in fact they were trying to help me out and had my best interests at heart. Please enjoy every minute and get off the computer!! Don't be afraid to make a fool of yourself, and the best piece of advice I ever got regarding my exchange year was to never turn down an opportunity. Do something every day that scares you and learn from the mistakes.

Claire, Year, 2009

Germany is fantastic, but you really have to throw yourself into your community! Get involved, and show up! Go to class everyday and participate as much as you can even if your German isn't that great! I did and when the other students saw that I really was trying and was putting effort into being there, they all wanted to get to know me, and I made great friends!

Erin, Year, 2009

School was really hard to adjust to because I could not really understand what was being taught and it was really frustrating not being able to participate. Expect everything. You never know exactly what you are going to experience when you are abroad. It's like living in a fantasy, but you have to make it your reality for that period of time. It is definitely a life changing experience and definitely worth it.

Anabelle, year, 2009

The sarcastic personality of Northern Germans [was challenging]. You'll feel insulted at times because Germans are so direct, but don't take it personally, they don't mean it that way.

Patrick, Year, 2009

To learn which situation to continue to be polite in, when politeness was superfluous and directness was necessary [took time]. In the first few months, you will be tired. Surrounded by a different language 24/7 is very tiring, so definitely take naps (and make sure your host family knows that it is natural for exchange

students to nap). But more importantly, even if you are tired, if you are invited to hang out or to some kind of activity, always, always say yes, at least in the first month or two. That sets you for success.

Marios, Year, 2009

The school system was very different. And the way everyone had different sets of friend groups from each thing they did and didn't hang out as much right after school.

Emily, Year, 2009

Be out going and loud from the first day and don't be discouraged if it takes a really long time to make friends. Always be honest and yourself. Don't speak English, even if your classmates want to speak it with you. Be pushy and on time. And exercise often or you'll gain lots of weight from the bread and chocolate!

Darcy, Year, 2009

The lack of in-school support and activities was hard. I spent a long time waiting to be offered something to do, when really what you have to do is express an interest, then go out and find it. As for the family: be careful. The rules may not be the same as you're used to, and I ended up being told the rules as I got in trouble for breaking them, which also led to further troubles later on. Learn the rules from the get go. Germany is an amazing country. I have come to love the people, the culture and the landscape. But it can be hard to fit into the culture. At first, it can be lonely; it took me a while before I really made friends; I had a lot of lonely weekends sitting in my room wishing to have something to do. And, if somebody asks if you want to do something, accept; they won't ask again, they'll think you're rejecting them if you say no. Be open with the host family, because sometimes the myth about Germans being distant can be true, at first at least; it helps open minds and hearts if you ask questions, vocalize, smile, act



excited. And if you have a problem: talk about it to someone. Don't just assume it will go away. I wish you the best exchange year you can have.

Madeline, Year, 2009

The people in Germany are much more closed and distant when you meet them, and I felt pretty alone the first couple of weeks. But then I understood, that after you get through the skin, they are the best friends you could ever have. You have to take the initiative!! They usually stay with the same group of 20 people since 5th grade, and are not used to getting to know new people, and will probably seem cold and distant. But if you continue talking to them, and ask them to do stuff on the weekends, they will respond positively.

Madeline, Year, 2008

I found school extremely boring, but besides that, the culture of my individual family was much more strict regarding properness than mine in the US. That doesn't mean every family is like that. The different families in Germany are as varied as in the US. Use your AFS network!!!! If you have a problem with the family, even if you don't think it's a big deal- it might not be- it always helps to talk. And if you find that you honestly don't have a serious problem, they're still there as friends before you really find your way in school.

Amy, Year, 2008

I wasn't sure if it was the culture, but my host family was extremely strict and required that I must do everything their way (holding silverware, methods for folding and sorting) or not at all. Go outside and meet new people as much as you can.

Reid, Semester, 2008

German kids are expected to be very self reliant versus the family unit oriented structure. Do not take direct communication as an insult, but rather as a desire to efficiently accomplish a task.

Stephen, Year, 2008

Germany is, in some ways, very much like America. They watch the same TV, have the same subjects in school, text almost as much, and have similar fashions. Don't let that fool you into thinking that they're the same. The school expects the students to learn for themselves, putting their future into their own hands. Your host family will expect you to be responsible for yourself and your commitments. As far as making friends, it will most likely be difficult in the beginning... but once they accept you, you're in and they are the greatest people I've known. Just be patient as you work

your way through to the inside - and remember to be open yourself. Don't wait to be called; call them. Learn to travel independently. Learn how to read the schedules and the bus plans, and don't be late for your bus. Get to know your area yourself - that's the best way I found to become comfortable with myself and my surroundings. It also proves to your host family that you can be trusted to not get lost, and that you can be independent and reliable, [which are] very important qualities to German people. Also, always be polite. Using whatever German you know can open up all sorts of doors.

