

Oakwood School
Host Family
Handbook



2022-2023

Dear Oakwood School Host Family,

Thank you for opening your home to an international student! All of us at Oakwood School feel that having a diverse international community on campus makes for an enriching learning experience for all students. We also realize that it takes a village to pull it off and thank you for supporting this important effort.

Inviting an international student to live in your home is an undertaking that deserves careful attention. It is our hope that this handbook will provide a reference guide for some of the questions and issues that may come up when welcoming a student from a different culture into your home.

Please let us know if you have any questions or suggestions for additions to this document.

Gratefully,

Michelle Helvey
Head of School



Roberta Vinkhuyzen
International Student Coordinator



Simone Sprague
Homestay Coordinator



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PRIOR TO YOUR STUDENT'S ARRIVAL

Before you welcome an international student into your home, it is especially important to discuss your expectations as a family. Are you OK with giving up the guest room in your home for an extended period of time? What are your expectations regarding chores and cleanliness, phone usage, and extracurricular activities? Discussing these things prior to the student's arrival will ensure that you can clearly communicate with your student and set everyone up for success.

Preparing a list of house rules is immensely helpful. Having a written set of records to refer back to is also helpful in the inevitable event rules are forgotten or disobeyed.

Decide as a family what you'd like your student to call you. Some host parents would like to be addressed as Mom and Dad, while others prefer to be called Uncle and Aunt, or Mr. and Mrs. last name. This is a personal choice.

Reach out to the student via WeChat (Asia) or WhatsApp (Europe) to ensure you have a way of communicating during travel and at the arrival airport.

Set up a Zoom, FaceTime, or Skype meeting well in advance of the student's arrival so you can start the process of getting to know each other. The student will appreciate your help with a packing list as our California climate will likely differ from their home country.

Exchange flight information and share phone numbers (and back up phone numbers).

If you are unable to pick up your student from the airport, please email homestay@oakwoodway.org at your earliest convenience so that we can make alternate arrangements.

Create a folder for your student's important documentation: the custodial responsibility forms, insurance card, etc.

ARRIVAL DAY

Track your student's flight with a tracking app to stay on top of changes in arrival information.

At the airport, consider bringing a placard with the student's name so that they can easily find you. Balloons or flowers will add a festive touch to the event.

Make sure your student lets their natural parents know that they have landed safely and that the student is in your care. The parents will be (anxiously) waiting for news, and students get so excited that they sometimes forget.

SHORTLY AFTER ARRIVAL

Give your student a tour of the neighborhood, community, and landmarks of your area. Also, walk them around your home upon arrival and show them how appliances work. Share internet passwords and provide them with a key to your home.

Your student will need to have a phone plan with a local phone number for emergency purposes. Most phone carriers offer prepaid plans as your student is likely too young to sign up for a contract.

Sit down and discuss the family house rules. It is important to start the way you intend to go on. A printed version is helpful for the student. Some hosts ask that the student sign the rules, while others feel a meeting about them suffices. Make sure that the student comprehends what you have written. Answering “yes” could simply mean that the student heard you (but does not necessarily indicate understanding).

In the back of this handbook are several examples of house rules to use as a guide to creating your own.

HOST FAMILY REQUIREMENTS AND EXPECTATIONS

Room

Depending on the student’s contract with Oakwood School, they will be given either a private room or a shared room with a host sibling. The room should have a desk so that the student can do homework comfortably and the student should have access to the internet in the room. Internet rules are different in each family, so please communicate yours clearly.

Food

Hosts are expected to provide three meals a day. At least one of those meals should be shared with the family and host prepared. Breakfast and lunch can be self-prepared by the student. Be aware that some students have never prepared a meal before and might not know how to take care of themselves. Gradually hand over these responsibilities.

A note about cultural differences regarding food: many Asian students prefer warm foods to cereal, salads, and smoothies. Asian children typically do not enjoy sandwiches. Please encourage your student to communicate their likes and dislikes honestly but realize this may be difficult for them culturally. European exchange students’ food preferences are more in line with American favorites and there tend to be fewer issues around food. Taking a student shopping with you is a great idea. They can share things that appeal to them and will help you narrow down their likes and preferences.

Family Activities

Some students are very shy when they first arrive and tend to isolate themselves in their room. Please try to encourage them to join family activities. The more engaged they are in family life, the better the hosting experience will be. Family game nights or movie nights are great opportunities for students to share in American culture.

Transportation

Hosts are responsible for dropping off their international student at school in the morning and picking them up after classes end. The student may also ask to be driven to extracurricular activities after school and on weekends. The student should understand that such requests may not always be granted as they must fit in with the family plans. Communicate clearly and encourage your student to share plans with you in a timely manner.

