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Introduction

During an exchange year, you may encounter many new and different situations that could at times be distressing or even dangerous. With this in mind, AFS has devised a system of “program support” for all participants, providing a wide range of support activities and services. The purpose is to provide a “safety net”; a consistently supportive environment in which participants can pose questions, obtain advice and assistance. This is done through the counselor system, guide books, manuals, pre-departure and arrival camps.

AFS Hong Kong cannot provide all possible answers, but through our support system, we can help to guide you towards asking appropriate questions and acquiring skills you need to cope with complex situations.

The purpose of this safety handbook is to provide useful information that will help address your concerns about safety. However, it is important to remember that just as parents cannot totally protect their children from harm; neither can AFS Hong Kong guarantee complete safety for participants.

Personal Safety Concerns

Although Hong Kong has a relatively low crime rate among cosmopolitan cities in the world, there is an increasing element in society which tends to affect the safety of both Hong Kong people and foreigners. Hong Kong can be a safe city if one is aware of potential dangers and acts accordingly. It is not a society that permits teenagers to be out late at night, either alone or even with a group. It is very protective and does not have same values as other countries in relation to teenage sex, drinking or smoking.

Rather Hong Kong is a society that cares deeply for children’s welfare. Most parents aspire to provide the best that they can for their children. It is a society that sees differences between educated and uneducated people. Rightly or wrongly, we tend to attribute crime with uneducated people. It is a society that places high value on education and parents value academic achievements. It also values respect for elders and commitment to the family.

Many problems occur when students cannot adjust to restrictions placed on them by host family. However host family does this because they are aware of dangers within their community and they are concerned for safety and welfare of their new family member. Issues that we are going to discuss here are meant to protect and not prohibit.

Recent experiences by foreigners have highlighted some dangers in Hong Kong and although these may be exception rather than the rule, we should learn from these events and avoid placing ourselves in dangerous situations.

Spending time in Hong Kong as an AFS student can be the most rewarding and challenging experience of your life. If you are aware of safety issues and behave accordingly, you will find Hong Kong to be the most wonderful place in the world.

In or around Home

In Hong Kong the voltage is 220V, which is very dangerous in cases of electric shocks. Though majority of electricity in home is earthed /grounded and there are on/off switches on the power outlets, you should be cautious when using electrical appliances. Please do not leave appliances on when you are not home or when you go to bed. Please unplug them after use. Also you are advised to carefully check that all stoves or cooking equipment have been properly switched off when you go out.

Most families in Hong Kong lock their doors and windows before leaving home. In fact most homes have security bars on doors and windows. Families are aware of the high risk in burglary and are suspicious of strange people around their homes. You will find that most private apartment buildings have a gate which will be kept locked most of the time. Usually there will be a security guard to unlock gate for visitors, or the tenants will use electronic locks.

You will probably find that doors in flats and houses are also locked. Rooms such as bedrooms or where there may be valuable items are sometimes kept locked. When someone enters home for repairs there will be someone to “keep an eye” on them.

These are some helpful questions that AFS Hong Kong encourages you to ask your host family:

1. Do you lock your doors and windows? When?
2. Am I going to have a house key?
3. Do you have first aid equipment? Where is it?
4. Do you have a fire extinguisher? Where do you keep it?
5. What should I do if an emergency occurs? Who should I call?
6. How should I answer the phone? What information should I not give out to strangers?
7. Where do you keep the emergency telephone numbers?
8. What should I do if I am alone and a stranger is at the door? What should I tell him/her?
9. Are there any appliances that could cause problem and that I should be aware of?

Internet Usage

Here are some general tips for helping to ensure you and your host family's safety and privacy when using the internet.

- Keep your passwords private, even from your best friend! Your online service provider would never ask for your passwords, so neither should anyone else.
- Use only your log-in name and/or e-mail address when chatting or sending e-mail
- Never give out personal information such as your name, address, or phone number
- Do not share photos of yourself, your family, or your home with people you meet online
- Always delete unknown e-mails without opening them. They may contain virus or links to pornographic material. Upon accessing them you may encounter serious consequences.
- If a person writes something that makes you feel uncomfortable, do not respond. Just log off and tell your host parents who can report it to your online service provider.
- Remember that nothing you write on the Web is completely private -- including e-mails. So be careful and think about what you send and who you tell.
- Not everyone is as nice, cute, and funny as it may sound online. Never make plans to meet an online "friend" in person.
- WHEN IN DOUBT -- always ask your host parents for help -- and just LOG OFF if you're not sure! You can always go back online later.

