

German Student Considerations

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Germany is made up of 16 different states and regions that come with different dialects, customs and mentalities. The Cultural Considerations below are an oversimplification of typical German behaviors. They are meant as a helpful conversation starter with the Germans you interact with. Please be aware that individuals will vary from the “typical German”.

YFU expects their exchange students to do the best they can to adapt to life in your family and in the USA. The explanations about the issues below are meant to give you an inkling about what typical challenges to expect for your student and how to better help them along in their adaptation process.



YFU-specific: PreDeparture Orientation (PDO)

In Germany PDO is a one week orientation aimed at teaching about culture as a general concept with the following sub-topics: cultural differences, communication, history, values, and adaptation. Specific tips about the USA are kept to a minimum due to its size and the considerable differences between our host families.

The orientation is facilitated by a group of volunteers, usually program alums. The team is usually made up of 8 – 10 people with a mix of just returned and more experienced alum. They try to show the broad spectrum of possible experiences based on their own experience and advice handed down over the years.

On a related note, German students are used to working with teens and tweens in the YFU context and might be surprised to learn their ARs and Orientation Staff are adults or even mature adults.

Values

Efficiency is often listed high among German values. Anything worth doing is worth doing well and there is certainly one very particular way to do it best and why would you do it any other way?! Germans may spend a lot of time refining a process even when they will only ever do it once. The same goes for planning events and outings. It's to be done ahead of time with as many factors as possible anticipated, so that you may enjoy most efficiently while on the outing.

Environmental issues are a second often quoted value. Most German cities and towns have implemented a detailed recycling system (which is different from the American one) with higher fees for collecting regular waste than recycling containers. Responsible solutions for depositing nuclear waste and harvesting wind energy come up in the news regularly.

Germans seem to have a high need for fairness. It is more important to find a fair solution than an easy solution; this may apply to paying your share for a group meal at a restaurant or involve a major investigative process to a disagreement, instead of making up and moving forward.

Information is better understood at a factual level than at the relationship level. Your German student may take things very literally and not be able to pick up nuances of meaning very well. This may be a language issue in the beginning, but the cultural background does also factor heavily into this issue. This is also true for their statements. They will make sure that the content of their own message is what they want to express but may neglect to pay attention to phrasing or politeness. Gratitude and feelings are expressed at large intervals and only when you absolutely have to. Making it part of your daily vocabulary is such a serious and novel step for a German that they may need some practice.

Religion and church

Germans, while mostly Christians, don't embrace religious services and belief. While state and religion are separated, religion is offered as a class in school. Typical attendance of church only happens at Easter and Christmas, so the approach to religious matters is academic rather than emotional or personal. The North is mostly Protestant, the South mostly Catholic. Churches offer after-school programs that some children and teenagers embrace. It is customary to be baptized as a young child, attend confirmation classes at the age of 14 and receive generous gifts by relatives at that time to then drop out of church when starting your first job as you then have to pay taxes to the church as long as you are a member.



Regional Differences

There may still be differences between students from East Germany and West Germany. Re-Unification was in 1989. You can see the former division in the picture. Germans certainly still have stereotypes about each other.

Then again Southern and Northern Germans like to point out their individuality as well. The dividing line here is humorously called Weisswurstäquator (white sausage equator) hinting at the fact that people South of the boarder like to eat white sausage and have strict rules about how it is done. The South in this sense is roughly the states Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg.

Race differences

On Dec 31, 2013 the German population was 80.7 million. 7.6 million of these 80 million have a migratory background. The one biggest group with 1.5 million are of Turkish decent, then Polish with 0.6 million. While there are people of every race in modern Germany, the numbers are so small that the topic of race is not commonly discussed. Cultural and subcultural issues are discussed in terms of nationality.

Germans expect the USA to be a melting pot with everyone having come together to live as a united people. The reality of separation is hard to accept as is the realization that with different skin color may come different cultural subgroups.

Many exchange students are familiar with Martin Luther King Junior, with the US having a black president, and with segregation being outlawed in the 50s and their expectation is that these tendencies are a thing of the past. It may come as a shock to an exchange student that in their High School, Hispanics hang out with other Hispanics, that the African American students form a group, that being Caucasian means they will be seen as a member of that group, and that they need to make an effort to reach out across those groups. It usually also takes a moment to sink in that being equal does not mean being the same and that these groupings represent different subcultures that come with different language (vocabulary, intonations), mannerism, and values.

