



The YMCA Youth Exchanges Guide



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Canada 

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INTRODUCTION

So... you're going on an exchange with YMCA Youth Exchange Canada!

What is it? It's an opportunity for youth ages 12 to 17 to explore Canada, meet new friends, and get involved in community projects. You get to go to a completely different part of the country and stay in a host community for 5 days. Youth from that community get to come experience where you live. It's a chance to discover new places and people, as well as a chance to share and discover your own community.

This guide is here to help.

Brought to you by youth who have been through the exchange, this guide has information, tips, and ideas.

WHAT IS THE YMCA?

The YMCA was established over 150 years ago as a charity dedicated to the building of healthy individuals and communities. We are dedicated to the growth of all people in spirit, mind and body.

The first YMCA in North America opened in Montreal in 1851, 16 years before Confederation. Today there are over 250 YMCA's across Canada!

YMCAs are a centre of community where friendships are formed and family ties are strengthened. YMCAs provide a variety of services in communities across the country. Each YMCA offers other local programs based on the needs of its community.

To find the YMCA nearest you, check out www.ymca.ca.

YMCA Youth Exchanges Canada is a federally funded program by the Department of Canadian Heritage.

THE YMCA VALUES

The YMCA is guided by certain values that inform the way we act and the decisions we make:

Caring – we act with compassion and concern for the well-being of others.

Health – we are committed to physical, social, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual development.

Honesty – we demonstrate integrity and trustworthiness.

Inclusiveness – we appreciate diversity, strive to be open to all, and seek to understand differences and find common ground.

Respect – we recognize and protect the inherent worth of every person, including oneself.

Responsibility – we are dependable and accountable for choices, actions, and commitments.

CONNECTING WITH YOUR GROUP

It's no fun travelling with strangers!

Get to know your own group before you travel. Set up time for group work once a week. Do something fun to get to know each other at the beginning of each meeting. Then get down to business.

- What are your groups' goals? What kinds of things are you interested in?
- What can each person contribute to the group?
- Find a good way to share your ideas, like a Facebook group.
- Be honest with each other. Your opinion matters.
- Talk about important things together, like your group's budget, expenses, and priorities.
- Make decisions as a group.

ICEBREAKERS

Icebreakers are a great way to get to know your own group and your twin group.

Below is a popular icebreaker by some past YMCA Youth Exchanges Canada groups (maybe you know it already?):

Honey if you love me will you please, please smile?

Gather the group in a circle with one volunteer (A) in the centre. (A) should stand in front of one member of the circle (B), and without touching her or him say:

*"Honey if you love me will you please,
please smile?"*

(B) must then respond:

"Honey I love you but I just can't smile"

If (B) laughs or smiles, she has to replace (A) in the centre of the circle. Continue play until everyone has had a turn in the centre.

Be inclusive - OBSERVE anyone who has not been asked yet. Remember, we're team-building!

This is also a great activity to do when you first meet your twin group. It is preferred that this activity is run by youth.

CREATING A GROUP DEFINITION OF SAFE SPACE

“SAFE SPACE is a space in which everyone is committed to creating a respectful environment.”

This means...

- Respecting differences (in terms of culture, race, ethnicity, religion, ability, sexual orientation, etc...).
- Being open to learning.
- What’s said here stays here. (Don’t gossip. Maintain group confidentiality. Keep personal information private).
- Taking care of yourself (physically, emotionally, medically, etc...).
- Be communicative with group members (See how everyone’s feeling at the end of the day).

What are some other things that make a space feel safer? Discuss it with your exchange group.

It’s important to establish a common concept of safe space within your group and twin group, in the beginning stages.

CONNECTING WITH YOUR TWIN GROUP

Once you've got your group, you need to get connected with the group you will be exchanging with: Your "TWIN GROUP".

EACH PERSON IN YOUR GROUP WILL BE
MATCHED WITH A TWIN.

You'll be matched up with a partner who will be your twin for the duration of the exchange.

Twins can be matched up based on age, interests, language, hobbies, diet or allergies.

Your twin is someone you've never met before and you'll be spending a lot of time together during the exchange. It's a good idea to get to know each other a bit before meeting in person.

SO INTRODUCE YOURSELF...

- Write a profile of basic info about you and what you're all about.
- Use the Internet, if available. Connect by e-mail, chat, Facebook/social networking sites.
- Exchange photos and interests.
- Send letters, postcards, and photos by "snail mail".

Who lives with you in your home?

You: _____

Your twin: _____

What do you like to do in your free time?

