

Host Family Handbook

Welcoming a student into your home—An Experience of a Lifetime

Becoming a host family to a young student from a different country and culture is both an enriching and challenging experience. Welcoming international students into our homes helps develop friendships that will last a lifetime and by sharing your home and offering guidance to your student your family becomes an important part of their life.

The Nova Scotia International Student Program . . .

Initiated in 1997, the Nova Scotia International Student Program (NSISP) is a joint venture of the regional school boards and the Department of Education. The NSISP provides students from other countries with education programs and the opportunity to learn our language and culture. All regions of the province participate in the program through their respective school boards.

Marketed in various countries, the NSISP uses international education fairs and contracted education agents to recruit potential students to the program. The agents act as representatives of the NSISP not only in recruiting the students but helping them with their applications and travel arrangements. They also act as the liaison between the NSISP and the student's parents while the students are in Canada.

A student's acceptance to the program is based on school performance, adaptability, English language ability, and good health. All students must obtain student Visas to come into the country to study. Citizenship and Immigration Canada, a department within the Canadian Government, is responsible for issuing student Visas.

After students apply to study in Nova Scotia, the NSISP reviews applications and, if approved, assigns them to one of the regional school boards. The school board places the student in one to their participating schools. The availability of a suitable home stay placement in the region often determines the choice of school.

The students' countries . . .

The NSISP works closely with agents around the world to bring students to the province. Students come from all over the world including Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Germany, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Russia, Thailand, Taiwan and Turkey.

Becoming a host family . . .

Families interested in becoming a host family should contact their local school board and speak with the International Student Program representative. After speaking to the NSISP representative, the family receives information for their perusal. The NSISP representative follows-up with the family and organizes a home visit.

Home visits are an opportunity for families to ask questions and gather more information on the program and for the NSISP representative to assess their suitability. The NSISP policy requires families have references and police checks.

Upon approval, the NSISP representative matches a student with a host family. Matches are based on family and student interests, and family and student preferences.

Host families agree to:

- provide a private bedroom
- provide three balanced meals per day
- invite and encourage participation in family events and travel
- show local culture and visit some highlights of the area
- explain family rules and expectations
- be familiar with program rules
- provide use of common areas in the home (living room, family room, etc.)
- allow use of telephone and computer according to family house rules
- encourage involvement in daily functions of family life (meal preparation, clean up etc.)
- provide guidance and advice for school and social problems

Host families are not responsible for:

- **Student finances**—students are responsible for setting up their own bank accounts. Host families are not responsible for providing an allowance, monitoring spending, or lending money. However, families should pay their students if they babysit their other children.
- **Individual items**—students are responsible for purchasing their own toiletry items, school supplies, club memberships, social events etc. However, if the family takes their student to dinner or a social event, then the family is responsible for the cost.
- **Monitoring food**—families are not responsible for putting the student on any kind of diet including one for personal or religious beliefs. Families, are however, responsible for providing healthy meals and snacks.

Preparing for the arrival of your student . . .

A successful home stay happens when all members of the family agree that taking an international student into the home is a good idea. If any family member disagrees then it could cause problems throughout the school year.

Once a student is placed, families can begin preparing the bedroom for the student. Necessities for your student include a bed, a desk and somewhere to store clothes and other personal items. Other useful items:

- clock radio (although many students bring an alarm clock or stereo)
- bulletin board (especially if families do not want items attached to the walls)
- calendar
- reading light
- extra blankets (many students come from warmer climates)
- any other small touches

Students should also have:

- set of keys
- list of important phone numbers (police, emergency contacts etc.)
- small notebook for writing information

It is a good idea to start corresponding with your student and their family once the NSISP identifies your student and indicates when they will arrive. This helps to give the family better insight to the student's personality, their likes and dislikes, and their expectations. In return the student's family learns more about the family their child will be living with while attending school. Corresponding will also help make your first meeting less awkward.

The NSISP recommends that families do some research on their student's home country. This helps give insight into the culture and helps with the communication gap because host families can ask questions about their student's homeland.

It is useful to contact local Canadian students in the area who are close in age to the international student. Let them know an international student is arriving. Ask them if they might show the student around the school, take them to a few social events etc. This makes the first few weeks much easier on the student as they feel much less alone.

Student arrival . . .

Once correspondence begins with the student host families could hear from them as to their flight arrival information. **Consider this information tentative! A staff member from NSISP confirms all flights.** During peak travel times arrangements often change and agents are trying to get the most economical flights for the students so things can change at the last minute.

