

Returning Home: For Parents

1. Introduction

They're back! Your son or daughter has returned home and the year of exchange is over. But hold on – it's not quite that simple. That kid you sent off a year ago is now a very confident young adult who has changed more than you may realize. Your student's readjustment may present challenges for you and others, who may not understand why your rebound student is having problems.

Reverse Culture Shock is a period of disorientation, resulting from returning to one's native culture after an extended stay abroad. It is different for each student. It can last a few weeks or many months. The very thing that we all want for our outbound students – to have a positive, mind-broadening experience, all the while embracing another culture and language – will practically ensure that your son or daughter will experience Reverse Culture Shock upon return. The transition back to life in one's home country after living abroad can be even harder than the initial adjustment of going abroad in the first place.

2. What happens to students when they live abroad for a year?

The Rotary Youth Exchange Program provides a thorough orientation to both outbound student and their parent(s). Over the course of four months, students and parents become familiar with the Rotary Youth Exchange program, the 4 D's, host families, visa applications, finding the most appropriate gifts to bring to host families and friends, and how to get a head start on learning the language of the host country.

By the time your student is about to return home, you know your son or daughter has lived with host families, interacted extensively with the host culture, and learned new customs and a new language.

What you may not be aware of, however, is the emotional impact of living and studying abroad. Most students arrive in their host country and temporarily regress to a more dependent stage of life, finding themselves dependent on the graciousness of their hosts. Their language ability is limited, their environment is full of unknowns, they are fed new foods at family meals, and they no longer understand the nonverbal cues that are going on around them. This experience can be stimulating and exhilarating as well as disconcerting, exhausting, and occasionally even frightening.

3. How does the student react and adapt?

Shortly after arrival, the student begins a process that is essential to his or her psychological well-being, namely, he seeks to absorb and learn as much as possible about his new context and culture so he can adapt as quickly as possible. Since knowledge equals power in this situation, the student focuses on unraveling how the society is structured, understanding cultural priorities, and discovering what is considered appropriate behavior in any given situation. This experience continually requires students to grow. Their dramatic learning curve consists of daily emotional ups and downs. Their senses are heightened, and they discover that their life is suddenly full of new challenges and unexpected surprises. Their overall comprehension steadily increases. Eventually, if they are successful in their adaptation process, they feel the thrill of realizing they can function in their new environment and find a certain level of acceptance by the host community.

4. What are some of the differences my son/daughter will feel upon returning to the US?

World View

Most students will feel that their worldview has hugely expanded as a result of their year abroad. Your student may have a deeper and broader awareness of global issues. He may return newly inspired to become more involved in global issues and pursue development or social justice work.

With this heightened awareness, your student may also express frustration at what he sees to be a lack of awareness or superficial priorities expressed by his peers. The challenge for newly returned students is to not forget what they have learned during their time abroad, and at the same time, not allow their dismay or indignation of others' lack of interest to get in the way of productive dialogue and action.

Different Pace of Life

Although most of us know that many other cultures have a more flexible attitude toward time, it might come as a shock to realize how well your son or daughter has adapted to different schedules or perceptions of time. During exchange, students may encounter the perception that Americans allow their lives to be ruled by the clock. Upon their return home, some students express new points of view related to watching the clock and prioritizing people and situations over schedules and deadlines.

a. Cultural Differences

To genuinely feel a part of the new culture, students have to sincerely accept, believe, and participate in its practices and customs. What at first appeared unfamiliar – such as greeting perfect strangers with a kiss on the cheek – has become accepted everyday behavior. Interestingly enough, this process occurs regardless of the host country.

When your student ultimately boards the plane to return home, these learned responses to social situations and different ways of perceiving his environment come right along with him. Although these newly acquired customs, behaviors, or worldviews are not necessarily commonplace or relevant back home, it is virtually impossible for them to be dropped overnight. Many students do not WANT to forget or discard what they have acquired while living abroad. They do not want to return to being exactly who they were before they left. Many feel this would invalidate their experience as well as the love and care they received from the host families, friends and Rotarians who helped and supported them through their year.

b. Homesickness

Your son or daughter has likely formed close ties with friends and host families. Leaving a friend or family member behind is difficult, especially when your student is unsure if she will ever be able to see some of the friends she made from around the world again. Your son or daughter may be particularly distraught over leaving behind a host family, whose lives have been shared for many months.

c. Loss of Language

For exchange students, learning a language is often the major reason for going abroad in the first place. So mastering and speaking the language becomes a major focus and an important part of the rebound's new identity.