Pornography on the Internet

Sending or receiving pornography, whether by accident or on purpose, is not acceptable. This includes transmission of photographs of persons known or unknown to you under the age of 18, via cell phone, smart phone or the internet, regardless of whether you have their consent.

As such, AFS Hong Kong discourages participants from accessing any pornographic materials. By doing so, not only would you be open to criminal prosecution, but your host family's perception of you would most likely become extremely negative, as would any potential host family. Therefore, AFS Hong Kong may terminate your program and arrange for an early return.

In order to avoid accidentally accessing pornographic material, always delete e-mails from unknown sources and *spam* without opening them. If you do access a pornographic site, by accident or otherwise, you should immediately notify your host family and local AFS volunteers.

Outside the home

In Hong Kong when there may have been incidents of crime or violence, (burglaries, purse snatching, thefts, assault, pick pocketing), it is possible your school may advise you about the problem and give recommendations regarding your personal safety. Please listen to your school officials carefully and ask for any clarification if you are unsure. In general, if such information is not available, AFS Hong Kong encourages you to let your host parents know whenever you are concerned or frightened. Ask them for help to ease your concerns. When you are going out, AFS Hong Kong suggests that you leave contact information of your where-about or contact your telephone number. Please do NOT take this as an intrusion into your privacy. On the contrary, your host family knows best about their community and is well prepared to give you advice about places it would be better for you to avoid and how best to get around. In general, you should take their advice seriously and follow their recommendations.

Hong Kong can be a safe city but there are situations which may be unsafe. There is a very big difference between boys and girls when it comes to safety. Girls are not treated as equally and more concern is shown for girls' safety than boys. Females in Hong Kong are very protected by their families - they are generally not permitted out late at night, they are not allowed to travel or go places by themselves. Families do not like it when girls flirt with boys or dress provocatively as this may be seen as tempting males and may lead to dangerous or unwanted situations.

Hong Kong families are usually conservative when it comes to their children and this applies to host students as well. Moral values of Hong Kong society are different to those of Western countries - Hong Kong children have much less independence and freedom and parents are very protective.

You should not be out alone anywhere late at night. If it is unavoidable then you should call someone to come and meet you. Always stay in well-lit areas.

When walking in crowded areas you should take care of your valuables. Pick-pocket is more common in crowded areas, especially on buses, markets, ferries, MTR, trams and shopping malls. Be careful of your belongings and surroundings.

Public transportation in Hong Kong is safe to use. However one should be more cautious when using public transport late at night. We suggest that female students do not take taxis by oneself late at night as there are reported cases of single female travelers being sexually assaulted by taxi drivers.

Although public transport is usually safe, more care needs to be taken during peak hours when overcrowding occurs. If you need to take the MTR, please follow instructions provided by their staff.

Never stand beyond the yellow line on the platform while waiting for approaching train since the crowd behind you may inadvertently push you down onto the rails. Sadly, this has happened to locals.

Traffic moves very quickly in Hong Kong and you must always stay alert to avoid personal injury. It is best to look both ways before crossing streets. Be careful not to rely on crowds as sometimes they have not checked roads for safety before crossing themselves.

In School

Be aware of students in school who are involved in illegal activities such as drugs. Avoid students who are violent. If you hear of students planning or threatening to perform a violent act, a rumor about such plans, or if you feel threatened in any way, go to your teachers. You can also talk to your Host Family, Support Contact or other AFS volunteers.

It is advisable not to keep valuable items in your school locker or to bring expensive items to school such as jewelry, electronics, credit cards, excess cash, etc.

Potentially dangerous situations mentioned above are actually excellent subjects to discuss with your host family and your Support Contact. By talking about safety and what you can do to prevent potentially harmful situations, you can learn a lot about Hong Kong people's attitudes towards crime.

Uncomfortable social situations

1) Laws, illegal drugs, alcohol abuse

Participants are forbidden to use illegal drugs and substances. Violation of this rule will result in dismissal from the program and immediate return to your home country. This is very important for you to remember should you find yourself in a situation where illegal substances are being used. Similarly, abuse of alcoholic beverages could result in program termination.