One member of the host family should be at the airport to greet the student upon arrival. A representative from the NSISP will also be there to ensure safe arrival and departure with the host family.

Program representatives greet students with signs that have their name printed on it. The NSISP encourages families to do their own colourful signs to welcoming their students. Families may also welcome their student with balloons, flowers, or small gifts.

Once students arrive at their home stay, excitement is high. During the first hours students may not be the least bit tired and usually want to take in as much as they possibly can. However, some students will be tired or jet-lagged after the long journey. Some will be very hungry and others will not be hungry or want to eat for a day or two. Remember, the combination of being excited and being on a different time clock can produce some different behaviour. Some students adjust quickly to their new home, while others take much longer.

After arriving home from the airport, show the student their room and around the house. Tell them where things are and how they work. However, with all the excitement in those first few hours, students may not remember everything their host family has told them.

Think about the student waking up the next morning in a strange house and anticipate what they might be wondering. Remember the more help students get with practical matters the more at ease they will feel. Don't be afraid to explain the simple things. In a new culture even the small things are new. Also remember that families have an established way of interacting and a way of daily operation. Adding a new person to this mixture is a jolt to all family members. Be clear and direct with the student and approach matters and questions with an open mind. Hesitation and confusion often occur for both family and student during the first few weeks of the program. Working out what place the student will take in the host family often leads to some awkward moments. This is normal. However once things get worked through, everyone can concentrate on building interesting and enriching relationships. **Remember be patient with your student.**

Culture shock and international students . . .

Culture shock has happened to some international students during their stay. At orientation NSISP representatives discuss culture shock and methods of dealing with the problem. Four phases to be aware of:

- 1. The Honeymoon**—students are excited about their new experiences and surroundings. Students will begin to associate Canada with their home country. They will also look for similarities between the two, and this helps them feel more comfortable.
- 2. Shock**—students start to feel a little disorientated. They will start to notice the differences between Canadian living and home. At this point the student might feel the most homesick. Most students do not display strong symptoms however some may get sleepier or need more time alone away from the host family. Keep the lines of communication open during this time as the student may want to talk about their feelings.
- 3. Recovery**—students feel more comfortable, relaxed and secure within their surroundings.
- 4. Home free**—students are now members of the family. Students will begin to enjoy the differences of their new life. They will also display more confidence and feel at home with their host family.

Students will go through these stages at different paces and some may not experience any culture shock. Culture shock is temporary for most students. With a little understanding and guidance from the host family, students can recover quickly.

Those first few weeks . . .

The first several weeks of the program can be a difficult time for international students and their host families. The NSISP suggests students and host families spend that time getting to know each other better. Issues families will want to address:

1. Food—typically when students first arrive they do not eat a lot. Imagine uprooting your life, living with a family from a different culture and having to eat different foods. It may take a week or two before students begin eating any amount of food. A good idea is to take them on a trip to the grocery store where they can point out some of their favourite foods.

2. Supervision—students need to understand from the beginning the rules for things including curfew, meal times, and telephone calls home. Some students find attentiveness to their whereabouts intrusive. Explain that in Canada parents do pay attention to these details for the students' own safety and well-being. Other students find their host family liberal in their rules and can find it difficult to get use to their newfound freedom.

3. Language—students might find it difficult to talk with and understand their new family and friends. The NSISP suggests families and friends speak slowly and try avoiding slang. Help your student with their pronunciation and with speaking in sentences. Before long, the student will sound just like any member of the family.

4. Manners—what we perceive as good manners can be completely different in another country. Silence and lack of curiosity in some areas of the world is considered rude. However, in some cultures it is a sign of respect. In some cultures, people do not say please and thank-you as readily as we do in Canada. On the other hand, in some cultures it would be considered unbelievably polite according to our standards. A student's level of modesty can be quite different from your own.

5. Transportation—most of our students come from large cities where public transportation is readily available. Some students find it difficult to rely on their host family to drive them to their various activities. They might complain about their location as a result. Explain that in many places across the country this is the reality and that the student just needs to get used to it and adjust. **The NSISP prohibits students from driving or obtaining a driver's permit while part of the program.**

6. School and Friends—all international students must attend school. They must also put an effort into their studies. Some students claim that because they are not here for school credit that they do not need to do homework or assignments. It is a good idea to remind them of program rules and expectations. Encouraging the student to enrol in extra curricular activities is a great way from them to meet new students. It also helps make their stay here in Canada richer and more memorable.

