

# AFS–USA Participant Travel Policy

AFS-USA travel guidelines are designed to maintain the integrity of AFS programs and to help participants adapt fully to their lives as exchange participants in the U.S. AFS participants have obligations to their host families, communities, and schools. In addition, AFS is responsible for participants; AFS must know a participant's whereabouts in the event of an emergency. So that participant travel is managed within the context of these factors, AFS-USA has established the following guidelines. **Should a participant travel without complying with AFS-USA travel guidelines, the action can be considered grounds for early return to the home country.**

## TRAVEL GUIDELINES

All participant travel must be in accordance with these guidelines:

- Host family must first approve travel plans.
- If host family has approved the travel plans the participant must then get the approval of the Volunteer Area Team Support Coordinator (ATSC) or other designated volunteer in his or her region.
- Finally travel must also be approved by the AFS-USA staff.
- Travel does not interfere with school (unless a participant travels on a school-organized activity).
- Travel does not interfere with attendance at compulsory AFS events. This includes school-sponsored travel.
- Travel does not interfere with host family plans to pursue activities with a participant, especially holiday plans.
- Travel does not interfere with the participant's adaptation or integration. Travel will not be allowed if a participant is experiencing adaptation problems of any kind. Frequent travel does not encourage integration in the host family and host community. Approval for travel may be denied if a participant has traveled recently or on previous trips.
- No single trip should exceed 10 days.
- Travel does not violate AFS safety guidelines.
- **NO crossing the border into Mexico without prior AFS approval.** The border between Mexico and the United States has recently become an area of great danger due to the increase in drug trafficking, murder, robbery, rape, etc. Because of these risks currently associated with crossing the Mexico border without an AFS representative or host family parent, AFS-USA will enforce a strict "no tolerance" policy for any student who violates this guideline and crosses the Mexican border for any reason without prior AFS approval. Students who cross the border without written permission from designated Area Team representatives are subject to an immediate early return from the AFS program.

## TYPES OF TRAVEL

There are several categories of AFS-sanctioned travel. Formal permission from AFS-USA and a signed travel waiver from natural parents are **not** required for the following types of trips:

- Travel that is part of an activity organized by the school the AFS participant attends, i.e. sports events, fieldtrips, school excursions etc. These activities must have school sponsored chaperones to qualify under this category.
- Travel on an AFS-sponsored trip.
  - If it is an AFS organized event, a registered AFS volunteer or host family, 21 years or older, must drive the student.
  - If it is not an AFS organized event, the driver must have a valid driver's license and be approved by the host parents, i.e. students may be approved to ride with host siblings, neighbors, etc.
- Travel with AFS volunteers over 25 years of age; or 21 years or older with Area Team approval.
- Travel with the host family member who is at least 25 years of age or 21 years or older with Area Team approval.

All other types of travel are classified as Independent Travel and require formal approval from AFS-USA and the participant's natural parents/guardians. Independent travel includes travel alone; travel with the

participant's natural family, relatives or with non-AFS groups. A participant is considered "traveling independently" whenever he or she is away from his or her host community for a period of time that involves one or more overnight stays, or, in some exceptions, an extended day trip away from the community. "Host community" is any community which the participant routinely travels for shopping, medical appointments, entertainment, etc. In any case, it is the responsibility of the participant to ensure that their liaison is informed of where they will be traveling and how to contact them in case of an emergency.

### **STEPS TO OBTAIN APPROVAL FOR INDEPENDENT TRAVEL**

All requests for independent travel must be made to the ATSC or designated volunteer at least three weeks prior to the participant's proposed departure date. All of the following steps must be taken before AFS can give its approval for an Independent Travel request. Only once approval has been gained, should the participant begin making any definite travel plans:

1. The participant must first obtain approval for independent travel from host family, ATSC or designated volunteer and AFS staff. The participant should inform host-family and volunteers the dates and destinations of the proposed travel as well as the purpose of the trip. In all cases of participant travel, the participant must provide emergency contact information to an AFS volunteer or staff person. This contact information should include the participant's travel plans and itinerary, accommodations, and how the participant can be contacted in case of emergency. If host family and ATSC or designated volunteer do not grant permission, then the participant will not be allowed to go on the trip.
2. If host family and volunteers approve the participant's request for travel, volunteers must confirm the plans with AFS-USA.
3. Natural parent permission is required for all Independent Travel. The participant is responsible for contacting the natural family to inform them of the travel request. The natural family must then make a formal request to the AFS office in the participant's home country for a Travel Waiver. A Travel Waiver releases AFS-USA from any costs, arrangements, or responsibility for any actions to or by the participant during the travel period. Participants are not released from the terms and conditions of the AFS Participation Agreement during travel.
4. The AFS office in the participant's home country will forward a signed copy of the Travel Waiver to AFS-USA. Participants may not travel until the signed waiver has arrived in the appropriate Regional Service Center. When the preceding four steps have been completed, the participant is free to make travel arrangements. A participant may not make travel arrangements until these steps are completed and the travel is approved by all parties.
5. If a participant wishes to travel outside the U.S., the participant should check her/his passport to ensure that s/he has a multiple-entry visa and that the visa expiration date is after the date the participant intends to re-enter the U.S. A single-entry visa will not allow a participant to travel to another country and return to the U.S. The participant is responsible for contacting the consulate of the country to be visited to obtain any necessary visas to travel to that country. At least two weeks ahead of time, the participant must send her/his DS-2019 form (a form stapled inside the participant's passport) into the Regional Service Center to be signed by the Participant Support Manager or other designated staff member..

