

## Guidelines for Host Families

The children who come to stay with you will have been chosen for one or more of the following reasons:

- *they have had cancer and are now in remission after treatment*
- *they live in one of the contaminated parts of the country*
- *they have diabetes or other illness, or have recently recovered from an operation*
- *they live in an orphanage. Some of these children have lost both parents, some just one parent and others have parents who simply cannot cope with looking after them.*

Some of the children who come from the villages in the contaminated regions live in small wooden houses, often with no water, no heating and very little comfort. In some cases they may have parents who have problems with alcohol and be quite neglected. Others may live quite simple village lives but be well loved and cared for. Most of the children who come from towns live in very small flats, and some live in 'temporary' hostels where kitchens and toilets are shared with other families.

**However, it is important to remember that not all the children come from very poor families.** The only children we would regard as ineligible for a recuperative holiday are those whose parents are rich enough to take the children abroad themselves. We try to find out as much as possible about the children's home circumstances before they come, as well as their health problems. **Do not expect all the children who come to be ill.** Many of them look perfectly healthy and are very active during their holiday. Occasionally children may be hyperactive because of an over active thyroid gland. Others may get tired easily and this may also be a thyroid gland problem.

But many of the children are reasonably healthy and the purpose of the holiday is to help them stay that way. Just remember that whilst they live at home they are constantly eating contaminated food and Caesium or other radioactive elements may be building up in their bodies. They are all at high risk of developing cancer, heart disease or serious respiratory or digestive problems. The time they spend with you may help to prevent this.

Some children may come with very little clothing but this should not present a problem. Your local group, perhaps with your help, will have organised a 'clothes bank' of good quality second hand clothes from which you can help the children to select suitable items. You may find very different responses amongst the children to the clothes you offer. Some will happily scoop up sackfuls of clothes, for brothers and parents as well as for themselves. Others will be much more reticent and may need a second chance to look at the clothes another day.

**If a child asks to have their ears pierced or a tattoo, under no circumstances do we allow any kind of body piercing or tattooing.** We also ask you not to buy expensive gifts or designer trainers for the children because this puts pressure on other families who may not be able to afford them. It also sets a precedent and future groups of children from the same school may arrive with unrealistic and undesirable expectations about the goods they will receive.

Small gifts, like art materials, balls and sports equipment, and simple games are appropriate and appreciated just as much. Photo albums of the holiday are also an ideal present which will be treasured. If you want to send the family back home a gift, tea, coffee, good chocolates, sewing items, gloves, inexpensive perfumes and toiletries are all suitable to send back for mothers and grandmas. For the men small tool kits, gloves, shaving items would all be gratefully received. However the most important gift you can give is your time and care, plus sharing our healthy environment and giving the children a good diet. Multivitamins are good for children to take home but when sending any health care items back with the children ensure that a translation of the instructions is attached to the container.

If the children in your group have had cancer they will have been selected by the charity 'Children in Trouble' which is run by parents of cancer sufferers. These children may not be poor and they may live in the city so they will probably be a lot more sophisticated than village children from schools such as Veletin or Hoiniki. They will all have had at least two years of treatment in hospital for cancer or leukaemia and will now be in remission. It is thought that several holidays abroad during this time may prevent a relapse. Many children become ill again in their teens and this is a very dangerous time. There are some 16 to 18 year olds who have never had the chance of a holiday abroad because of illnesses in their early teens.

### **Before the children arrive**

Before you are accepted as a host family you will be visited by two members of the local group who have experience in social work, child care or health visiting. Their job is simply to make sure that your home feels like a happy, caring environment for the visiting children. You will also be asked to fill in a form for the local group and also a Disclosure Form for the Criminal Records Bureau. You will be given a copy of our 'Child Protection Policy' and asked to agree to abide by its guidelines. It is important that you attend several meetings of your local group, learn a little about the effects of the Chernobyl accident in order to understand the purpose of the recuperative holidays; give some help with fund raising events and get to know the other family with whom you will be sharing. You will need to discuss how you will look after the children and how you will ensure a smooth transition from Family A to Family B. If the first family has a very relaxed attitude to mealtimes, bed times, etc. and the second family is much stricter, problems may arise.