Lauren, Year, 2008

Your job is to adapt to this new world you will be living in; don't spend your time trying to change it; don't waste this experience, take advantage of it and grow from it.

Maeve, Year, 2008

People are very direct and say what they mean. The school system is also very different, and adjusting to a new family can also be difficult. Give everything a chance, don't just give up!!

Annina, Year, 2008

Germans are VERY direct and tell the truth. Try not to take everything personally and don't be embarrassed or get too bothered by mistakes regarding communication.

Alice, Year, 2008

My host mom was too controlling and strict. No one took me seriously in school. It's hard to make friends in an established clique when you don't speak the language! Don't expect relationships to just materialize. Work for them.

Kathleen, Year, 2008

The one thing that was not necessarily hard to adjust to, but weird to adjust to, was the fact that Germans are very honest and will share their opinions. They also expect people to invite themselves along, which is very different to how things in the US are done. In my opinion, culture shock is the worst when you are expecting something. Just expect everything to be different and be just pleasantly surprised when something is similar to what you already know. If you just anticipate everything to be different, nothing will seriously shock you.

Rebecca, Year, 2008

Coming from the Vermont, it wasn't really clear to me how much diversity I actually lived with at home. When I got to Germany, it was strange to notice that

not only was my entire school Caucasian, almost everyone in my class had German heritage. It was strange getting used to "all German, all the time" with food, as well. Strange, but also delicious. Learn, as quickly as possible, expressions like "doch" "eigentlich schon" and the difference between "angeben" "zugeben" and "übergeben". These things are very useful, and in all likelihood you will spend some very entertaining conversations upon your arrival back in the US wondering how the how the hell you are supposed to say those things in English.

Molly, Year, 2008

It appeared to me that my German family was not as demonstrative as my own family. It was a sudden change to not be as affectionate with people. But as I made closer friends, they showed more affection towards me. You're representing your country, and you're going to leave impressions on people everywhere you go. This means you should act like an ambassador, while still remaining true to yourself.

Mary, Year, 2008

It was most difficult to adjust to my host family and new social life in my host country, Germany. At my host family's home, I had to do different chores than I had to do in America. Dusting and doing the dishes for example. But my host family would do my laundry for me, which I would do myself back at home. So it was difficult to adjust to not doing what I used to do, and begin to do other chores that I typically would not do at home. I also found it difficult to immediately make friends in my host country. I found that the Germans were not as open and willing to meet new people as Americans are, but I quickly learned that I had to usually make the first move and introduce myself and invite people to do stuff with me. Be open to everyone and everything. You can never have too many friends!

Briana, Year, 2008

German teenagers interact in a different way than we do. It can take someone quite a long while to warm up to you, but with time it does happen. In Germany, if you do not talk to other students in the class or make an effort to start a conversation, then they will go ahead and assume that you do not want to talk with them. People at my school thought that I was unfriendly at first, and that was hard for me to understand. I thought that everyone was being unfriendly to me! It was difficult for me because I was used to people being really receptive and welcoming to new students in my school, especially students from abroad. I thought that the Germans would also be this way too. However,

once I learned that it was just a part of the culture and social norm, I was able to adapt to it, step outside my comfort zones, and make some amazing friends.

Germany seems in some ways so similar to the US, but you can't forget that it's a completely different culture and things are very different even if you can't always see it on the surface.

1. Make friends with the other AFSers sharing the experience with you. Even if they're not in your immediate area, they are so much fun to visit! Not only that, but they provide a level of support that no one else can give you. After all, they are going through the same thing that you are at the same time.

2. Take lots of pictures, journal when you can but don't worry about it too much. It's an amazing look back into your year, but sometimes you just have to let the year unfold. I found that I was journaling only during the dull days...

3. Learn as much German as you can! I know, everyone says this but it is just SO important. I knew nothing when I left, and it took me forever to be comfortable enough to start speaking.

4. I call it the "English habit." Do not...DO NOT let people speak only English with you. Everyone seemed to want to "practice their English" with me. While this is nice, don't fall into the trap of only speaking English with everyone. Nearly everyone in Germany can speak it, and so it is hard to break out of the habit once you have started speaking English with everyone. I never fully broke out of it actually, and it's something that I regret. I found that once a relationship or a friendship is established in English, switching to German completely is near impossible. It can be done, but if you just start off with German or nothing, then you won't ever have this problem.

5. Do your best to look at things through the eyes of others.

6. You will make a lot of mistakes, better accept it now, whether with your host family, the language, your friends, whatever. At the beginning of my stay, it seemed like I could do nothing right, or on my own... I felt like a small child all over again. Luckily, confidence comes with experience, and soon you will realize that you are completely adapted to your new surroundings. Don't let the hard beginnings throw you off. It's always hard in the beginning!! I remember wanting to come home after 3 weeks, but 4 months later I couldn't dream of ever leaving. Give everything time. It will get better, I promise.

Hannah, Year, 2008