Please be advised that a visa may be required for a hosted participant to travel to Canada or Mexico. It is the participant's responsibility to determine whether a visa is necessary and to obtain one if so. Participants may contact their local Canadian or Mexican consulate for further information or consult the following websites: Embassy of Canada – <http://www.cic.gc.ca/> , Embassy of Mexico <http://www.embassyofmexico.org/> .

### **VISITS FROM NATURAL FAMILIES**

The AFS Participation Agreement, which is signed by all AFS participants and their natural parents, states, *"Many years of experience have taught AFS that a visit by relatives and friends can negatively impact the participant's experience. We understand that AFS does not encourage visits from family members or friends during the AFS program. If a family or friends plan to visit the participant, we agree to obtain consent in advance from the AFS national office in the hosting country. We also agree to abide by the hosting country*

*regulations regarding the timing and duration of the visit. We understand that the AFS host country and or host family are required to consent to a visit. In addition, we agree not to make any lodging or other impositions on the host family during the visit.”*

As our world becomes a smaller place, AFS-USA realizes that many of our participants have relatives or family friends who live in the USA. Additionally, many parents and other family members may have the opportunity to come to the USA on scheduled business or holiday trips. Visits from natural family or friends from home are often not the good idea envisaged. Through approximately 60 years of experience, AFS volunteers, participants, and host families have learned that natural family visits are disruptive to the participant’s exchange experience. For the participant, the arrival of someone from home interrupts integration into American life, as relationships and cultural norms from home are resumed. For the hosts, it interrupts their role as parents, may confuse relationships, and imposes additional hospitality burdens. Visits take the focus from the participant and burden AFS volunteer and staff support structures. In keeping with the AFS standards and the participant adjustment cycle, AFS-USA highly discourages any visits during the program.

If a natural family does plan a visit, it should be for no more than three to four days total and must be approved in advance by the ATSC or other designated volunteer. If the participant wants to travel with the natural family during this time, the host family, ATSC or other designated volunteer and staff must give permission before the trip is planned and the participant must obtain a travel waiver. (See steps 3 and 4 above.)

The following information outlines the AFS-USA policy regarding natural family and friend visits. Non-adherence to the following standards may result in an early return of the participant from the AFS-USA program.

- AFS participants hosted in the USA will not be permitted to request approval for any visits from relatives or friends until after they have been on the program for five months (year program participants) or are in the final month of their program (semester program participants).
- AFS participants will not be allowed to travel independently to visit relatives or family friends in the USA until after they have been on the program for five months or are in the final month of their program. If an AFS participant wants to visit a friend who is on an exchange in the USA, this will be considered on a case-by-case basis.
- All visits must be approved by AFS-USA, the participant’s host family, and the local/area volunteers. AFS-USA recommends that approval from all three parties be confirmed prior to tickets being purchased. AFS-USA reserves the right to deny permission for a visit if a participant is having adjustment or other support problems at the time.
- Participants will not be allowed to miss school to travel with their natural parents, other relatives or friends. AFS is an educational program and all schools in the USA offer several vacation periods. An AFS participant traveling with his/her natural parents, other relatives or friends is considered independent travel and subject to those guidelines and the requirement of a Travel Waiver.
- Since visits can be disruptive to a participant’s adjustment and adaptation, they should last no longer than 3-4 days.
- Natural family members should not plan to stay with the AFS participant’s host family, but rather are expected to arrange for their own hotel in the area.
- Natural family visits should not conflict host family plans or required AFS events and orientations.
- Any visiting natural family member or friend must obtain travel insurance prior to departure from their home country. AFS will not manage, oversee or pay for any medical care needed by visitors.

If you have any questions regarding travel policy, please contact your **Regional Service Center at 1-800-876-2377.**