

Keeping your Students Safe

guidelines for YFU Area Reps

International exchange is an experience that thousands of teens enjoy every year. While students develop a new level of independence, caretaking responsibilities are transferred to Youth For Understanding. With such a task, a realistic approach to child safety is essential as we try to provide our students with a carefree and secure environment. So, as unseemly as it is, we must face the fact that exploitation of teenagers, whether it be financial, sexual or otherwise, is a harsh reality that we have a responsibility to be aware of and report immediately to your Support Services Manager at 800-424-3691.

SAFEGUARDING AGAINST EXPLOITATION

There are steps that everyone at YFU can take to help ensure that our international students have a positive experience.

- Perform thorough reference checks on potential host families. If there are two host parents, ask references about each of them individually, rather than asking solely about the couple as a pair.
- If there are two host parents, talk with both of them, making sure that they are each committed, individually and as a couple, to welcoming in their new student. Regulations require both parents to be present for the interview unless there are extenuating circumstances.
- Provide proper orientation training to host families. Distribute the “Five Simple Safety Tips” handout to your host families and be ready to talk with them about it.
- Be sure to make direct contact with students each month. Leaving numerous messages with no return call could be a red flag in and of itself. An isolated student is more vulnerable and thus an easier target for abuse or exploitation.
- Ask students direct questions about their host family relationships, what they talk about and what chores they are expected to do. Ensure they have established their own bank account.

DETECTING SEXUAL ABUSE

There are behavioral signs that may indicate victimization. You should be alert to the signs of sexual abuse including

- a fear of certain places, people, or activities— especially being alone with certain people. **Exchange students should not be forced to give affection to an adult or teenager if they do not want to.** Be alert to signs that an exchange student is trying to avoid someone, and listen carefully when he or she tells you how they feel about someone.
- behavioral changes, extreme mood swings, withdrawal, fearfulness, and excessive crying.
- a sudden “acting out” of feelings or aggressive or rebellious behavior.

You should note that some of these behaviors may have other explanations. A child who studies abroad is entering a strange environment and may experience homesickness or anxieties that can lead to behaviors similar to the signs of

sexual molestation. Do not, however, simply discount the behavior as homesickness. Bring it to the attention of your Support Services Manager right away. Even if the student's behavior is a result of homesickness, his or her exchange experience will be much more enjoyable if the cause of the distress is addressed, and the child feels comfortable discussing it.

Be aware also of clues about relationships with host family members. Specifically, if

- a host parent confides personal or marital problems to the student. Talking to a teenager about these topics is inappropriate and could be a sign that the relationship is heading in the wrong direction. Again, ask your students what types of things they talk about with their host parents.
- one host parent is remote and uninvolved in the hosting experience. Though this may be natural in some households, be aware that it can point toward "hosting for the wrong reasons."

WHAT TO DO

At some point a student in your area may tell you that someone has exploited or molested him or her. If this happens, you should be prepared to help the child. Follow these guidelines, and report it to your District Office Support Services Manager immediately.

DON'T claim that the student misunderstood what happened.

DON'T blame the student.

DON'T panic or overreact to the information disclosed by the student.

DO listen to and believe the student. Discounting what the student is reporting can result in the oversight of a serious situation.

DO believe that the behavior, however serious or benign, is making the student feel uncomfortable, which is what we must protect against. If the student is uncomfortable, you must react.

DO respect the student's privacy. It is important that you provide a safe space for the student to talk about what happened, and that you discuss the situation only with your Support Services Manager or other District Office Staff.

DO listen to host families when they report improper behavior, whether it is their own or their student's. Passing information on to your Support Services Manager or District Office staff is critical because it allows for necessary safeguards and precautions to be put in place.

REPORTING CASES OF EXPLOITATION

Remember, most people are not trained to make judgments about whether a child has been abused. If you suspect that an exchange student in your area is the victim or perpetrator of exploitation, you should report this to your Support Services Manager or District Office staff immediately. A YFU employee will follow up appropriately, according to established YFU USA protocol. It is not your role to confront the abuser—you must report and carefully document the allegations. Please note that if your profession requires you to report directly to authorities, to be sure to coordinate the report with the Support Services Manager.

Knowing what you know now, keep in mind that sexual exploitation should not be confused with physical contact that is a true expression of affection. A warm and healthy relationship can exist between a host family and exchange student **if all family members respect one another and place reasonable limits on physical interaction.** If a student or host family comments on any level of discomfort though, you must react appropriately; report it to your Support Services Manager or District Office staff.