Teenagers

Teenagers are seen as young adults rather than older children. They are supposed to be making adult decisions with the parents being able to veto or oversee them. However, it's a monitored trial run for when they soon move out to go to college. Natural Parents trust their children's assessment and will discuss with them on an equal footing. In severe medical situations I often hear host parents say, "If it were my kid, I would get them home." German parents trust their child to make the call if they can stay - and students often prefer to remain on program. German parents accept that.

A German exchange student might become frustrated when s/he has to earn their host parents' trust before being allowed to make their own decisions. Make sure they know this is not a reaction to them as a person, but is a culturally appropriate parenting approach.

School work

German schools are focused on academic subjects. Electives and extra-curriculars are kept to the most basic level. Grading has a slightly different focus: active participation during class makes up about 50% of the grade, the rest is made up by tests taken in class. Homework is not graded and sometimes only inconsistently checked. A number of German students each year have difficulty

shifting the focus to being more thorough and reliable with their homework in their American High School. They may consider it busy work and unnecessary when they have already grasped the content. It helps to make this difference in grading systems transparent to them.

Relationships

It is very common in Germany that groups of friends are made up of boys and girls. It is perfectly reasonable to cultivate a friendship with a person of the other gender without intending for it to turn into a romantic relationship. If things do turn into a romantic relationship it is usually a transformation from an already existing friendship. The concept of dating is unknown.

As a result your exchange student may not know the proper etiquette to bond with a person they are romantically interested in and could come across as too forward or too awkward.

Public transportation / mobility

In Germany, even remote areas are connected by public transport and students are expected to make their way to school, afternoon activities and friends' houses by themselves. In fact, curfews, if there are any, usually coincide with the last bus/train. It is highly unusual to ask parents for rides. Public Transportation is safe and common. German exchange students often have a hard time asking for rides when in the US as it may feel to them like an inappropriately big burden for a host parent. There is also a lack of understanding that they may need to ask for permission when riding with a teenaged driver.

Asking: why? vs. Questioning Authority

Germany is still very influenced by WWII. Our current students are the first generation that barely know people that were alive during the war anymore. But they are held accountable for keeping the legacy of the lessons learned alive. The rise of fascism and the resulting war is made a topic in school every year, and mostly students deal with the question of how things could have gotten so far out of hand and are taught to be an alert, well-informed and active participant in shaping society. German children are raised to think for themselves and question rules that they don't understand or don't believe to be fair. While German kids are, of course, expected to follow their parents' guidance, the process of setting up rules is a more collaborative effort. Asking "why?" is not considered questioning authority, but rather it's considered a responsible action. Rules are followed because they make sense to the child, not "because I said so." Asking why is a step in getting there.

Weapons and Sex

Weapons and sex are hot button topics that Americans and Germans have very different views on. I like to compare these two topics because the feelings they are viewed with are equally intense if reversed.

Germans feel sex and nudity are a part of life and being able to deal with them responsibly means openly talking about them. This goes especially among friends and within the family even across generations, and TV programming and some print media will also be more liberal than Americans are accustomed to. There are some nude beaches along the Baltic Sea and it's customary to go into the sauna nude. Learning about the human body starts in kindergarten; sex education begins around the time of 5th grade, sometimes earlier; and it is considered irresponsible to not discuss safe sex with your children by the time puberty hits at the latest. Abstinence, while also recommended for emotions' sake, is not considered a form of contraception.

Weapons, especially guns, are not common in Germany. I suppose it goes hand in hand with the German's weariness of the military due to Germany's history in the Nazi Era. There is little understanding for wanting or needing to protect house and family with personal weapons. Please be aware that Bundestag (German Congress) forbids CBYX Students to handle any kind of weapons or simulation thereof (including archery and laser tag). They consider it a demonstration of violence that runs contrary to our program goals.

Additional reading and viewing:

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

An Australian living in Germany lists her observations about Germans

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F0tkx-LhEB0>

Exaggerated and partly explicit explanation of how to "get Germanized". Delivered by a German (4:30)

Acceptable greetings are listed at 2:50

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=woUZCk58iCQ>

An American explaining Cultural Differences, (watch 1:00 – 7:00)

<http://www.thelocal.de/>

Current German news in English