

## JAPANESE STUDENT CONSIDERATIONS

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Japanese students come from a very different culture than American students, and so it is common to expect differences in their behavior and overall way of life. Awareness of the cultural differences between you and your student is essential in order to give your student a successful study abroad experience.

### BACKGROUND ABOUT JAPANESE HIGH SCHOOLS AND STUDENT LIFE

**Education System in Japan:** 6 years of elementary; 3 years of junior high; 3 years of senior high and 4 years of college.

**Homeroom Class:** In Japan, students belong to a “homeroom class” that has as few as 3 students and as many as 40. Students stay in the same classroom and have their own desks, and subject teachers move from classroom to classroom. The “homeroom class” stays together throughout the year, and most of the times, takes the same classes and even competes against other classes at sports day, etc. This arrangement makes it easier for students to make close friends without being very “outgoing” and gregarious. Teachers usually stay in a large “teachers’ room,” so it is not so easy for Japanese students to have private conversations with their teachers.

**High Pressure placed on College Entrance exam:** Many Japanese students go to “cram schools” in preparation for college entrance exams. Students often begin preparing for the university in elementary school, and usually do not have temporary/part-time jobs until they enter college. If students fail the college entrance exam, they graduate from high school and then take a year off to focus on studying. This is seen as a failure. The entrance exam is viewed as a family affair. A lot of families will put everything on hold the year that their child is preparing for the exam in order to support the studying.

**Homework:** Japanese high school students do not have as much homework as American students. However, a majority of Japanese students go to “cram schools” in the evenings and weekends to prepare for the college entrance exam. They often get home as late as 10 PM. Many students have lots of homework for these cram schools. Some students take their cram schools more seriously than their regular high school.

**Extracurricular Activities:** Depending on the school, participation in extracurricular activities is mandatory for the first and second year high school students. Students belong to one or two clubs that last throughout the year. Sports teams usually don’t have tryouts or cuts. In the final year of high school, students usually quit their extracurricular activities to focus on preparing for the college entrance

exam.

**Classes:** Classes are short (50-60 minutes long), and students have 5-6 classes each day. School starts between 7:00 and 8:30AM and ends at about 4:30PM.

**Role of Mother:** It is still overwhelmingly considered a mother's job to raise and nurture a child. Mothers often stay awake until their children come home after cram school. Fathers can be absent due to busy work schedules.

**Peer relationships:** It is a norm in Japan that strong friendships are formed only with people of the same age. Japanese society is very hierarchical, so it is hard for Japanese students to talk to others who are not in their age group. They will talk with older or younger friends or a peer's siblings, but withhold information or feelings because they don't think others will relate to them and their perspectives. In the U.S., the Area Rep and Host Family should let Japanese students know that it is OK to be friends with those who are younger or older than themselves.

**Bullying and corporal punishment:** While the majority of Japanese students have happy school lives, bullying, and resultant refusal to go to school or at times suicidal thoughts, continue to be a problem in Japan. It is not uncommon for Japanese coaches to administer corporal punishment as a means of "discipline."

**Japanese students' perception of "exchange students":** In Japan, foreigners, especially Westerners, are regarded highly, and therefore foreign students in Japan are treated like "superstars." Therefore, Japanese students are often surprised and discouraged to discover that they are treated with no particular interest or stardom in the U.S.

**Japanese students' understanding of race relations:** Japanese students learn about America from TV and other media sources, so their perception about race may be skewed and may seem "racist" from the American perspective. Host families and Area Reps should be aware of where their "racist" perception or comments come from, and should not label them as "racist" but coach them on what is considered acceptable language in the U.S.

**Japanese teacher's role:** Teachers in Japan are very involved and have a lot of say about students' lives. If students, wearing their school uniform, are hanging out in a public café or game center, other community members may report the students to their teachers. Likewise, teachers sometimes patrol cafes after school to make sure students are not hanging out or doing anything that will get them into trouble, especially if they are wearing a school uniform. If students are caught doing something bad, they are reported to the school and the homeroom teacher often goes to retrieve the student. Following this incident, the teacher in Japan might have the student write a report every week or two about being in the U.S. This might become too much for the student to handle. YFU Japan discourages Japanese schools from putting too much additional burden on Japanese students during their YFU year. If students are spending too much time on a Japanese teacher's requirements, please let your Area Rep know and we

will bring it to the attention of YFU Japan.