WHEN YOUR STUDENT LEAVES

Please remind your student to check their passport several months before departure to ensure that it is valid for at least six months after the date of travel. The student should also have the appropriate representative from Oakwood School sign the I-20 for the student prior to departure.

If your student travels back to their home country during the summer, please be clear on expectations regarding their belongings. If you are planning on using their room for visitors, ask your student to pack up their items in boxes or stow them away neatly in the closet so that the space is usable.

Students leaving for college should be made aware of the small size of American dorm rooms and purge their belongings before college. Please aid in giving away or selling books to students in lower grades and donate (clean) clothing no longer used to charitable organizations.

Host families are not responsible for loss or damage to items left in their homes.

Mailing items home should be strongly discouraged as it is prohibitively expensive.

COMMON QUESTIONS AND CONCERNS

Bank Accounts

If your international student is under eighteen, they cannot open a bank account in the United States. They need a natural parent to sign the paperwork. Opening a joint account is highly discouraged. Most students will arrive with a credit card to use and some cash for incidentals.

Car Services

Your student's parent(s) have signed a car service (Uber/Lift, etc.) permission form. You will be provided with a copy of this document for your records.

Chores

The concept of chores is viewed very differently in many parts of the world. In Asia, for example, the parental focus on academic success has resulted in students not ever having done any chores before coming to America. Because your student is now part of your family, assigning chores will be a normal part of their everyday lives. Some students are asked to feed the family cat, others help with the dishes after dinner, and some are put in charge of recycling (be prepared to teach students from Asia the ropes as recycling is a relatively new concept there).

Church

Many international students are not religious and unfamiliar with American church services. Some students really enjoy attending church with their hosts and get a lot out of the youth group meetings there. They provide an additional social group for the kids to join, and attendance should be encouraged but cannot be required.

Communication Style Differences

Asian students are often surprised by the directness of American communication. Their culture focuses very much on conflict avoidance and difficult conversations can often lead to tears and frustration. Using gentle language and “I statements” (“I feel frustrated when you leave trash in your room” versus the more confronting “you never empty the trash can in your room”) is helpful in bridging the gap between cultures.

Cultural Expectations

Most of the world has a very inaccurate image of what the typical American family is based on what they see on television and social media. They may not be familiar with nontraditional families. In addition, some students come from wealthy families where the mindset is that “services” can be bought can lead to some unrealistic expectations. Communication will be key in your student embracing diversity and changing ingrained stereotypes.

Curfew

Rules regarding curfew should be discussed early on during your student’s stay. This conversation should include at what time you expect them home on weekdays and during the weekend and what time they should go to bed. These rules should not be any more or less strict than the rules you set for your own children.

Dating

When it comes to your international student wanting to go on a date, it is best to err on the side of caution. Reaching out to natural parents may be helpful in setting boundaries for your student.

Driver’s License

International students can obtain their driver’s license but should wait until they are eighteen so that they can sign the paperwork themselves. The exception is when they have a local “relative” who is willing to sign paperwork before their 18th birthday. Students will need proof of residency, which Oakwood School can provide. After they pass the theoretical part of their license, they can contact a local driving school for lessons. The instructor will indicate when the student is ready for their driving exam and the lesson vehicle will be used for the exam. At that time, the student can purchase a vehicle if that is what natural parents agree to, but they must provide their own insurance. Students should never drive the host family car.

A note on international students driving with underage host siblings: this is allowed if host parents put a note in the glove compartment indicating their agreement on (host) siblings driving together.

Expressing Gratitude

Many people from Asia say please and thank you a lot less frequently than people from the West. Culturally, doing things for each other is understood as normal and no gratitude needs to be expressed. Please educate your student on this western custom. Saying things like “thank you for the ride” when being dropped off at school, “thank you for dinner,” or saying “thank you” to the teacher when leaving the classroom is a skill that needs to be taught, but that will serve the student well during their time here.

Similarly, the custom of saying “excuse me” is fairly foreign to an international student. Many people new to the United States are also puzzled by the frequently expressed “how are you doing?” from cashiers and passersby. They may initially think that this is an invitation for a conversation rather than a greeting. This is a very American custom that takes some time to get used to for foreigners.

Saying “bless you” when somebody sneezes is also confusing to some students. They might think that, because they are not religious, this is not a concept they should embrace.

Fire

Your home should be a very safe environment for your student. The student’s use of candles, incense, and other items with an open flame should be discouraged.