In general, knowing the culture is usually the best preparation for knowing how to handle uncomfortable social situations. It is also important for your host parents to meet your friends and to know with whom you spend your free time. If you are invited to go to a party or other events and are not sure if it is safe to go, AFS Hong Kong recommends that you find out more about the party or event, where is it being held and who will be there. Usually your host siblings, parents, friends, teachers can give information about the event and people expected to attend. Some host parents may also "forbid" students to attend certain types of parties or events. You should respect your parents' advice, even if your friends are going.

In Hong Kong the legal drinking age is 18 or above. You must be at least 18 years old to buy or consume alcohol. However, as rules mark down by AFS Hong Kong, students are not allowed to consume alcoholic drinking while on exchange even if they become of age while on exchange.

Participants and their natural parents are responsible for damages caused by participants to third parties and cost involved in connection with such claims. AFS Hong Kong does NOT assume any legal liability for you.

As an AFS student you are not permitted to drive. In Hong Kong a person must be 18 years old to attain a driver's license. We strongly advice AFS students not to ride in any motor vehicles with 1) a young driver; or 2) someone without a license; or 3) with someone who has consumed alcohol. If you are in this situation, you should contact your host family or someone from AFS and they will advise you. Remember - hitchhiking is forbidden!

2) Sexual harassment

Cultures differ in their views of appropriate sexual behavior and practices for young people. Often clarification of attitudes may be necessary and here, again, advice of people you have come to know and trust is very valuable. Knowledge about people you socialize with is important, and this is acquired best through increasing knowledge of culture. Equally important are your own values and beliefs regarding your behaviour. In societies where some young people are sexually active, there are also many who are not. You should not compromise your own personal values and beliefs regarding sexual behavior.

You may be unsure in some situations if you are being sexually harassed or if a particular person's behavior would be considered normal friendliness. An important source is your own instinct. Also, often your host siblings/parents and friends will be able to advise you about normal behavior of people you do not know. Other resources to whom you can seek for advice or help are your teachers, AFS support contacts or AFS Hong Kong office.

Sexual harassment is likely to happen in any country and Hong Kong is no different. To reduce chances of being sexually harassed on public transport, try to stand in less crowded areas or find somewhere you can have your back supported by a wall. If this does not resolve the situation, and you are made uncomfortable, cry "help" and this will usually be sufficient to stop the perpetrator. If the perpetrator continues to harass you then ask other passengers or staff for help and if you know the area, get off at the next station and wait for the next train or bus. You should not hesitate to call a police officer if you feel that you are in danger.

If any sexual harassment occurs within your host family then you should not keep it a secret. The best action is to say “NO” and remove yourself from the situation: turn on lights, go where there are other people or make noise, anything non-violent that will attract other people's attention and stop the person harassing you. If possible, speak with your host parent or an AFS representative as soon as it happens.

However, there needs to be some cultural sensitivity when dealing with potential of sexual harassment. For example, it is common to have two girls holding hands or one guy putting his arm around another guy's shoulder in public, which may only be friendly behavior and have no connotations of sexual harassment. Nevertheless, if any of these behaviors is not acceptable to you or makes you uncomfortable, you have every right to say "NO".

If you have any problems with any form of sexual harassment and do not feel comfortable speaking with your host family, Support Contact or contact AFS Hong Kong office.

3) Sex

AFS Hong Kong discourages you to be sexually active during your year in Hong Kong. Please realize that if you choose to be sexually active, this could very likely put your host family, AFS Hong Kong, and others around you in an uncomfortable situation. Chinese society is very disapproving of teenage or premarital sex, so please be aware that this may be different from your own society. Equally important to the general attitude are *your own values and beliefs* regarding your behavior. In societies where young people are sexually active, there are also many who are not. You should not compromise your own personal values and beliefs regarding sexual behavior.

Communicable Disease

1) Avian Flu

Avian Flu is an infectious disease caused by birds with type A strains of the influenza virus. H5N1 virus is one type of Influenza A. Previously, it is known to infect only birds until human cases were documented in Hong Kong. Avian Flu (H5N1) is transmitted from infected live birds to human. Transmission between humans is very inefficient. Avian Flu (H5N1) has similar initial clinical symptoms as other influenza viruses. However, it is more likely to result in high fever, chest infection, respiratory failure, multi-organ failure or even death.