**High parental expectations:** Japanese Parents are much more demanding of the exchange experience than 20 years ago. They view themselves as paying customers and have high expectations, especially for their children's meals. The main complaint by Japanese students and natural parents are about meals in the U.S. Host families in Japan who provide excellent meals and take their American students out to eat expect the same treatment for their child in the U.S. This relates to Japanese students' expectations that they be treated like a "star" once they arrive in the U.S. If the Japanese students are treated differently from how they would treat foreign exchange students, the natural parents and students are likely to complain. Sometimes students or natural parents will complain and say they are not being provided lunch. YFU Japan does screen the natural families and tries not to accept those who are too strict or have unrealistic expectations, or those who treat YFU as a commercial organization.

## COMMUNICATION AND JAPANESE QUIETNESS

**Expressions of feelings:** Japanese virtues dictate that one should understand and anticipate others' feelings without these feelings being explicitly expressed; therefore, it is hard for Japanese students to express their feelings. Students will sometimes have to be reminded to use "I feel" to express feelings. Refer to the "essential phrases" attached to the end of this note, and help Japanese students practice how to express their feelings in English.

**Interrupting:** It is challenging for Japanese students to jump into a dinner conversation, interrupt another speaker or raise their hands in class. Interrupting is considered impolite in Japan. Thus host families should reassure their Japanese students, more than once, that participating in family conversations, and even interrupting is okay. Trying to ask specific questions of Japanese students during dinnertime or family discussions lets them know that they have permission to talk. Alternatively, set a specific time such as "at the beginning of dinner" or "after you return from school" when students know they are expected to share their thoughts and observations with the host family.

**Communication with the Area Representative (AR):** Communication with the Area Rep can be challenging. Because of the Area Rep's senior status, Japanese students will most likely act in deference rather than sharing their true feelings. Since Japanese students tend to be obedient (or are good at seeming obedient), they will nod their head and agree to trying out whatever suggestions the Area Reps and host families make. However, the true test is whether or not they truly DO IT. It is quite possible that students pretended to agree with the Area Rep and Host Family in deference to their senior status. Area Reps and host families need to repeat and continually stress to Japanese students that they should share opinions freely. Japanese students may not believe these types of instructions until they are repeated at least a few times. For example, if a host family allows a student to interrupt during a conversation, the host family should give explicit permission to the student a few times so that the student begins to believe that the invitation is truly meant.

**Self-secluding in his/her own room:** Prior experience has shown that Japanese students often spend much more time in their bedrooms than host families deem ideal. If a Japanese student is in his or her room and not communicating with the host family, the host family often takes it personally. It can mean that the student is retreating to a safe space where they can decompress from the stresses of living in a foreign environment. The student likely needs to be told (again—many times) to spend some time in common areas and monitoring the amount of time a student spends in their own room may be necessary.

**Negative and taboo issues:** Divorce, separation, death, illness, adoption, foster care, etc. are topics that are considered taboo in Japan and not discussed in public. When Japanese students hear these things discussed among the family, they have no idea how to respond. Let the student know about different perceptions and boundaries of these topics in the U.S. Again, you may need to do this at least a few times before it really starts to sink in.

**Communication by boys:** Japanese boys seem to have a more difficult time communicating. In Japan, it is not very manly to be chatty or communicative, or share personal feelings. Even talking about how their day was can be difficult. Encouragement, and modeling by their male host siblings, host fathers or male Area Rep is helpful.

**Perfectionism:** A lot of education in Japan is rote memorization, therefore Japanese students are often afraid to make mistakes or admit that they don't understand. They are also reluctant to ask for help. Try to set up a conversation partner or mentor for your Japanese student right from the start, and let that person know about some of these issues that they will need to work through.

## JAPANESE PERSONALITIES

**Self-esteem:** Japanese students' self-esteem tends to be lower than students of other cultures. They both internalize feelings and are sent mixed messages while growing up that contribute to low self-esteem. For example, students are pushed to perform well at school, but if/when they succeed and are complimented, they are taught to deny their own achievement or skills, and to simply say "No, no, it is not that great. It wasn't my own doing." Teenage suicide rates are higher in Japan than in the U.S. There are two main reasons for this: (a) students who are bullied do not talk about it; and (b) students are often under a lot of pressure from the college entrance exams.