Host families should be aware that it is tempting for children from very poor families to steal. Please put away any valuable items and it might be sensible

to supervise the children's packing to make sure nothing goes astray. Be especially careful with mobile phones. If you lose a phone and don't notice for a few days you could end up with a large bill for calls made in Belarus!

### **When the children arrive**

They will be met at the airport by two or three members of your group. All the other families will be gathered at a local school hall, church or community centre waiting to greet the children when they arrive in your town. If at all possible both families should be there to be introduced to the children by the interpreter. If the group can find any other Russian speakers to come along for this initial meeting it will help the children and their families to get to know each other.

When you get them home the children will be tired after their long journey but will be excited that they have arrived and probably a little apprehensive. They will probably want to unpack straight away and often their luggage contains more gifts than clothes, and they may want to present these to you straight away. If you are helping them to unpack check whether they have brought any food. If you don't encourage them to throw it away you may find a lump of meat still lurking in a cupboard a week later.

The children should sleep in the same room at least at first so that they will not be lonely or homesick. We usually do not place a boy and a girl together unless they are brother and sister. Take time to explain how the bathroom works. If they come from a rural area the children may have very poor bathroom facilities at home, and even in the cities plumbing in Belarus leaves much to be desired. It is not the custom in Belarus to flush paper down the toilet.

### **During the visit**

Every effort will be made to supply basic information, such as family background, past or present health problems and any special diets. We hope to have this information available before the visit, but sometimes it is not possible. Children with cancer, in particular, can often be unwell at the last minute, and have to be substituted for a child about whom we have very little information. We have also asked parents in Belarus to send a letter of introduction with their child, being as honest as possible about his or her temperament and behaviour as well as their health needs, allergies, etc. If you are unclear about any of the information which has been supplied to you, check with the interpreter. If a child becomes ill, treat him or her as you would your own child and arrange for the interpreter to be there if you visit the doctor. It is best to inform your doctor before the children's arrival that you will have Belarusian visitors staying with you. Britain has a reciprocal agreement with Belarus so basic health care for children is free. If a child falls ill with flu or breaks his arm, then the NHS must treat him. But if the child has an existing condition like diabetes, then there is no obligation on a doctor to treat him or provide medication for the condition, although you will still find that many doctors are very helpful and supportive.

If the children who come to stay with your group are in remission from cancer they will have a doctor with them. There is now a law in Belarus that a doctor must accompany each group of up to 25 people. So in some cases we are able to share the doctor between two groups and he or she will spend a fortnight with your group.

It is important for all the visiting children to be seen by a dentist if you are able to arrange this. The parents need to give specific permission for this and they will clearly do so on the forms they fill in before the children visit. In some areas unfortunately, groups find it impossible to locate a dentist who is willing to give his or her time to see the children. But if it can be arranged it is of great benefit to the children, especially those who live in villages where the local treatment may be very poor and without anaesthetics. You can either organize for the whole group to go to the same dentist or each family can ask their own dentist if it is possible to bring along their two children during the first week of the visit so there is time to arrange treatment if it is needed. It is important that the dentist realizes that it is not possible to claim from the NHS for treatment for Belarusian children, except for emergency treatment. We have had some cases of health authorities contacting us about dentists who have tried to claim for the cost of treating a group of our children.

Keep to hand the phone numbers of other families and the interpreter. The children should be given the number for the interpreter so they can ring any time they need to. If they abuse this the interpreter will soon tell them off. It is the duty of the interpreter to see the children regularly, including visits to your home. Help from the interpreter is especially vital at the initial stages of the visit and families should not hesitate to call her (or occasionally, him). It is also a good idea for the group to arrange a rota of families to invite the interpreter for an evening meal. This gives you the opportunity to chat to your children at greater length and also to talk with the interpreter and find out more about Belarus. If you attend church yourself you may want to take the children along with you at least once, but if their own faith is different, ask if they would like to go to a different service as well.

