





CHAPTER 7

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HOSTING A GAPP STUDENT

Note to the reader: The wording of this section is addressed directly to prospective host families. It is also available from the GAPP office as a .pdf file.

Hosting a GAPP student can be a most rewarding experience – an opportunity to extend your family into a second culture. GAPP students provide us the opportunity to look at familiar patterns through the eyes of those who grew up in a different country, speak a different language, and have different habits and expectations. Some of these differences may be hardly noticeable, while others may surprise us.

Recognizing cultural differences, respecting them, and being able to accommodate them for the duration of the stay will broaden everyone's intercultural perspectives. This chapter is intended to be a point of departure for conversations at home and discussions in the classroom, raising sensitivity and expanding awareness about how your student will participate in your family's daily life. It will also help anticipate awkward moments and perhaps prevent difficult situations.

7.1. GAPP Students Have Expectations of the United States

GAPP students probably have expectations of life in America formed during the English-language learning experience in the German classroom or from the media. Most Germans have seen popular American movies and television series, and most likely their expectations have been shaped by these Hollywood images. As you well know, few families will match the image portrayed in school texts or movies. To get an idea of how this works, describe your image of *Germany* and see how your guest reacts.

Visitors will be eager to experience America. They will expect to encounter the stereotypes they may have formed, but they should also be open to dismantling them. Many have very specific images of what America is and how it operates. They know that school buses are yellow. They know about freeways, Los Angeles traffic jams, and probably a lot about New York. Expectations may be idealistic, even unrealistic, and their requirements of their host families may be based on these expectations.

Germans may have unrealistic ideas about the distances in the United States. When asked about what they would like to see or do, they may suggest something so far away that you are not at all prepared to accommodate that

wish or at least surprised by such an excessive request. Coordinators should provide parents with a list of suggested outings in the area.

7.1.1. Cultural Expectations

Host families learn certain things about Germans in preparation for the exchange. The German GAPP students also learn some “dos” and “don’ts” about American families in preparation for their visit. This leads to interesting situations. For example, Americans have learned that Germans shake hands as they greet or take leave of one another. Germans have learned that Americans typically don’t shake hands. What happens? The Germans arrive knowing that handshaking is not the norm and will do their best to be appropriate, while the American hosts, wanting to make the Germans feel at home, will offer handshakes. The best thing for the Americans to do is to act normally and let the Germans experience us as we usually are. Don’t we want them to do the same for us when we are in Germany?

7.2. Meeting Your Student at the Airport

Meeting the Germans at the airport is a moment filled with anticipation and feelings ranging from “Why are we doing this?” to “This is going to be so much fun. I can’t wait.” Conversation tends to focus on the trip, the airline connections, and the guests’ travel fatigue. This is also an apprehensive moment for the visitors, who suddenly find themselves all alone with total strangers with whom they will live for the next three weeks.

7.3. Arriving at Home

When the Germans arrive, they have spent many hours on the plane, and have a time change to overcome. They probably have been excited about making this trip for quite some time. The sights, sounds, and new language provide a barrage of impressions in the beginning. Much of the information you give during the first hours will be lost in the initial confusion.

When you first arrive at home, introduce your student to family members and pets. Determine immediately how you would like your student to address you. Do you want it to be by first name? Mom and Dad? Mr. and Mrs.?

Show your guest where s/he will sleep and where to put his/her things, then tour the house, pointing out where important things are located, especially

which bathroom to use and how to operate the tub or shower. Although it is important for your guest to know how appliances operate, this might be reserved for another time, when some of the excitement has settled and s/he will be more receptive to details such as how the microwave operates and which TV channels are more interesting than others.

7.4. Meals

Even if it is not common for your family to eat three meals a day, provide this opportunity to your guest. Most German students are accustomed to a snack break sometime in the morning and will probably find it difficult to manage from breakfast until lunch without a little something to eat. Ask whether s/he would like to take something along, or explain what opportunities for snacks and meals your school provides. Treat your guest as you would your own children. If you pack a lunch for them, do so for your guest. If you give them money to buy their lunch at school, include your guest.

Are you planning to have family dinners at certain times on certain days? If you want your guest to be there, make it clear when you expect him/her.

Certain foods considered to be typically American and liked by most teenagers may take some time to “grow” on your visitor. Peanut butter, corn, pumpkin pie and squash may not be instant successes with your guest, yet s/he should be expected to eat what the family eats and not expect special fare.

What are your thoughts about snacking? What is off limits? What is available? Is the refrigerator available for between-meal snacks? Are there limitations?

7.5. Daily Routines

Don't change your family's patterns to present the “typical” American family picture. If you do not normally eat breakfast together, don't start now. If there are times when everyone just goes to the refrigerator and helps him/herself, continue to do that and invite your guest to participate. If you do laundry on certain days, tell your visitor when and where to put clothes to be washed. If you go to church on Sundays, invite your visitor to come along. If you do not normally go, don't go for your visitor's sake, but do make it possible for him/her to go to church if desired.

Discuss the daily routines. What time is “rise and shine”? Is the bathroom to be shared? Are you expecting your guest to participate in certain chores? Make his/her bed? Be ready to leave at a certain time?

Is TV accessible at all times? Who sits where in front of the TV? What time do you expect everyone to be quiet for the night?