**Compliments:** If a child is complimented, for example, "Your son is a great piano player," most Japanese parents will respond by saying, "No, no he is not very good." It is seen as good to be humble and to deny accomplishments when others comment on them. Individual recognition: In Japan, there is less individual recognition. Teamwork is encouraged more than individual efforts.

## UNIQUE JAPANESE WAY OF THINKING

**Internalizing personal issues:** The Japanese word “gaman” is translated literally as perseverance. Self disclosure or sharing personal feelings, especially negative feelings (both toward oneself or others) is perceived as not good in Japanese culture. Japanese people see sharing negative feelings as a bother or harm to other people. This means that, if a Japanese student feels that a host family has wronged them, he will withhold feelings, will not voice concern, and will try to resolve negative feelings by persevering. Conversely, they will be shocked or humiliated to hear that the host family does not like certain things about him. This will be considered a breach of a social contract. The Japanese student may think “It is so unfair that my host parents bring up what they don’t like about me, when I persevered through their shortcomings for so long!” Then their anger erupts. To address these cases, the Area Rep and host family should give explicit permission to speak about negative feelings as well as positive feelings. Additionally, the perception of talking to a counselor is often very negative. It often takes 5-10 minutes for a YFU staff or volunteer support person to explain who they are and what they do before a Japanese student is willing to say that anything is less than wonderful. Often if they have a problem or want to move, they want to do this immediately because they have internalized the problem so much, for so long that when the problem is finally vocalized, it is like a volcano bursting.

**Group vs. Individual Cultures:** Since Japan is a group-minded, high-context culture, Japanese students are encouraged to base their decisions on what others would expect them to do, rather than asking themselves what they themselves want to do. Therefore, Japanese students are not used to making independent decisions and understanding their behaviors and decisions as their own. It feels foreign to them that they have to take responsibility for their actions—they feel as if the group should take responsibility because most likely, the decision to act in one way or another was not an independent one but made in the context of the situation. So it is hard for Japanese students to truly apologize for their wrong behaviors, or to acknowledge the part they played. This means that great patience is required of the Area Rep and host family as they explore with a Japanese student their behavior and why they made the decision they made.

## STUDENT RESPONSIBILITIES AT SCHOOL AND AT HOME

**Chores:** Japanese students respond well when they are asked to do something specific. “Chore” is not a word that Japanese students seem to understand. It is better for host families to ask specifically for Japanese students to wash the dishes, clean their room, take out the garbage, etc. Asking them to “help with chores” is hard to understand. Japanese students generally don’t help out in the house in Japan—their most important job is studying. However, note that, in Japan, schools are cleaned by students, not janitors. Students are often assigned specific tasks on a rotating basis at school.

**Academics vs. Socializing:** Japanese students go through school with the same classmates for months and years, so they do not have to have great social skills to make friends. Additionally, since Japan

is homogenous and the youth population is declining, Japanese students are often shocked by the size of their American school and the diversity of the student body. They feel lost as to how to make friends in an American high school. They are also puzzled by the choices they are given, be it coursework or extracurricular activities. They will most likely need guidance when choosing their coursework. Previous experience suggests that Japanese students should sign up for Japanese classes, if one is offered at his/her school, since this gives them a chance to be an “expert” at least in something. The emphasis on the college entrance exam means that Japanese students are not required to do much else other than study in Japan. These factors all contribute to less emphasis being put on social skills in Japan than in the U.S. Often, 17 year old Japanese students will act more like how an American would expect a 15 year old to act. Expect that most Japanese students will seem about two years younger in their social skills than their calendar age.

**Study habits:** Often, when Japanese students arrive in the U.S., they continue to work and study as if they were still in Japan. The host family may complain that their student studies too much and is not transitioning into U.S. culture. Students are often worried that they are behind in Japanese work.

## ENGLISH USAGE AND MISUNDERSTANDINGS

**Negatives:** Some students find it difficult when people ask questions with negatives, such as “Don’t you agree?” or “Wouldn’t you like to go?”, and may say “yes” or “no” without truly understanding the question. They often feel that it is impolite or a burden to ask the speaker to repeat a question several times. In Japanese, one would say “yes (you are correct), I do NOT agree” or “yes (your assumption is right) I would NOT like to go”, so an answer to a negative question is the complete opposite from English.