Since late 2003, outbreaks of Avian Flu in chickens and ducks have been reported from several countries in Asia; cases of human infection have also been reported. The Department of Health has

been closely monitoring the situation and has adopted appropriate preventive measures to prevent the import of the disease.

To prevent the Avian Flu and Human Flu, you are advised to:

- Avoid touching live birds or poultry or their droppings.
- Immediately wash your hands thoroughly with liquid soap and water if you have been in contact with live birds or poultry.
- Eat only thoroughly cooked poultry and eggs.
- Wash hands thoroughly before touching eyes, nose, mouth or any part of your face.
- Maintain good body resistance by having a balanced diet, regular exercise, adequate rest, reducing stress, and not smoking.
- Avoid crowded places with poor ventilation.
- Consult doctor and tell him/her about your travel history immediately if you develop fever and respiratory symptoms after returning from a country that reports an avian flu outbreak.
- Consult a doctor and wear a mask to prevent spread of the disease if you have symptoms of influenza.

2) Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS)

SARS is an acute respiratory infection that has been reported in a number of places, including Hong Kong. It is a form of atypical pneumonia caused by a new agent. Symptoms of severe acute respiratory syndrome include: fever (over 38 degrees Celsius) and chills, coughing, shortness of breath, headache, aching body and general malaise.

Hong Kong has been free from SARS since June 2003. However the Hong Kong Government remains vigilant and prepared to handle future outbreak if occurred.

To prevent SARS, you are advised to:

- Wash hands frequently and properly. Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth. If you must do so, wash your hands before touching them.
- Always carry a handkerchief or tissue paper. Cover the nose and mouth with it when sneezing or coughing. Remember to wash hands immediately with liquid soap afterwards.
- Use serving chopsticks and spoons at meal time. Do not share lunch boxes and drinks.
- Maintain a healthy life style: a balanced diet, regular exercise and adequate rest. Do not smoke.
- Wear a mask and consult a doctor promptly if you develop symptoms of respiratory illness, such as cough or fever.

Typhoons and Rainstorms

April to September is rainy season in Hong Kong; during this time rains can be heavy, and typhoons often occur as well therefore both heavy rains, typhoons, may result in landslides. Hong Kong has a set of procedures in handling severity of storms. For heavy rain, a red rainstorm warning is issued when rains are expected to be heavy, so you should be cautious. A black rainstorm warning is more severe, and means that you should stay wherever you are; i.e., if you are at home in the morning, school may be closed until the black rainstorm warning is lowered; if you are at school, you should stay there until your school supervisors advise otherwise.

For typhoons, a number one tropical cyclone signal or a number three strong wind signal mean that typhoon or severe tropical storm is in the area. Depending upon the direction of the storm, it may get worse and this would mean hoisting of number eight typhoon signal. When number eight signal is hoisted, schools and businesses close, and everyone are expected to go home within two hours. If a number eight is raised in the morning, schools and businesses will be closed while the signal is still hoisted; if it is lowered during the morning, students are generally expected to go to school within two hours. In typhoons as well as rainstorms, it is always best to listen to the radio or watch TV for update.

Emergencies

Under Hong Kong law, anyone aged 15 or above is required to carry valid identification document (such as Hong Kong Identification Card or Passport). Police officers may check occasionally and AFS Hong Kong advises that you to show respect and cooperation with authorities.

If you do not understand then the best advice would be to say that you do not understand what is happening and identify yourself as an exchange student. This is important not only in the event of being questioned by authorities, but also in the unfortunate event of a personal accident or if you fall to victim of a crime.

In the case of an emergency you should try to call your host family, Support Contact or AFS Hong Kong office. The number of AFS HONG KONG office is (852) 2802-0383 and emergency hotline number is (852) 9654-7381.

In case of an emergency you should follow the advice of the government. AFS Hong Kong office will immediately contact you in order to provide necessary assistance.

Hong Kong is an international commercial center and terrorism threats are extremely rare, but you should be aware that there may be potential risk terrorist no matter where you are.

Conclusion

Best general advice that AFS Hong Kong can recommend regarding issues of personal safety are:

- Get to know Hong Kong culture well through questions, dialogue and discussion with your host family, peers and AFS Support Contact.
- Take concerns and advice from your host family and school representatives seriously.
- As stated in the agreement document you sign prior to leaving home, the AFS Hong Kong office will make recommendations and give guidelines for physical welfare and security. Take this advice seriously and comply with these guidelines.