You: _____

Your twin: _____

What kind of music do you like?

You: _____

Your twin: _____

Do you prefer indoor or outdoor activities?

You: _____

Your twin: _____

How would your friends describe you?

You: _____

Your twin: _____

YMCA YOUTH EXCHANGE COMMUNITY QUIZ

PART ONE PRE-EXCHANGE
(Fill this out before the exchange happens.)

Community

- What I would like to learn about my own community?

- What I would like to learn about my twin community?

- Some things that not too many people know about my community:

- What I would like my twin to see/ experience that they probably couldn't do if they were just a tourist in my community:

Billets/ Accommodations/ Everyday Living

- What do I know about where I will be staying?
What might it look like?

- Do I have a special diet (food allergies, vegetarian, vegan, halal, kosher)?

- Do I have any special needs that my twin should know about?

- Have I asked my twin about special needs they may have? (ie. Can my twin swim? If not, swimming in the lake might not be a great idea...)

✓ Checklist:

- I have told both my leader and my twin about my unique needs?
- I asked my twin about their needs (Eg. diet)?
- Anything else? _____

Personal

- These are my fears about the exchange:

- These are my hopes about the exchange:

HOSTING

Hosting an exchange means discovering your own community.

As a host, you get to plan activities for your twin group when they come to where you live. You can make fun and recreational plans to “show off” your community. Think about something special about your neighborhood, maybe there is a community centre that hosts a weekly performance for youth, a RibFest in June, or a Mardi Gras in February.

Brainstorm and remember: Something common for you might be new to your twin group! Also, as part of the exchange, your group will get to plan a minimum of 8 hours worth of volunteer projects.

Tip: The more input you contribute, the greater enjoyment you will get out of the exchange! Let your creative juice flow!

Research and explore your community to discover what you have to offer:

- Fun community events
- Local organizations
- Local attractions
- Cool initiatives
- etc...

Have a broad range of activities planned and mix them up in the itinerary to keep things interesting.

Tip: When hosting, remember to ask your twin how they are and if they need anything on a regular basis. They may be too shy to ask. Help them feel welcome.

IDEAS FOR VOLUNTEER PROJECTS

Volunteerism is a great way to connect with your group and community.

As part of an exchange, your group will have to plan a minimum of 8 hours worth of volunteer projects which take place in your local community. This can be broken into 2 half days. These projects should be based on the interests of your group and have relevance in your community. It will require some planning before your twin group arrives. If you're planning an outdoor event think about weather and be flexible so that the project can be done on another day in case it is too cold, hot, rainy etc.

WHAT ABOUT...

- **Food Bank:** Help out your local Food Bank by sorting food, making packages and more!
- **Visiting Retirement Homes:** Interact with seniors and share stories!
- **Drama/Music with a Message:** Put on a performance, music, hip hop and more that talks about social issues. Help spread the word of diversity issue environmental messages, newcomer issues and much more!
- **Tree Planting:** Plant trees in your local park! Help keep our planet green. Offset your carbon footprint from your exchange.
- **Can Drive:** Collect food for the local food bank.
- **Community Clean Up:** Help keep your community beautiful and clean!
- **Out in the cold:** Organize a fundraiser where your group sleeps out in the cold/sets up tents outside(during winter) to raise awareness of homeless issues.
- **Community kitchen/shelter:** Help with meal preparation at a shelter or community kitchen.
- **Organizing an event to raise awareness about an international issue or cause.** Some groups have organized a hunger banquet to raise money and awareness of poverty in different parts of the world.

FUNDRAISING

An important part of the preparation phase is fundraising.

So...why are we fundraising?

There is a \$50 group fee for each group member, but this can be covered in your fundraising. Your group has to cover the costs of the activities while you are hosting your twin group. This means that if your group plans expensive museum visits and day trips requiring bus rentals, your group will have to raise a lot of money. On the other hand, if you plan local activities, volunteer activities and community dinners you will have to do less fundraising and you may spend more time connecting with your twins and planning for their arrival.

Tip: Try to think of FREE activities to do with your group.

HOW MUCH SHOULD WE FUNDRAISE?

After you have come up with an activity you should make a budget of how much is required. Make sure you add about 10% to 15% in contingency funds to plan for the unexpected.

Fundraising does not always have to mean getting money. Several groups have written letters to ask for donations such as food, entrance fees and bus tickets. Some other groups have also used group volunteer activities before and during the hosting phase as another means of receiving some in-kind donations in return.