**Demanding tones:** “Want” is a very popular verb in Japan and one that is learned early in English classes. Some host families see the use of the word “want” as very demanding, such as “I want to go to the post office,” whereas the reality is that the Japanese student has yet to reach the grade level in school where they learn polite forms like “May I go to the post office?” or “Would you be able to take me to the post office?” So the perception of rudeness or being demanding is actually a linguistic issue.

**Expressions of embarrassment:** When a Japanese student says, “I want to die” or “I wish I were dead”, it generally means that the student is very embarrassed or ashamed about something. Generally, it is safe to assume that you do not need to take this as seriously as you would if said by a student of another culture. They also often hold their head in their hands and look down, or even pat/hit their head in embarrassment. American host families tend to assume that the Japanese student must be suffering great mental anguish. Keep in mind that these gestures are quite common, especially among boys, and often only a demonstration of embarrassment.

**Doctor vs. hospital:** If a Japanese student says “I went to the hospital”, the student most likely went to a doctor’s office. This is typically an issue when a student arrives and tells the host family that they went to the hospital before they left Japan. Sometimes the host family worries that something serious happened before they left. That is most often not the case.

**U.S. rules:** “We can do anything in the U.S.” is a common mis-perception of Japanese students who are often surprised to learn that there are in fact a lot of rules in the U.S. Many Japanese assume that the U.S. is a very liberal/non-religious society.

**Curfews:** Some students are not used to staying out late and do not know what to do if their curfew is late.

## OTHER JAPAN-SPECIFIC INFORMATION

**School Tuition:** The organization that oversees and regulates exchange programs in Japan prohibits YFU from asking Japanese students to pay tuition unless the student is a direct placement.

**Immunizations:** Japanese parents are very cautious about immunizations. Japanese doctors will only give one shot per visit which makes it very difficult for students to receive all of their shots before coming to the U.S. Also, Hepatitis B is not required in Japan and it is difficult to get the shot there. However, they are allowed to get shots in the U.S. It is best to request that the student gets as many as possible in Japan, but they can finish those shots in the U.S. If a Japanese student gets immunizations in the U.S. be aware of and sensitive to the cultural differences related to immunizations.

**“Not with Me” Sessions:** YFU Japan facilitates “Not with Me” sessions for their students. This particular training is a little different than what YFU USA offers though. Generally, these types of situations are not discussed in such detail. For example, unlike the U.S., Japan does not have a public sex offender list.

**Eating Disorders:** Diets have become a major trend in Japan and students are often told that they will gain weight in the U.S. Japanese students generally eat less than students in the U.S. However, eating habits should be monitored to ensure that they are eating adequate portions. Some Japanese students have gone home with eating disorders that the host families did not report to YFU USA. It is extremely important that host families notify YFU USA if they notice any unusual behavior in a student’s eating pattern.

## CHALLENGES FACED BY FAMILIES HOSTING JAPANESE STUDENTS

1. English problem: “My student’s English is very poor.”; “Her English is not at the level that it should be.”; “His high SLEP score does not reflect his poor speaking skills.”
  - English is a difficult language for Japanese students. We cannot expect the same fluency from a Japanese student as we would from a European student.
  - Possible Solution – conduct an “English language assessment”; ask your Area Rep or SSM to open a Rosetta Stone account for your student, which can be opened while student is still in Japan.
2. Isolation from Host Family and American Friends: “My student doesn’t mingle or initiate

conversations.”; “She doesn’t seem to want to be a part of the family.”; “He spends so much time in his room.”

- It’s normal for students to initially spend more time in their rooms because they need time to decompress. See Communication and Japanese Quietness below.
- Possible Solution—Perseverance. Continue to invite your student to come. Repeat it many times. Monitor the amount of time spent alone in the bedroom.

3. Lack of Communication About Negative Feelings: “My student kept telling me that everything was wonderful, and one day, BAM! Her anger erupted and she’s so stubborn.” “My student only tells me that everything is wonderful, though I can tell it isn’t”.

- It is very difficult for a Japanese student to express anything negative.
- Possible Solution – Perseverance. Take time to explore positives and negatives; re-assure more than once that it’s okay to discuss negative issues. Ask your Area Rep to reinforce by talking to your Japanese student about how to verbally express their negative feelings in an acceptable fashion.

4. Lack of Help Around the House: “My student is so lazy. She doesn’t do anything to help around the house!”

- Possible Solution – Be very specific about what you want your student to do.

