

How to Help: Advice from Students to Parents

"My dad has proven to be the best person to talk to since I've been back, in terms of someone to tell stories to. He asks great questions and really wants to learn about the culture and learn from what I learned there. Because both he and one of my best friends have taken a lot of interest, it has made it easier on me to not be concerned about those who don't care to hear too much." (Uganda Studies Program Student letter, Spring '04)

1. Understand that "reverse culture shock" is a real possibility and learn to recognize its symptoms so you can offer appropriate support to your student.
2. Realize that returning home is often not a predictable process and can be more stressful than your student or you could anticipate. Be prepared to offer support long-distance as your student anticipates coming home and adjusts to re-entry.
3. Understand that most students are, in some ways, different than they were before they left home. They may initially seem to be "strangers." It is hard to know what their experiences have meant to them and how they have changed. It may be necessary to "renegotiate" your relationship with your student, but your history together will provide a basis for this process.
4. Be aware of your own expectations on your student. You may wish that they would just "fit back in" but it is more helpful if you avoid forcing them into old roles and relationships. Allow them space and time to readjust and reconnect.
5. Be conscious of all the things that have changed at home. Help your student to understand what has taken place both in the society and among friends and family. Even if they have heard about events, the impact at home may not have been obvious. You have much to tell them, and they, you.
6. Avoid criticism, sarcasm, or mockery for seemingly odd patterns of behavior, speech, or new attitudes.
7. Create opportunities for your student to express their opinions, tell their stories, and show their pictures. Listen carefully and try to understand the significance of their overseas experiences. Seek to know what is important to them.
8. Acknowledge that all returned students experience some sense of loss. Strange as it may seem, students often grieve for what they have left behind. They may be missing friends, a stimulating environment, the feeling of being special, experiencing greater freedoms or responsibilities, or special privileges.
9. Offer to mark and celebrate the return of your student. Discuss his or her preference for how and when to do so. Be careful of "surprise" parties. Ask if he/she would like to host a family or friend photo night.
10. Expect some critical comparisons of culture and lifestyle. Keep your responses neutral. It can increase your chances to learn something important about your student's experience and how their worldview has changed. Don't take their comments personally.
11. Make contact with people who have successfully gone through the experience of returning home and refer your student to them—it may help both of you through a potentially difficult period of re-adaptation.
12. Remember: different people have different responses. Your student may wish to talk about their experience abroad frequently, or only just a little. Both responses can be natural. Give your student space for different reactions, depending on the situation and the other people involved.
13. Remember: as much as your student may be missing their study abroad, they missed home that much while away, too. Don't take it personally if they talk often about wanting to return. Try not to treat this as "just a phase"; instead, talk seriously about the desire to come back to the region.