Going Out to Eat

Because you will be providing meals to your student, you are responsible for paying their share of a restaurant bill should you go out to dinner. It is perfectly acceptable to set limits on what they can spend. You can suggest they pick an entrée under a certain dollar amount or tell them they can either pick an appetizer or dessert, but not both.

When the student goes out with friends, they are responsible for paying for that meal.

Homework

Host families have access to their international student’s grades in Veracross. The school will reach out if the student falls behind or seems to be struggling. Feel free to reach out to Oakwood’s International Student Coordinator, Roberta Vinkhuyzen, for academic support.

House Rules

It is important to provide your student with a paper copy of the house rules. Great items to include are:

- Water usage
- Meals and snacks
- Personal hygiene
- Phone usage
- Gaming/computer use
- Bedtime expectations
- Homework
- Laundry
- Kitchen

There are two sample house rule lists found at the back of this handbook to help you create your own.

Illegal Activities

Please contact Mr. Berniker, High School Head and Principal, if you suspect your international student is engaging in illegal activities. The use of alcohol, tobacco/vaping, or drugs are a contract violation and may result in suspension or expulsion.

Insurance

Every student will have an international student insurance policy during their stay with your family. It is important to note that this is an accident and injury policy rather than a conventional insurance policy. This means that preventative care is not covered, such as school physicals and dental cleanings. However, sudden illness, sports injuries, toothaches, etc. are covered.

Local urgent care clinics are most often used for international students as they will not typically have access to a general practitioner.

Language Help

Your international student will appreciate gentle corrections to grammar and pronunciation. Some students were taught English by non-native speakers and will need some help. The “th” sound in English is particularly difficult for Asian students. Gentle guidance will be much appreciated. Some families introduce a few new words at dinner each day to expand a student’s vocabulary. Playing games like scrabble is also immensely helpful in terms of education and family bonding.

Laundry

Students should be doing their own laundry but may need some help. Depending on where your student is from, they may not ever have done their own laundry. Washers and dryers also look different in many countries. Lots of countries do not use dryers but hang up laundry to dry outside. You will need to educate your student on California’s drought and water conservation. Teach your student to run full loads only. You may have to help a student new to chores on the frequency of when items need laundering. Sports jersey after each use, jeans once a week, winter coats once a month, etc.

Location Apps on Cell Phones

Many host families choose to add their international student to the family’s location tracking app (Life 360/Find my Phone) so that they know where the student is at all times.

Locking Doors and Privacy

Some students like to lock their bedroom doors at night in order to feel safe. Please discourage your student from doing so. It is important to have access to their room in case of an emergency. Some host families ask that the door remain ajar during the day. This is a personal choice but make sure you communicate your family’s preferences clearly with your student.

Monthly Check-Ins

While you are hosting your international student, you will have a monthly check-in with Oakwood’s Homestay Coordinator, Simone Sprague. She can answer any questions you may have and assist with any concerns. This would include four quarterly visits and a monthly phone call.

Phone Plan

As with the bank account, sharing a phone plan with your student is not a great idea. There are many reasonably priced prepaid plans on the market for your student to choose from. Your student may need some assistance in finding a plan that will work for them.

Sleepovers

International students can have sleepovers at the home of other host families since they will have also been background checked by the school. With written consent from the parents, the student can spend the night in the home of non-background checked families as well.

Spending Money

Students are expected to pay for school-related items like books and field trips themselves. We discourage host families from engaging in financial transactions with their international student. Lending money to your international student is discouraged.

Sports and Clubs

Encourage your international student to join the seasonal sports activities Oakwood School offers, even if they have little or no experience playing sports. Being part of a team is a wonderful way to meet people in every grade. Traveling with the team to away games is a highlight of high school for many students.

Joining choir, a musical ensemble, theater, and clubs is a fantastic opportunity available at Oakwood School and is a terrific way to make new friends and also a valuable addition to the college application. Make sure the schedule works for the family before committing to these extracurricular activities.

Supervision

Your student should be treated as a member of the family. Depending on the age of your student, you can make decisions on the amount of time you are comfortable leaving them home by themselves. International students may not be left alone overnight. Please reach out to the school for respite care support if you need to be away from home and cannot take your student with you.

Table Manners

Asian Students are used to eating with chopsticks, and many kids are not very comfortable using Western-style utensils when they first arrive in the United States. Please offer gentle guidance on using utensils. The student may also need some assistance with other aspects of Western etiquette. A good analogy is that Asian people tend to lower their faces to their food, while western people bring their food up to their mouths. The “slurping” of food may also need to be addressed. The goal is that when a student gets invited to a family for dinner that they feel comfortable dining with them.