**Food** should be simple and nourishing – plenty of fresh fruit, vegetables, bread, cereals, meat and fish, fruit juice, milk and water. If the children are reluctant to drink milk this may be that they do not drink it at home because of the radiation, or they have been told that milk in Britain is not safe, due to BSE. Reassure them that it is safe and good for them and they will probably drink it. Vegetarianism is almost unknown in Belarus. Like children everywhere they will love beefburgers, chips, coke, sweets and chocolate. Remember that they are here to improve their health, so don't indulge them too much. It is probably best for fizzy drinks to be a treat for outings and parties and to give them milk and fruit juice when you are at home. High sugar intake is best avoided anyway as most of the children have very poor teeth.

Some of the children have wonderful manners, others don't. Ask the interpreter when she visits to explain to the children what you expect from them. A common problem is children leaving the table before everyone has finished, but this can usually easily be resolved by the interpreter explaining to

them that you would like them to stay at the table till the end of the meal. Also some children are not used to using a knife as Belarusians often eat just with a fork.

Your local group may be able to get donations of fruit or at least buy it in bulk. Most Belarussian children get very little fruit at home, except apples, and they simply can't get enough of it while they are here. If you fill your fruit bowl you may find that it has been emptied within minutes and the same again the next day. It is best to ration fruit, just putting out what you would like them to eat. Be as generous as you can as it is obviously good for the children to eat plenty, but fifteen bananas or twenty oranges in a day is clearly more than they need! The children may try to hoard food, planning to take it home with them. If you think this is happening, just tell them that you will give them some food to take home before they leave.

It is important that the children spend plenty of time with you, their host family, but they will generally be glad to have regular opportunities to get together with their friends. Major outings should be organised at well spaced intervals with not too many long journeys. The children should be offered the opportunity to go on all the outings which have been planned. It is not always necessary for the family to accompany them. As well as the planned outings, families often get together in twos and threes to go on simple outings, to a park or for a picnic in the countryside.

**Phone calls** to Belarus on ordinary BT lines are expensive – about 60p per minute in the evenings and more during the day. But there are special numbers you can dial to get much cheaper phone calls, so we will supply these numbers to all the groups and host families.. If they can make one call home each week that should be adequate for most of them. The Interpreter will have contact numbers for all the children in the case of emergency or if the children are uncertain of the code.

In most cases the children will be staying with each host family for two weeks. It is very important that the children are made aware of this at the beginning and that they meet the next family well before the change over date. Otherwise they may think that they are no longer wanted by you. Please keep to the arranged change over date for the sake of the children and both sets of families, and never say to them that they can come back to you if they are unhappy with the second family. If they have enjoyed their stay with you it is natural that they should feel apprehensive about moving on to a new family, but in almost all cases they quickly settle down.

Please feel free to raise any concern before or during the visit with your group co-ordinator, so that any problems can be eliminated at an early stage. In the event of serious misbehaviour the interpreter and your group co-ordinator should be contacted immediately. In many cases a few firm words from the interpreter may resolve the situation. If problems persist, it may be necessary to separate the children or move them both to a different family. There may simply be a personality clash between the two Belarussian children or between

them and your own children. **Never struggle on in silence with children who are making your family unhappy, and probably themselves as well.**

**Accidents:** In the event of any accident please contact the interpreter and your group co-ordinator. Either you or they should then contact the National Co-ordinator or one of the Trustees. The interpreter should inform the child's parents about the accident, if it is not serious, and take care not to alarm them. In the event of a serious accident we would arrange for someone in Belarus to visit the parents to tell them, and would probably then make arrangements for them to fly over to Britain.

If you write to your children, after their return to Belarus, you will probably find that some letters arrive and some do not. It is best not to send them anything valuable in the post as it is quite likely not to reach its destination. If you want to send them money, send a small amount in dollars, and wait till you know it has arrived before you send any more. If your children came from a school with a good English teacher, you could write to them in English. If not, you need to find someone to translate your letters into Russian or the children may never be able to read them. Before your children leave for Belarus ensure that they write down in Cyrillic letters their home address. You will then be able to photocopy it and use it as a label when you write to them. Note that the address is written in reverse order, starting with the region, then the city, street and house.

Some families get very attached to the children who have been to stay with them and ask if they can have them back. If the children have had cancer then they need several holidays abroad, so it should be possible for you to have them again. But if they come from a school where other children have not yet had a holiday abroad, then it is important that we give all their classmates the chance of a holiday before we invite children back. It may sometimes be possible to invite a child back two or three years after their first holiday.

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