



Residential or Homestay: which is better?

For the foreign child coming to The UK to learn English two distinct types of course are available: the residential course, in which the student lives, eats and receives lessons in the school; and the homestay course, in which the student lives with an English family. Which is better?

SPEAKING ENGLISH

Homestay: A student placed with a good family is in an excellent position to practise everyday English in a natural social and cultural context. Much will depend on the confidence of the student and the affability of the family. A student lacking confidence, or faced with a socially or culturally unfamiliar situation, might feel too shy to talk. Remember that much of a student's time in a homestay situation will be spent outside the family with other students on the course. It is important therefore for the students to come from a variety of countries if they are to benefit from speaking English together. It is unwise to accept a situation where students of the same nationality are lodged with the same family.

Residential: so long as the residential situation is genuinely multinational (and it is advisable to check how many students share the same mother tongue) a great deal of English will be spoken between students from different countries and cultures. There is arguably greater motivation to speak English because the students must use the language to make friends with others who share common interests. For students to learn English it is important that they feel socially comfortable. For younger students especially a feeling of 'safety in numbers' on residential courses makes them less likely to feel inhibited or isolated, more likely to join in.

ENGLISH LIFE AND CULTURE

Homestay: a student well-placed with an English family is in an excellent position to learn about English life and culture. What this is, however, will depend on how lively and cultured the host family is! Host families are paid to accept students so there is some tendency for poorer families to act as hosts. This has social and cultural implications that you need to be aware of.

Residential: there is less contact with everyday English life and culture. However, students from many different countries and cultures mix together and benefit by becoming more 'international': arguably more useful than knowledge about English life and culture in today's world.

STANDARDS AND FACILITIES

Homestay: reputable organisations try hard to accommodate students with good host families. Despite the organising school's best efforts standards of food, comfort, etc. will inevitably vary from one family to another.

Residential: because all students receive the same food and use the same facilities, standards can be guaranteed. Facilities can be checked in advance by reading the school's brochure. If the school is [Accredited by The British Council](#), its brochure has to be truthful. If not, there is an

independent complaints procedure. Students at residential schools also benefit from the on-site facilities such as swimming pools, sports halls, sports fields, etc. These help them to integrate and speak English together. Read the brochure carefully to check exactly what is available at each site.

SUPERVISION AND SECURITY

Homestay: the students have considerably more freedom than in a residential situation. The normal stipulation is that a child should return to the host family's home by a certain time in the evening. What they do, where they go, who they see during this time is largely their own choice. This encourages independence but it also carries risks, especially if students feel they are beyond their parents' control. So the maturity of the individual child, and the nature of the local town and its inhabitants become important considerations.

Residential: 24-hour supervision is possible. This limits freedom. For example students will not normally be allowed to leave the school grounds without a member of staff. However, the school and grounds often cover a large area, with on-site facilities. There will also be opportunities for the students to go on supervised shopping trips and excursions. Contact with the local community will be limited, but the students can socialise with their counterparts from different countries and cultures. Local British youngsters can be invited to participate - for example in discos - but under the supervision of the school authorities.

CONCLUSION

With homestay courses there are many different variables to take into account: the type of family, the personality of the child, the nature of the locality. At best, the child will form excellent relationships with the host family and return year after year (or 'exchange' with another child on a swop basis). In the residential situation it is easier to guarantee standards and facilities are generally better. At best, students will return home healthy and refreshed having made new friends from all over the world. Whatever type of course you choose, make sure the school is Accredited by The British Council: participating schools undergo regular inspections to safeguard standards.

© Christopher Etchells
English Country Schools, 2008
etchells@countrieschools.co.uk