7. Cultural Sensitivity—students come from many different countries and walks of life. Customs about cleanliness, including showers and laundry, to personal space, including shaking hands, hugging and table manners may vary greatly from ours. Families are encouraged to discuss these and other habits with their students as early as possible.

Family visits from home . . .

Visits from family back home are encouraged, although some students will find these visits disruptive. Students get into a routine and become part of a Canadian family and sometimes find it stressful to balance this with the presence of family members from home. However, this is a very positive experience and a wonderful opportunity for the host parents to meet their students' parents. It is not advisable that family from home visits during exam time.

NSISP does not recommend families to stay with their student's host families. They must make arrangements for their own accommodations. Host families are not responsible for accommodations or meals for their student's families visiting Nova Scotia. Extending Nova Scotia hospitality is encouraged.

Student travel . . .

Students are encouraged to travel and visit other places in Canada. If the student travels with their host family then permission is considered granted. However, if the student plans to travel out of the province, without their host parents, the student's parents must give written permission.

The NSISP asks host families to inform them before taking their student on a trip that is going to last more than a day. In case of an emergency, the NSISP needs to know where to reach the student or family.

Medical insurance . . .

Students receive medical coverage through Ingle Insurance. Students pay for their medical coverage through their program fees. They will receive a card showing they have coverage through Ingle Insurance. If they have any procedure done at the hospital, Ingle Insurance – in some cases - receives a direct bill from the hospital, however sometimes a student will be required to pay for a service upfront but will be reimbursed after Ingle Insurance receives their receipt and claim form.

Ingle Insurance does not cover regular trips to the dentist. However, the insurance will cover the cost of the dentist if the visit is the result of an accident..

Money . . .

Students are responsible for their own financial matters. The NSISP recommends families should help their student set up a personal bank account. Families should discuss any plans the students and their parents have for spending money.

The NSISP advises host families not to lend money to their student. If hosts feel their student is not receiving enough money from home or is spending beyond their means, they should contact the local program representative.

Financial reimbursement for host families . . .

Host families receive monthly financial reimbursement from the NSISP. Families receive payment from the NSISP not from the student or the student's family.

Use of telephone and computer . . .

When students arrive, families should clarify the use of the telephone and computer, and make sure the student understands. The NSISP recommends families explain how to operate the telephone, answer properly and pay the bill.

The NSISP encourages students to invest in prepaid telephone calling cards. Many local stores sell the prepaid international and national telephone cards. Student benefit from the cards because they don't owe their host family any money on their phone bills.

Departure . . .

Students cease to be considered participants in the NSISP after June 30 if they are here for the academic year. Although their medical insurance runs out at this time, students may continue it for an extra cost.

Host families have no obligation to house their student once the school term is over. However, if families wish, the student can remain with them throughout summer months or into a new school term.

Extending a student's stay . . .

All student Visas have an expiry date. If your student wants to extend their Visa, an NSISP representative has the necessary application package from the Canadian Immigration Department. Students need a full physical examination for the approval of their extension. The examination may cost your student approximately \$200 Cdn. Students should send their application for extension at least six weeks before the expiry date of the Visa.

Support for the host family . . .

The NSISP gives support to all the host families involved with the program. Host families can talk to the home stay coordinator or school board representative when problems arise. They also have a network of other host families for support. The NSISP recognizes that without the support of these families the NSISP would not continue to grow and become successful.

Guidelines for a successful home stay experience . . .

- Welcome the student into the home with care and understanding. Remember that the student may be homesick upon arrival and show compassion and sensitivity to this condition.
- Understand and agree to accept this student as one of the family. It may be uncomfortable at first but include them in normal family activities.
- Talk to your student regularly. Show interest in their school projects, activities or hobbies.
- Spend recreational time with your student. On occasion the NSISP will take them to places of local interest or to sightseeing attractions. Encourage students to make friends at school and in the neighbourhood. School and community activities are an important part of your student's experience in Nova Scotia. Provide a reasonable amount of transportation for your student to attend school activities or other community activities.
- Monitor the students' progress in school. Offer assistance and guidance to the international student when possible.
- Maintain communication with the home stay coordinator. Try to resolve problems through proactive communication and understanding.
- Successful families also give their students time, attention and love. These attributes make the program a memorable experience for everyone involved.