FUNDRAISING IDEAS:

- **Hold a sale:** A bake sale, smoothie sale, popsicle sale, garage sale...
- **Hold a benefit:** A supper, a dance, or a concert with local bands that will play for free.
- **Hold a raffle:** Collect and use prizes, donated from local businesses.
- **Hold a "Thon":** Wash-a-thon, Bowl-a-thon, Walk-a-thon...
- **Hold a Can Drive:** Collect all the cans and bottles from the houses and take them to the recycling center.

TRAVELLING

You never know what's going to happen until you get there. You can prepare yourself by looking into the area where you're going to be going, by surfing the web, going to your local library, or asking questions...

- Be ready to step outside your comfort zone.
- Keep an open mind.
- Be open to similarities and differences.
- Take opportunities that present themselves.
- Challenge yourself!
- Work to create a safe space for yourself and group members, so everyone can feel at home in their host communities.
- Look forward to an exciting adventure!

GOING GREEN

For some people, being green is an easy habit. However, others have a hard time adjusting their daily routine to fit the green way of life. Being green can be as simple as you want to make it. Being a part of a YMCA exchange, we promote helping the environment in as many ways as we can. Here are a few friendly tips to make your exchange more green and eco-friendly.

- Simplify your packing list as much as possible. Only bring belongings that you use or enjoy on a regular basis. Try to reduce what you bring on your YMCA youth exchange. By packing lightly, you help to reduce the weight of the plane and fuel costs. If you pack lightly, you can help reduce your group's environmental footprint.
- When on your exchange, think of different ways to travel as a group. Instead of hiring private buses, walk or take public transit, if possible. Not only does it help the environment, but allows you to see beautiful views of the community.
- Before your exchange, recommend investing in reusable plates, bowls, utensils, etc. As a group use your own plates, cups, and utensils when given the opportunity then fill a sink of water and take turns washing dishes. This reduces waste and helps bring your group closer together.

- Remember your youth exchange water bottle! Every day brings new activities and in order to stay active, you need to keep yourself hydrated. Instead of buying a plastic water bottle to drink, refill the one you already have.
- Avoid general waste. After getting ready in the morning remember to turn off and unplug all items. Don't forget the lights! When showering or brushing your teeth, turn the water off until needed. When eating as a group, try your best to avoid wasting food. If there are left-overs, pack them up for later.

HOW CAN I GO GREEN:

PROTECTING YOURSELF FROM SEXUAL ABUSE

Every exchange participant has the right to stay in a safe and secure environment. For this reason all participants and hosts must take part in a screening process. This includes Group Leaders or any other chaperones that will be hosting youth in their home.

Here are some strategies to help you stay safe.

Say no

If anyone touches you or invades your personal or emotional space, you have a right to say “no.” Don’t discuss it. If you don’t want to be touched, a loud “No, don’t touch me” is okay.

Be assertive

Let the person know you will tell someone what has happened. However, if you are afraid, look for ways to get away from the situation. Do talk with your group leader.

Travel in groups

Avoid situations where you are alone with someone you don’t know well, feel uncomfortable with or who may try to take advantage of you. Arrange to have someone else around.

Show that you know

Let others know that you are aware of sexual abuse, that you are in charge of your own body, and that you will work to protect yourself.

Nurture supports

Develop friendships that support you. Be a friend to others and value relationships in which you can speak honestly.

Trust yourself

If you have a gut feeling that something is wrong about a person's behaviour, trust that your intuition is warning you.

DIFFERENCES AND CULTURAL ADAPTATION

You have probably heard the term
“culture shock”.
what exactly is this?

Typically the opportunity of being in a new environment where you are meeting new people and learning about new ways of living is very exciting. However, this sudden change of being in an unfamiliar environment can be overwhelming for many people and often the initial excitement fades. At this point, you may feel very nervous, stressed and want to return home. A person may experience culture shock anywhere. No person or place is immune to culture shock. Many people experience culture shock in their own homes after being away for an extended period. Things that you are used to and may take for granted such as having your friends or family around you or speaking your mother tongue may not be possible.

SYMPTOMS OF CULTURE SHOCK

- You are restless, nervous or have difficulty sleeping.
- You are frustrated and get irritated very easily.
- You are extremely bored.
- You are counting down the days until you go home and making detailed plans for your return.
- You are feeling sick, have headaches and are very tired.
- You prefer to be left alone, you rather not make the effort to interact with members of your group.
- You don't feel like making the effort of learning a new language.
- You have a craving for all things familiar (food, music, books).
- You are afraid to try new things and very nervous that you will make a mistake or be misunderstood
- You feel most comfortable talking to friends and family at home over the telephone or internet

It's okay and normal to feel culture shock. Your group and Group Leader (s) can help you with this.