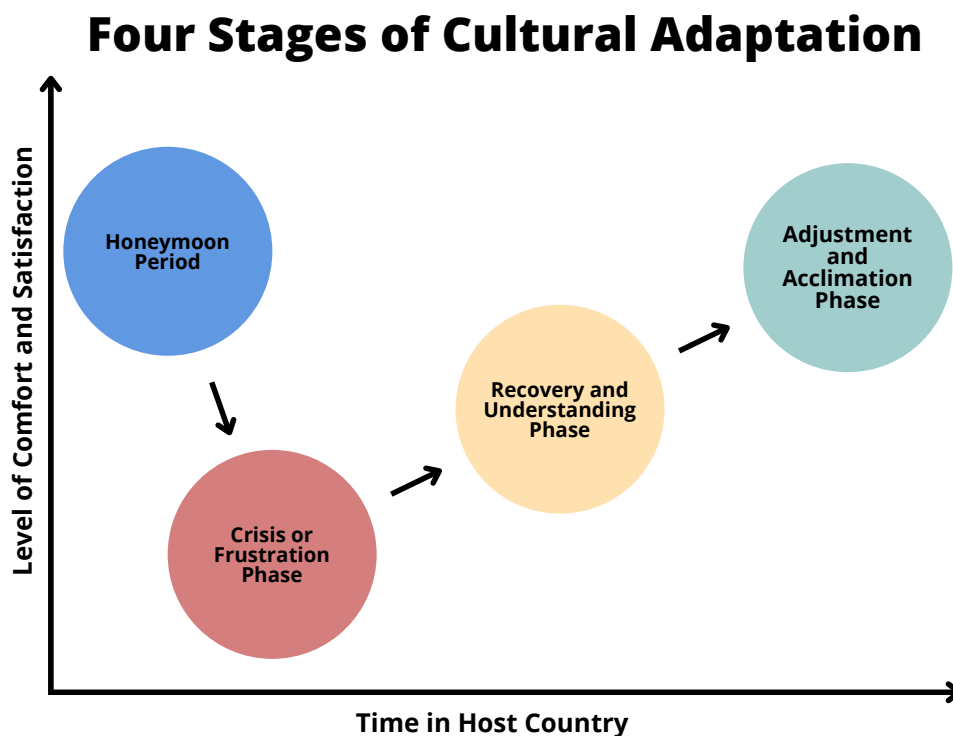
Travel

Students can travel with their host families, but natural parents need to give written permission for the trip. The parents will be responsible for the extra expenses incurred during travel unless the hosts have offered to pay for the trip.

CULTURE SHOCK

Many international students experience culture shock at some point during their stay here. There are four phases to culture shock:

1. **The honeymoon period**
During the first few weeks of the student's stay, everything seems new and exciting, and students are incredibly happy.
2. **The crisis or frustration phase**
This period is the most important in terms of acculturation and development. Students frequently enter this phase when they receive their first bad grade or have an argument with their hosts. They begin to comprehend how big the differences are between the cultures they are trying to navigate and feel overwhelmed.
3. **The recovery and understanding phase**
During this stage, students will gain a more balanced perspective on cultural differences and start to settle in. Their English proficiency usually improves dramatically during this period and self-esteem grows.
4. **The adjustment and acclimation phase**
This phase is marked by an increased ability to manage and navigate their surroundings. Students will feel at home in their surroundings and start to feel part of life in America.



CELEBRATING ASIAN HOLIDAYS WITH YOUR STUDENT

The major Asian holidays present a time when your student may be very homesick. Acknowledging these holidays and celebrating them as a family may go a long way in easing the heartache of separation from family. There are many Asian grocery stores in the area and having food familiar to them seems to help a lot. Having the student prepare a dish from home is a wonderful way to share culture.

Below, please find a list of major Asian holidays:

Mid-autumn festival/moon Festival

The moon festival occurs on the 15th day of the 8th month of the lunar calendar. This holiday serves as China's harvest celebration and can be compared to our Thanksgiving holiday. Decorations include paper lanterns and people gift mooncakes (a delicacy filled with bean paste) to friends and acquaintances.

Chinese New Year or Spring Festival

This holiday is based on the lunar calendar, so the date varies from year to year. The holiday usually falls in late January or early February. The holiday is celebrated in many Asian countries, including China, Vietnam, and Singapore. Red envelopes, filled with money, are often exchanged during this holiday. People like to wear red as that color welcomes good fortune.

SAMPLE HOUSE RULES

Example One:

Dear Jenny,

Welcome to the Smith family. We are excited to have you here!

Here are our house rules:

Punctuality

Please be ready to leave for school at 8:00 am. Being on time is much appreciated and expected in America.

