

Study Abroad: A Family Guide

The Supportive Family

STAY IN TOUCH –
BUT NOT TOO
OFTEN!

Family

Let Your
Student be
the Travel
Guide



ENCOURAGE
YOUR STUDENT
TO TAKE
CHARGE!

the

Family

issue

WHAT TO EXPECT
WHEN THEY RETURN

-Culture shock can happen

Going abroad will certainly be a defining period in your student's educational experience—a psychological journey that can transform them into a global thinker with international perspectives and put him or her a step ahead of the competition in the eyes of prospective employers. In spite of this, you—and your student—may have a wide range of feelings about the upcoming experience, from excitement to stress. By understanding each other's feelings and supporting decisions before, during, and after the period of overseas study, you can help maximize this opportunity. Here is some advice on what to expect.

Encourage, but don't push

Before your student leaves, offer your full support. Let him/ her know that you will be there throughout the experience if needed, including that you can still be reached from overseas.

Time abroad often begins with a honeymoon period during which students are excited to finally be in the setting that they have dreamed of. After facing realities such as unfamiliar university procedures, unexpected difficulty with the local language, commuting woes, and the absence of usual support groups, culture shock can set in. At the same time, the student is away from on-

campus medical, psychological and advisory services they may have come to rely on.

Expect to hear some tales of frustration, though your student will likely be experiencing many wonderful things as well, even if you are not the first to hear about them. In most cases he or she won't expect you to solve problems—as much as you may want to—and is just looking for an understanding ear.

If going abroad was your idea to begin with, be sure not to push too hard. Every year, program directors hear complaints from students who didn't want to come in the first place—and those students experience more difficulty than others adjusting to the new environment. In fact, some never do.



A Curious Smile – by Jordan Machtelinckx taken in Lesotho on his study abroad program at University of Cape Town, South Africa

Stay in Touch, but maintain a level of distance

There is a close correlation between morale overseas and messages from home. Stay informed about current events in the country and region where the student is abroad. Many friends and family find reading about the overseas location to be both interesting and a good way to feel more in touch with the experiences of their student.

However, while you will be very eager to know everything about your student's novel experiences, it is usually not a good idea to encourage your student to call or email home constantly. It is by overcoming any difficulties that your student will quickly rise to a new level of independence. If the student is always on the phone or internet communicating with family and friends, the incentive to integrate with the community is much decreased. Instead of exploring the host country, learning the traditions and norms of the host culture and making friends with the locals, the student is spending precious time emailing or calling people back home.

You can support your student's efforts to become more immersed in the host culture by reassuring him or her that you do not

expect frequent long email messages, a daily phone call, or text messages several times a day. By doing this, you are giving your student permission to his or her wings and fly – and in all likelihood, they will!



St. James Park – by Bonnie Skolfield
taken in London, England on her study
abroad program in Italy

Visit Your Student, but minimize disruption

If you are planning to visit your student, try not to do so when the term is just getting started. At this early stage, the student is getting accustomed to the norms of the culture, to the academic system, to the city and how to get around. Instead, give him or her time to adjust to the new environment, acquire mastery of the local language, and

develop new expertise, skills and knowledge to show off when you do come. If you hold off your visit until the end of the program or during a program break where there are no classes, your student has already made the transition to life in his or her host city. Also, the student will enjoy showing you around and you get the benefit of having a knowledgeable guide to introduce you to the city and country.

If you do visit, try not to undermine the student's academic commitment by pulling them from class for vacation trips. Instead, get a copy of the student's semester schedule and schedule your trip during program vacations.



Silte People – taken by Stephanie McGregor in Ethiopia on her Beavers

Prepare for the Transformation

Your student will return home changed by the experience. This can take many forms, from new ways of dressing to cravings for different kinds of food to new political perspectives. This is not so unusual. Your daily routine probably changed very little during the time the student was abroad. On the other hand, your student's life was anything, but routine! He or she was exposed to a plethora of new ideas, practices, and philosophies. So do expect some changes and be patient. It will take time before your student sorts through his or her experiences to determine which traits and personal lessons learned abroad are worth keeping.

Be prepared for some reverse culture shock. After the excitement of being back and delighting friends and family with tales of their adventures, many students find themselves moping and feeling sad, because they miss their new friends, the novel experiences that happened almost daily, the exciting activities, or their favorite food. Your student might express boredom, assert that his or her life has become quite ordinary and suggest that he or she wants to spend time abroad again.

Once again, your support, interest, and understanding will help your student during his or her life-altering experience. Discussing these feelings and changes in your student's outlook is an excellent way of sharing his or her international experience. Encourage him or her to stay in touch with overseas friends, but to find local avenues in which the knowledge and skills gained from their time abroad could be useful. In time, your student will readjust to being back though most likely changed by his or her time overseas. Most education abroad participants report years later that the time they spent overseas was the best part of their college years – and it changed them for life.

This information is borrowed from "Parents: Pointers to Prepare for the Transformation" created by CIEE, a leading U.S. non-governmental international education organization.

