Japanese Student Considerations
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Communication and Japanese Quietness

Interrupting: It is very hard for Japanese students to jump in and interrupt, or raise hands in the middle of class or in a dinner discussion, as interrupting is not considered polite in Japan. Thus host families should try to ask specific questions to the student during dinnertime or family discussions so that they know they have permission to talk.

Peer relationships: Strong peer friendships only with people their own age is the norm in Japan. 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/younger friends or peer siblings, but withhold information or feelings because they don’t think others will relate to them and their perspectives. In the US even with different age groups, one should let the students know that it is ok to be friends with seniors or freshmen. Communication with the Area Representative (AR) can also be challenging, so the AR really needs to stress to the student that they should share opinions freely. Prior experience has shown that if a Japanese student is in his or her room or not communicating with the parents, the host family often takes it personally.

Negative issues: Divorce, death, illness, adoption, foster care, etc. are topics that are considered a 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 US.

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.

Academics vs. social networks: Social skills are not emphasized as much in Japan as in the US. Academic work is considered more important and as a result of this focus on studying, some of the students who are 17 years old will act more like they are 15. Consider that most Japanese students will be about two years younger in their social skills than their calendar age.

Internalizing personal issues: The Japanese word “gaman” is translated literally as perseverance. Self disclosure or sharing personal feelings, especially negative feelings, is perceived as not good in Japanese culture. Japanese would see this as a bother to other people. The perception of counseling is also very negative – It often takes 5-8 minutes for a YFU staff or volunteer support person to explain who they are and what they do before Japanese students are 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 and when the problem is vocalized it is like a volcano bursting.

**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 with the Japanese student right from the start, and let the student know about some of these issues that they will need to work through.

**Chores:** Japanese students respond well when they are asked to do something specific. Regarding the concept of chores – “chores” 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., rather than to ask them to “help with chores.” Japanese students generally don’t help out in the house in Japan – it is considered that their most important job is studying.

**English Usage and Misunderstandings**

**Negatives:** Some students find it difficult when people ask questions with negative words, such as “Don’t you agree?” or “Wouldn’t you like to go?” They just don’t understand the question and don’t know how to answer. When Americans use a negative when asking questions, this can sometimes create a misunderstanding and Japanese students often will just say ‘yes’ or nod their head even if they do not understand. They often feel that it is impolite or a burden to ask one to repeat a question several times.

**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 students have yet to reach the grade level in school where they learn polite forms – “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. YFU Japan is working with the students to avoid these issues by discussing language nuances at the pre-departure orientations.

**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. Do not take this as seriously as you would if said by a student of another culture.

**Doctor vs. hospital:** If a Japanese student says: “I went to the hospital” the student most likely went to a doctor’s office for a physical. It likely is not a serious as it sounds. This is typically an issue when the students arrive and they tell their host family that they went to the hospital before they left Japan. Sometimes the host family worries that something serious happened before they left.
Transitioning to Life in the US

**Study habits:** Often Japanese students, when they arrive in the U.S. continue to work/study as if they were still in Japan. The host family may complain that the students study too much and are not transitioning into the US culture. Students often feel that they are behind in Japanese work and will lose their study habits. YFU USA is willing to get involved if the studying is too excessive (some students study until 1am)...

**Japanese teacher’s role:** Teachers in Japan are very involved and have a lot of say in the students’ lives. If students, wearing their school uniform, are hanging out in a café or game center, pedestrians or community members may report the students to their teachers. The teachers also will sometimes patrol cafes etc. after school to make sure the 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 anything bad, they are reported to the school. Following this tendency, teachers in Japan might contact the host family to have the student write a report every week or two about being in the US. This might become too much for the students to handle. YFU Japan discourages Japanese schools to put too much burden on Japanese students. If students are spending too much time on a Japanese teacher’s requirements, please let YFU USA know and we will bring it to the attention of YFU Japan.

**Japanese Parent Relationships with Students**

**Teacher role:** Parents in Japan often view teachers as a counselor for their child.

**High parental expectations:** 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 Japanese child in the United States. If the Japanese students are treated differently, the natural parents and students are likely to complain. Sometimes students or host 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.

**Personalities**

**Self esteem:** Japanese students’ self esteem tends to be lower than students of other cultures. Japanese students tend to internalize feelings and are also sent mixed messages while they are growing up that contribute to low self esteem. Teenage suicide rates are higher in Japan than the US. 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 entrance exam to universities. If students fail, they have to study for another year and 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 students are preparing for the exam in order to support their studying. Some students go to a ‘cram’ school to get ready for the exam. Students often begin preparing for the university in elementary school.
Compliments: If a child is given a compliment, for example “your student is a great piano player,” most Japanese parents will respond by saying “no, no they are 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. Team work is encouraged more than individual efforts.

Extracurricular activities: Sports and music involvement are strongly encouraged. Students often sign up for an intense year long programs, where they practice seven days a week.

Expressions of feelings: Students will sometimes have to be reminded to use “I feel” to express feelings.

Japanese Students’ Perception of the US

US rules: “We can do anything in the U.S.” is a common misperception, and Japanese students are often surprised to learn that there are a lot of rules in the U.S.

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

School Tuition: The organization that oversees/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 because in the past, two students died from receiving shots that were not authorized by the Japanese Ministry of Health. For example, Hepatitis B is not required in Japan and it is difficult to get the shot there. Also, 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 US. However, they are allowed to get shots in the US. It is best to request that students get as many as possible in Japan, but they can finish those shots in the U.S.

“Not with Me” Sessions: YFU Japan has implemented “Not with Me” sessions for their students. The 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 advise YFU USA about. It is extremely important to emphasize that host families notify YFU USA if they notice any unusual behavior in a student’s eating pattern.