Dinner

We usually have dinner as a family around 7:00 pm. We will give you a 10-minute heads up, so please be aware. We don't bring cell phones to the dinner table.

Your room

Eating and drinking in your room is OK, but please bring dirty dishes out daily and empty the trash often. Vacuuming your room and keeping it clean is your responsibility.

Washer and Dryer

Please run full loads of laundry only. We do this to preserve water and electricity. Underwear and athletic attire need to be washed after a single use, jeans and sweaters after several. Please ask if you need guidance.

Dishes

After dinner, we all clear the table, and we take turns rinsing dishes. Food scraps go in the trash under the sink, dishes get a quick rinse, and then are put to the left side of the sink. Parents will load the dishwasher but expect you to clear and rinse.

Trash

Recycling goes in the pantry. When you notice the trash can or recycling is full, please empty in trash bins downstairs.

Showers

Because we are in a drought, we ask that you take short showers (no more than about 10 minutes). Californians are trained to save water and it is a very precious resource. Also, save water by not letting it run when brushing your teeth or using lots of water to rinse a dish. (Get sponge wet, scrub, put in the left sink. It is all going through the dishwasher so it doesn't have to be sterile.)

Septic Tank

We don't have a sewer here in the country but are on a septic tank. That means that we can only flush toilet paper. Not tissues, not paper towels, not sanitary napkins (they must go in the trash can).

Friends

Feel free to invite friends over but give us a heads up so we know who/what to expect and can prepare for bigger dinners if they are joining us.

Lights

We are an environmentally conscious family. Please turn off the lights when you are not in the room. Remember to turn the lights off when you leave for school, etc.

Schedule

Since there will be three of you and one driver, please give adequate advance notice on pickups and weekend plans.

Please let us know if you have any questions. We are so happy you are here.

Example Two:

Bedroom

- Please keep your room neat and clean.
- Please vacuum and/or dust your own room at least once a week.
- Please do not keep garbage in your room.
- Please make your bed daily.

Personal Hygiene

- All toiletries should be kept in your room or in the bathroom space assigned to you. Please do not leave these items around the house or bathroom.
- Please shower or bathe at least every other day using your own toiletries.
- (For female students) Feminine products are your responsibility. Please ask your host mother about proper disposal.
- Please use deodorant and brush your teeth daily.
- Haircuts are your responsibility.

Bathroom Use

- Please clean up after each and every bathroom use.
- Please check the floor for spilled water and wipe up.
- Please flush the toilet after each use and place the seat cover down.
- Please wash your hands with soap and water after using the toilet.

Laundry

- Please place your dirty clothes and towels in your own hamper(s).
- We will show you how to use the washer and dryer. It is your responsibility to fold and put away your clean clothes after they are washed.
- You will be in charge of changing your sheets every other week.

Meals and Snacks

- Please wash your hands with soap and water before each meal.
- Please excuse yourself from the table before leaving.
- Please clear your own plate after eating meals.

Kitchen

- You may use the microwave and stove once you have been shown how.
- You may not cook unless there is a member of the host family in the house.
- You may snack, but please clean up counters and dishes after use.

Computer Use

- Please do not access any adult content on the computer or bring adult content print materials into the house.
- Please do not download any new/updated programs on the host family computers without asking for permission.

Homework

- Homework is a priority!
- The school schedule will change according to extracurricular activities. Homework is expected to be completed after school if a later activity is scheduled.
- All forms of entertainment, such as T.V. watching, video games or computer use will be allowed only after all schoolwork is completed.

Special Activities

- Please coordinate special school activities with us.
- Remember that there are other members of the family that may have conflicting plans.
- Please give as much notice as possible if you would like to do something that does not include the family (example: going over to someone's house).
- Transportation should always be worked out in advance. Please give us at least 24 hours' notice.
- Make sure you meet others at the agreed time and in the agreed place.

Money

- It is yours to spend, but you should manage it.
- You may not ask to borrow money from anyone.

Packages

- You may receive personal packages in the mail.
- Please seek permission from the host family before purchasing additional items/furniture for your bedroom.

Reminders

- You may have friends visit the house only if you ask us for permission first.
- Please do not make plans without first asking for permission from us.
- Please ask for permission to leave the house.
- Please do not leave the house without letting us know where you are going. We are responsible for knowing where you are at all times.
- Please do not bring alcohol, drugs, tobacco, or vaping devices into the house. Even if you smoke at home, you are required to abide by U.S. law, and school rules on smoking.
- We ask that you always speak English when in our home.
- Please do not make travel plans without first consulting us.

I have read and understood these house rules.

Signed:

Host Parent 1: _____ Date: _____

Host Parent 2: _____ Date: _____

Student: _____ Date: _____