

# Understanding Cultural Differences Project

• The following project is designed to help you and your au pair discuss and understand cultural differences. Your Au Pair will have completed the same assignment before departing his/her home country. We request you read and think about the answers to these questions before the Au Pair/Host Family orientation. Your Community Representative will guide a discussion which will cover the following questions. Please be frank and open with your responses.

A refresher regarding the terminology used in this exercise is important. Culture, race, and ethnicity are, at times, used interchangeably. They are, in fact, very different:

## Definitions

Race refers to an anthropological system of classification based upon physical characteristics determined by heredity. People who share a genetic heritage and who, as a result, have very similar physical characteristics constitute a racial group. Most ethnologists now recognize only three primary divisions of race; Caucasian or white, Negroid or black, and Mongoloid or yellow, each with many subdivisions. Racial characteristics include color and texture of hair, color of skin and eyes, stature, bodily proportions and bone structure. Many anthropologists and ethnologists are questioning the fundamental validity and utility of racial classification.

Ethnicity generally refers to a classification of people based upon their national or regional origin, such as "Nigerian," "Serbo-Croatian," or "Chinese." The word "ethnic" is derived from a Greek word that means "national or foreign." People in an ethnic group are usually of the same race, and they may share a common cultural background. However, ethnicity and culture are not interchangeable.

Culture is more complex than either ethnicity or race. Culture refers to the total system of values, beliefs, attitudes, traditions, and standards of behavior that regulate life within a particular group of people. Culture includes components that organize people into social groups and that regulate both individual and group behavior. Culture includes cognitive systems such as beliefs, attitudes, and values. It includes norms, which are rules regarding appropriate ways of behaving. It includes spiritual or religious systems and institutions. Culture may also include the art and artifacts produced by the group. While race is determined by one's

biology and ethnicity by one's national or regional origin, culture is made by people. Cultural components are created and incorporated into group life to regulate social organization and to assure the survival and well being of group members.

We are now ready to begin the exercise. Prepare your answers for the Au Pair/Host Family Orientation.

## Project Questions

### 1) Family Background

- Where were you born and raised?
- What was the ethnic background of your parents and grandparents?
- What Country did they or their ancestors emigrate from, and when?
- If so, why did they emigrate?
- Do you know anything about your family's early experiences in this country?
- What were they like?
- What characteristics, traditions, and values held by your parents and grandparents do you still maintain?
- Which have you changed?

### 2) Family Child Rearing Practices

- What is the most important thing a family can provide for a child?
- What is your preferred form of discipline for misbehavior, and why?
- How do you view physical forms of discipline, and what do you call it?
- How do you know when a person has "gone too far?"
- Are there general beliefs about child discipline that many people from your culture share?
- Do you expect different things for boys and girls?
- What are they?
- Do you expect different things from older children and younger ones?
- What are they? And, at what age does a child become "older?"
- What is your family tradition about meals?
- Who cooks, who eats when, do children feed each other, what kinds of foods do you prefer?
- Who cares for the children when the parents have to go out?
- At what age were you first left alone?
- At what age are children in your family given responsibility to care for other children?

### 3) Family Roles and Rules

- Who makes what kinds of decisions in your family?
- What decisions can you make by yourself without input from anyone?
- What decisions does your (wife, husband, mother, boyfriend) make?
- Would you call your family "intergenerational?"
- That is, do extended family members play a large role in your life? (Parents, sisters and brother, aunts and uncles, grandparents, non-blood "relatives" such as godparents, friends, etc.)
- What kinds of things do you think are "personal" and shouldn't be talked about with people outside the family?

### 4) Family Support Networks

- To whom do you turn when you are in trouble or need help?
- Is your family involved with a church?
- How big a role does religion play in your lives?
- Did anyone other than your parents care for you for any extended period of time? Who?
- How did you feel about being cared for by people other than your parents?
- Who in your life has had an important influence on your development?

### 5) Intercultural Experiences

- Explain if, and how, discrimination has affected your life?
  - How do you decide if you can trust people or not?
  - Do you have trusting and friendly relationships with people from other cultures or ethnic backgrounds?
- What kinds of pre-judgments do you think other people make about you because of your race, ethnicity, or culture?
- What would you want a person of another, culture, like me, to know and understand about your culture?

### 6) Closure

- How have you felt about this assignment?
- Were there any questions that you found offensive or disrespectful?
- What can you tell to help someone better understand and work with other Au Pairs of your cultural or ethnic background?