5. Doubt About Student Motivation: “I don’t think doing exchange was my student’s idea—it was probably his parents’ idea!”

- It is hard for Japanese students to separate what their parents or others expect of them and what they themselves want. See Unique Japanese Way of Thinking below.
- Possible Solution—Perseverance. Help your student understand that in the U.S., they are expected to have their own individual opinions, separate from others’.

## ESSENTIAL PHRASES FOR EXCHANGE STUDENTS: AN ENGLISH LESSON

*It was so (kind) of you...*

*trip (generous)*

*paper.*

*(special)*

*(thoughtful)*

*(considerate)*

*...to take me on this wonderful*

*...to help me with this English*

*...to tell me about your childhood.*

*...to make this special meal for us.*

*...to drive us (to the movies, the mall, the game, etc.)*

*...to do my laundry so quickly.*

*...to buy my favorite foods.*

*...to remember my special day.*

### RESPOND TO KINDNESS!

USE DAILY! - The trip (or gift, party, play, movie, meal, show, year, class...) was special (or memorable) to me because.....follow this with SEVERAL sincere, well thought reasons about what you specifically enjoyed.

*I appreciate you... I care about you... I like you... I love you...*

For best effects, add a reason as appropriate:

*Because... you do so many special things for me.  
you have shown me so much  
kindness.  
you love me even when things  
get tough.*

“How can I help you?” - This sentence you should use almost daily with host families, friends, teachers, coaches... The possibilities are endless. More importantly, you can OBSERVE how to help and do so without being asked.

*I hope you can forgive me for... forgetting to do my chores.  
coming home late.  
speaking without  
thinking.  
turning the homework in late.*

*I hope you'll have sometime to spend with me to do \_\_\_\_\_. Can I help you with something to make this possible?*

*I enjoy being with you. I am learning so much from you and from this experience. You have changed my life because of your (kindness, friendship, generosity...). This experience has changed me because... I hope we continue to become closer to each other. I like spending time with you and getting to know you better.*

## ADVANCED PHRASES AND CUSTOMS

\_\_\_\_\_, *I'd like you to meet my friend (or my host mom or my sister or my teacher, etc.),*  
\_\_\_\_\_. *OR Do you remember my host brother, \_\_\_\_\_?*

These phrases must be used whenever you run into someone that your family/friend may not know or may not remember. This alone is not enough—you need to continue to give them a mutual subject they can speak about. Examples:

*You two have a lot in common since you both... are good artists.  
are  
musicians.  
love  
hockey.  
went to XYZ concert.*

*You may remember I was telling you how s/he visited Japan.  
is the star in the school  
play. just moved from  
Ohio.  
had a nice party.  
helped with my  
studies.*

*How are you? OR How was your day? OR How are your classes?*

“Fine” or “Great” is usually NOT an adequate response if the question comes from host family or close friends. You need to have a response that is a conversation starter OR you can ask a specific question to the other person to begin to have a conversation.

### **Examples:**

*\*I'm really happy this week about the new project we're doing in history class. Did I tell you about it?*

*\*I was so happy (or sad or surprised or?) to hear from my parents (or friends) at home that they.....*

*\*OK, but I am really worried about the exam we'll be having in math class.*

*\*I'm fine, but how about you? What happened at your swim meet this week?*

*\*Has your leg recovered from your accident?*

*\*Fine, and I wanted to tell you how great the poem was that you read in class.*

*(A sincere compliment is always appropriate!!!)*

*\*Do you have anything fun going on this weekend?*

*(An essential phrase for those of you who want to go out more with friends!!!)*

When you leave someone's house, you should ALWAYS look for your host/ess to thank him or her in a personal, detailed way. Often a note should be sent too.

*\*It was so kind of you to have me here for a sleepover, and especially for you to get up so early to make that great breakfast.*

*\*Thanks for inviting me to this party. You put so much care into the food and the decorations that I'll always remember it well.*

*\*I am so happy you included me in this group and this experience!*

## **KEY COMMUNICATIONS SKILLS**

These are the qualities that will help you develop and keep close relationships with family and friends:

*ENTHUSIASM! SINCERITY! GENEROUS IN SPIRIT!*

*HELPFUL! HAPPY! OPENNESS!*

*FLEXIBILITY! INTEREST!*