Here are some tips to help you adapt:

DO	DON'T
<p>DO try to learn the language of the community you are in. Even a few new words can go a long way in adjusting.</p>	<p>DON'T spend too much time by yourself.</p>
<p>DO try to get some physical exercise. Take a walk, it is a great stress reliever!</p>	<p>DON'T spend too much time only with members from your own group.</p>
<p>DO keep a journal. Write down your thoughts and feelings. You can write down things that really are bothering you. This will help you learn more about yourself. Come back and revisit your journal later on, you might be able to laugh off your earlier experiences and you might notice how much you have adapted in a short time.</p>	<p>DON'T write long emails and having lengthy conversations with friends and family back home. They are not in the same environment as you and will not fully understand. Often they will just worry more about you.</p>

DO	DON'T
<p>DO speak to a leader. If you are having a really difficult time you should speak to your leader. Maybe other people in the group are also have a hard time.</p>	<p>DON'T make judgements or comparisons with your own "culture" or community. Try to experience the culture on its own. No culture is better than another, it is all a matter of perspective.</p>
<p>DO observe and ask questions. If you are unsure of something, ask for clarifications, observe and try to get a better understanding of what is going on. Things that seem very strange at first may make a lot more sense with a little more context.</p>	
<p>DO be open and try to get out of your comfort zone. You won't be in an exchange forever. Try to get the most out of the experience and try new things. Give yourself a goal of trying something new each day.</p>	
<p>DO try to mix with your twin group and your twin.</p>	

PROCESS OF CULTURAL ADAPTATION:

- Talk about cultural adaptation with your group before your first phase of the exchange.
- Discuss symptoms to help each other recognize "culture shock".
- Reflect on a time you've experienced culture shock.
- If you're comfortable, share your experience of culture shock or adaptation.
- Write tips to help adapt to a new environment and ways to support each other.
- Group de-briefing is important too, summarize what's good and bad and what can be done to make the trip as memorable as possible.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Sometimes problems happen.

Many conflicts arise out of misunderstandings.

We may feel that something is unfair, someone is being mean, or that we're not getting a fair share.

Problems don't go away if you ignore them- in fact they usually get worse.

It's a good idea to face problems and get them sorted out as soon as you can.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION GUIDE

DO	DON'T
DO talk about it! Speak calmly - try to understand each other.	DON'T raise your voice, yell or swear.
DO be clear about your needs and feelings . Use "I" statements. Say how you feel starting with "I feel..."	DON'T blame the other person ("you said/did...").
DO ask questions. Like "How do you feel about this?"	DON'T get uncomfortably close to the other person.
DO listen . Concentrate on what the other person is saying.	DON'T interrupt or hog the conversation.
DO come with possible solutions to the conflict Both people have to compromise.	DON'T act bossy .

CONFLICT RESOLUTION PRACTICE

How would you resolve the following conflicts?

- Your host family is serving you a meal which you find unfamiliar and strange. What could you do?
- Your twin called you a “loser” this morning and now is ignoring you. What could you do?
- Your teacher blamed you for something you didn’t do. What could you do?
- Your exchange group is doing a high ropes activity. You are afraid of heights. What could you do?

When you need additional support to resolve a conflict:

It is most ideal when conflicts are resolved between the two respective parties.

However, sometimes conflicts require the assistance of an external mediator or leader. If you have been unable to resolve a conflict on your own speak to your leader!

AT THE END OF YOUR EXCHANGE...

Complete the YMCA Youth Exchanges Canada evaluation. Your feedback helps the program improve!

- Keep in touch with members of your twin group! Share pictures/video!
- Continue to volunteer in your community!
- Keep building on the connections you made during the exchange program!
- Check out your local YMCA for other youth and leadership opportunities.
- Want to do another exchange? Check out the Summer Work Student Exchange Program www.summer-work.com
- Apply for the YMCA Youth Exchanges Youth Advisory Committee. For more info, contact info.yec@ymcagta.org

Community

- The biggest surprise for me about my twin community was...

- Something that surprised me about my own community during the exchange...

Doing it over again...

- If I could go back and change one thing about the hosting phase, what would it be?

- If I could go back and change one thing about the travel phase what would it be?

- If I could go back and have 1 day more with my twin what would I like to do?

My NEW goals

- I am going to keep in touch with my twin group by doing the following:

- I want to do more in my own community. I am going to start by doing this:

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