It is a common German habit to keep doors closed. When your guest retreats into his/her room and closes the door, it does not mean that s/he is closing him/herself off from you, it just means that this is what is typically done at home in Germany. Also be sensitive to the student’s need for privacy and quiet time. When in doubt about how your guest is feeling, ask!

7.6. Rules When Spending Time Away from Your Host’s Home

Be clear about your expectations regarding your guests being members of your household. Do tell them that you expect to be asked if they would like to do something away from your house and that you need to know where they will be and when they’ll be home. The German students may appear to be very mature and worldly-wise according to your standards, but they are still teenagers and responsible to you while in your family. As a parent, insist on knowing where the students are at all times.

GAPP rules and regulations are clear: Do not allow German students to drive!

7.7. Telephone and Email Use

What are your expectations regarding telephone use? It would be nice to let your students make a short call home to let their families know that they have arrived safely. Telephone calls home can often lead to homesickness. Discourage your guest from excessively calling their friends, both here and in Germany. After that, what are your rules about long-distance calls? Time on the phone? Calls after certain hours? Telephone calls are also not as important anymore now that most families have email. Students should be given a chance to email their friends and families. Discourage hour-long sessions on the computer, as that prevents the students from being with their host families and fellow students.

7.8. Laundry

What are your household procedures regarding laundry? Does everyone do his/her own? Should dirty clothing be in a certain place on a certain day? Who does the ironing? How will you know whether the clothes brought by your guest are appropriate for the washing machine? Germans typically wear the same article of clothing more often between washings than their American counterparts.

7.9. Alcohol and Smoking

German teenagers' views on alcohol are often more liberal than those of their American hosts. Yet, when in your house, your guest will follow your rules and regulations. It is not a good idea to serve your guest alcohol of any kind, even though s/he may be used to it in Germany. If your guest is a smoker and you are not, let it be known when and where to smoke or request that he/she not to smoke.

7.10. Necessary Information for Your Guest

Provide your guest with the home, work, and cellular numbers of family members or neighbors. Make certain that these numbers are written down and carried along with your address and directions from school to your house. It will be difficult for the Germans to orient themselves in the beginning, since the distinguishing features with which we identify our neighborhoods will be unfamiliar and difficult to remember for them. Make sure your guest has access into the house at all times. You may want to provide the student with his/her own key. If you have a security alarm, make sure the guest understands how it works, or leave it unarmed for the duration of the stay.

Find out who has medical treatment authority for your guests. If it is the German accompanying teacher, know how to reach him/her in case of an emergency.

7.11. Activities with GAPP Students

Everything will be interesting to the Germans, even if they do not show the appropriate enthusiasm. For many teenagers, showing excitement about an experience is difficult. Some students may bubble with excitement, while others seem to shrug things off which you expect to be appreciated.

Regard seeming indifference as a cultural variation. It is often interesting to observe how German guests react to a situation without apparent interest and then listen to them talk about it with great excitement to the other GAPP students at school the following day. It may well be that some of the experiences your guest has while with you may not be understood until s/he returns home.

Everyday life is also interesting. Grocery shopping, running errands, visiting neighbors, doing family projects, attending little league ball games, spending a day at work with someone from your family, taking a trip to the hardware store, etc., will be valuable experiences for your guest and will afford a detailed look into American life.

Regard your guest as a typical teenager. Your invitation to accompany you may not be met with excitement. S/he may prefer to relax in front of the TV. While some relaxing may be appropriate, those opportunities ought to be balanced with worthwhile activities. Would you like your child to spend the time in Germany in front of the television?

7.12. What Do We Talk About?

Ask your student about his/her family, habits, food, work, etc. This discussion will give you significant information and will let you know where the cultural differences lie and what may be of interest to your student.

Expect your GAPP student to be more politically informed than many Americans. A German student typically has a global view and may not agree with the American way of doing things in the world. Do not try to convert him/her. Try to explain the reasons for your thinking and discover the reasons for your guest's thinking.

7.13. Host Family's Financial Obligations

Treat your guest as you treat your own children. When you go out for meals or to an event, pay for your GAPP student as you would your own children. GAPP students will have spending money of their own for souvenirs and snacks. German families will reciprocate in similar manner when the American students visit there.

7.14. What If Things Just Don't Work Out?

Even though GAPP students are screened prior to being accepted into the program, and even though care has been taken to match your family with the student according to what is known about each student, it occasionally happens that people simply were not meant to be together under the same roof. It could be that the teenagers do not get along, or it could be that the GAPP student is fundamentally so different that you are dreading the three weeks s/he will be with you. If that should be the case, call your son's or daughter's German teacher and ask for assistance. Sometimes all it takes is a conversation to clear up differences. Sometimes it would simply be better for a student to be moved to a different home. This does not imply that you are a poor host or that you should tough it out. It may simply mean that this is an incompatible match.

7.15. You Can Do It!

Have fun with the visit! This is an opportunity for you and your family to learn firsthand about another culture. In fact, you may find that you have begun a long-lasting international friendship. Hope that your son/daughter will have the opportunity to return the visit and gain as much from the visit as your guest gained from being with you. There will probably be some awkward moments, but those will pass. When in doubt, ask, and keep the dialogue going. You'll be surprised how quickly the time passes.

