



# **AFS Germany Safety-Tips**

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# Introduction

Hi there! Before you arrive we would like to share some more information with you. You may think that a booklet giving some advice about your safety is not a very pleasant way to welcome people. While our purpose is certainly not to scare or alarm you, by giving you the following tips, we want you to avoid any unnecessary trouble or incident during your stay in Germany and allow you to make the most of it.

In your country and in your cultural surroundings you have learnt to avoid potentially dangerous situations by instinctively following the rules you have been taught. These rules, which are often anchored in your subconscious, keep you safe. You know the places you better not go to, you notice as soon as someone makes a threatening impression (through their exterior, their behavior or the way they speak). These acquired instincts, which help to avoid danger, don't work for every country, as cultures are obviously very different.

**Germany is generally a very safe country.** It may happen, however, that you get into an unpleasant or even dangerous situation and you may not know how to react according to our patterns of behavior.

This is why we encourage you to read these tips carefully and talk about the subjects with your host family, your contact person or the AFS office.

## In And Around Your Home

### *Within Your Host Family*

Although there are security instructions which are valid throughout Germany, there may be regional differences. Therefore we recommend that you talk about the following questions with your host family:

- What should I do in case of an emergency? Whom should I call?
- Where do you keep the emergency phone numbers (family, doctors, relatives,...)?
- Do you have a first aid kit? Where is it?
- Do you have a smoke detector and a fire extinguisher? Where is it?
- Do you always lock your windows and doors?
- Am I going to have a house key? What if I forget or lose it?
- How should I react if I am at home by myself and someone rings at the door?
- Do I answer the phone when I am on my own? Which information may I pass on to persons unknown to me when I happen to answer the phone?
- Are there any potentially dangerous household appliances (e.g. gas stove)?

### *Outside*

During the day it is usually safe to go out by yourself. At night you should be more careful. In both cases we strongly advise you to follow your host family's instructions. Always let your host family know where you are going, with whom and when they should expect you back. Always

leave a telephone number where you can be reached and make sure that your phone is charged.

Talk about the following with your host family:

- Is it safe to walk around the neighborhood at night?
- Are there areas in my host community which are not safe for me – either at night or during the day?
- How can I feel safe when I am out and about on my own, especially at night?
- What should I do if I get lost or separated from my friends?
- Is it safe to use public transport (bus, underground, train) at all times?
- What should I do if an emergency occurs outside?

**Ask your host family about any situation in which you feel uncertain or even frightened!**

## Protection of Minors laws

If you want to go out with friends, please be aware of the protection of minors laws:

- If you go to the movies, pay attention to the age limit. Films might be restricted to audience over 16 or 18 years of age.
- Without a person of legal age who has parental responsibility, **adolescents under 16 are not allowed to:**
  - enter a pub or disco
  - drink beer, wine and other alcohol in public or buy it in shops
  - attend gambling halls
- Without a person of legal age who has parental responsibility, **adolescents from 16 – 18 are not allowed to:**
  - stay longer than 12 pm in a restaurant, pub or disco
  - drink alcoholic beverages (incl. mixed drinks) other than beer or wine in public
- Smoking under the age of 18 is prohibited!

**All drugs** (such as marijuana, ecstasy, cocaine) **are illegal in Germany. Stay away from them!** If you get involved with any kind of drugs (involvement is also hanging out with friends who use drugs) your stay in Germany will be **terminated immediately** by AFS.

## AFS Germany Rules

In addition to these laws, AFS Germany sets the following **rules**:

- Obeying family rules
- Regular school attendance
- Following the law
- No driving of motorized vehicles
- No pregnancy
- Obeying traveling rules

Breaking of any of these rules can lead to immediate termination of your stay in Germany!

## Fare Dodging

If you use public transportation, be sure to have a valid ticket. If you are owner of a monthly ticket, check for what kind of transportation it may be used. The tickets for bus, tram, underground or S-Bahn generally have to be bought before starting the trip. They can be purchased either at the station, sometimes at the conductor, or maybe even at a ticket machine inside the vehicle. If you are unsure, ask a member of the public.

Don't use public transportation without a valid ticket. If you get caught, you not only have to pay a service fee (40-60 EURO), but also a complaint may be filed.

## Music Download

It is illegal in Germany, as in any other country, to offer or download copyrighted music, videos or other data. German authorities prosecute violations, even in minor cases. Severe fines will be charged. Be sure to remove or switch off any software which might use P2P technology for those reasons. Hefty fines of more than 500 Euros have occurred in the last years, so spare you this potential trouble.

## Uncomfortable Social Situations – “Time To Say No”

### *Physical Issues*

Especially during your first weeks in Germany you might be unsure how to consider other persons behavior. A “brother kiss” for example is very normal in certain countries; it might not be in yours. In general in Germany the form of reception and interaction depends a lot on the relation you have with that person. Relations are depending mostly on how well you know and like a person and not so much on the status the person has compared to you. If you are in doubt, discuss this openly with your AFS counsellor, your host family, other AFS volunteers or staff members.

Be aware that sexuality may be shown very openly in public in Germany. Even though there are now feminist initiatives who try to change this, you might well see a scantily clad woman on an advertisement for car tyres, repair services or even chocolate – you name it. Not only will you see this in magazines, there are also often posters displayed along the street.

It is also quite common among young people to talk about sexuality. A certain level of this talk is not considered promiscuous or odd. That does not mean that you are expected to join that conversation or even talk about your own experiences. It is always your right to refuse an answer, and no one will force you to.

Overall, you should never compromise your personal values and beliefs regarding sexual behavior. **If you feel** you have been exposed to sexual harassment, speak about it to your host family, AFS contact person or your regional AFS-Office. You may also contact **[timetosayno@afs.org](mailto:timetosayno@afs.org)** for advice. Since your safety is very important to us you will also receive more information about this issue at your first camp in Germany.

## ***Peer Pressure and Alcohol***

If you go out with friends, especially if visiting bars or clubs, it may be common among your friends to consume alcohol. You will probably be offered a drink as well. Be sure not to feel pressured to do anything you don't want to. You always have the right to decline the offer, and this will be fully accepted.

It is accepted in Germany to consume alcohol within the legal limits as written above. Be aware that German students might be used better to alcohol than you are. If you choose to have a beer or more, be careful with what you do while under the influence. Especially don't go swimming after consuming alcohol! You might drown.

## **Diseases and Dangerous Animals**

Considering diseases and dangerous animals, Germany is probably one of the safest countries in the world.

But even though sexual diseases such as HIV are proportionally scarce in Germany, you should follow the well known rules of behaviour to seek a maximum of protection. If you are uncertain, ask a person you trust.

In **certain areas** of Germany there is the risk of Lyme disease and TBE (called FSME in Germany). Ask your host parents about this. Both diseases are transmitted by ticks – a tiny animal as small as a pinhead which lives in forests and grassy meadows. It is a good idea to check your legs after walking through high grass, as often enough you can catch the ticks before they bite. In case you find something sitting on your skin that won't blow away, ask your host parents for advice. Ticks can be removed easily with the right equipment and experience. If the surrounding area of skin turns red days later or if you get a fever, you need to see a doctor.

## **Cycling, Swimming, Hazardous Sports**

Hazardous sports (e.g. climbing, skiing) are not generally permitted within the AFS program. You need a sports waiver signed by your natural parents for these activities.

If you ride a bike, ask your host parents about dangerous crossings and the traffic rules for cyclists. Keep in mind that we have right hand traffic in Germany! Do not ride in the dark without lights and always lock your bike to prevent theft.

Do not go swimming if you do not feel safe – even if others want you to join them. Be careful when bathing in the open sea (your host parents or natives will inform you about the dangers of the tide). When swimming in lakes, do not jump in even if you think it is deep enough.

## General Safety Considerations

As everywhere, where there are many people there are pickpockets, so be most aware when shopping in crowds. Even at school, theft is possible, so take care of your money and personal belongings. **Always** lock your bicycle, even if you only leave it for a minute or two.

Always carry an ID with you (it doesn't necessarily have to be your passport), as you might be asked to show your identification.

Natural disasters are very rare in Germany. Occasionally, floods occur along the main rivers, especially during spring time when the snow melts and rain is abundant. Those floods usually don't come unexpected and therefore won't put you into a dangerous situation. You will be instructed how to behave well in advance by your host family or local authorities. Some regions (particularly along the Rhine River) are also experiencing minor earthquakes from time to time. These earthquakes are usually so low-key that you may not even notice them.

## Emergency Phone Numbers

General Emergency numbers (free call, no pre-code):

<b>Police:</b>	<b>110</b>
<b>Fire:</b>	<b>112</b>
<b>Ambulance:</b>	<b>19222 or 112</b>

### **AFS office:**

During office hours (appr. 8am to 8pm)	
AFS Office Hamburg	040 – 399 222 - 0

After office hours	
AFS <b>emergency</b> mobile:	0162 – 10 51 881

## Conclusions

1. Get to know the host culture well. Keep talking and discussing with your host family, peers, local AFS volunteers.
2. Take concerns expressed by your host family or school seriously. Follow their advice.
3. Do not ignore your own “instinct” in any given situation!

Besides your host family AFS provides you with local volunteers that are always happy to help you. Make sure you get to know your local AFS contact person. Take down her/his phone number and do not hesitate to call in case of any questions or concerns.