So it should be no surprise that returning home and the loss (or fear of losing) the language can be very upsetting. Your son or daughter may fight back, insisting on speaking Italian or Swedish or Portuguese to you and anyone else who will listen. With your student's identity already under attack, the loss of language is just one more sign of defeat.

d. End of an Adventure

The year abroad – a year of incredible personal growth and stimulation is over. For those who chose to live abroad to satisfy a sense of adventure, this is yet another disappointment in returning home.

e. Lack of Validation

Most returning students face the frustrating reality that their parents and peers will never fully understand and appreciate what the exchange experience was like and meant to the student. Although you as parents are likely more interested in your student's exchange experience than friends and siblings, there is still a limit to how much you can understand or appreciate.

Young people derive much of their self-respect and confidence from the approval and encouragement of others, particularly from you, the parent. To the extent that you cannot fully grasp what the exchange experience was like for your son or daughter, your student cannot receive validation of that experience from you. Although you may be enthusiastic and very proud of what your son or daughter has accomplished, your student – knowing that you don't REALLY understand what their exchange year was all about – doesn't derive much comfort from you, even though you are probably saying all the right things. Teenagers are still in the midst of creating their identities. And so to have their identities threatened at this vulnerable time can be very troubling.

f. Unflattering Comparisons

Your daughter is walking around the house, carrying on and on about how fascinating Rio was, how delicious her Brazilian host mother's cooking was, how fun and animated her host family was, and the athletic prowess of her Brazilian father on the tennis court. If you are getting tired of this, who can blame you?

You know that your daughter doesn't love her host family more than you, but some days you wonder. You may find yourself getting defensive about yourself, your family's home life and your life in the U.S.

g. Need to Once Again Shoulder the Load

In some cases, exchange students are treated more like guests than family members, and are not expected to participate in the running of the household as a family member would. For others, hired household help may mean that your son or daughter rarely has to lift a finger. When your student comes home, she will likely be expected to carry her own weight once again. This need to once again take up household and family responsibilities, which may restrict freedoms, may be a nasty surprise to your rebound.

h. Parents

Likely the greatest frustration for returning exchange students is the sudden reappearance of their parents in their lives. Not you as individuals, moms and dads, but rather your roles as father and mother. The issue here is that your child likely doesn't feel that she needs you as much as she did before she left. Compared to their peers who stay home, most exchange students mature at an accelerated pace during the course of their exchange year. Your son or daughter faced and overcame numerous challenges living thousands of miles away from home. She learned and functioned speaking a new language, and likely had a host father and mother who were not as involved as you are in all aspects of her life. She is most likely more self-assured and independent than others her age. But not knowing exactly how to treat your rebound student, you will likely treat her the same as you did before she left. You'll want to get involved in all aspects of her life, give advice, and know about all sorts of things that she hasn't share with an adult for quite some time. You may find yourself criticizing new behaviors she has taken on, and missing the old daughter you sent off a year ago. And that's where the problems begin.

Your child has had the growth experience of a lifetime. So treating her as if she had never left home is her worst nightmare. It's not only annoying and demeaning; it actually undermines the maturity and self-confidence that are the greatest and most important legacies of your child's exchange year. The desire for increased independence is the most common reason American students give for wanting to go abroad. And now, the whole rationale for the exchange year is threatened.

i. Personal Communication

How can one fully describe the learning experiences, growth, expansion, and realizations made during the months studying abroad? Is it even possible to share the importance of the relationships made, the poignancy of leaving, and the joys and sadness experienced throughout, made even more intense by the awareness that the time abroad was temporary? Most returning students are bursting with stories to share, yet also feel apprehensive that they will not be able to adequately communicate their feelings. They must also realize—though it may come as a shock—that life has gone on for everyone at home as well and that their friends also have had new experiences during the time they were abroad.

The frustration in communicating their experience, even with the use of email and cell phones, frequently leaves students with a sense of alienation both within their own family and among their broader group of friends. This, in turn, can lead to withdrawal and depression. Often it is easier for returning students to relate to new friends who are also returning home from study abroad programs and may be experiencing the same difficulties readjusting.

j. Peers and School

For some students, their decision to spend a year as an exchange student is not well received or understood by their peers. And so when your student returns home, she may be especially eager to demonstrate to everyone the wisdom of her going abroad. But her peers may not be especially interested in her exchange experience

and so the student may never get the chance to justify that original decision that others did not understand. Rebounds often have more difficulty relating to their peers and friends than to parents and siblings.

k. No Longer a Celebrity

High school exchange students tend to stand out in their school and communities. Often, they are the only American for miles around and that can make a student feel pretty special. They are often the center of attention and objects of great interest. They might be sought after for interviews, to give talks or presentations, to simply be friends. For some students, it is a powerful experience to be considered special simply because they are from somewhere else. The constant fishbowl effect is flattering, albeit also exhausting.

Coming home can be quite a letdown. Although there may be excitement and interest in the beginning, a rebound student will be absorbed back into the fabric of home life with amazing – and disappointing – speed. Your son or daughter no longer stands out as they did while abroad.

l. Siblings

If there are siblings in the household, they like you will be happy to see their rebound sibling again. But there is no denying that incorporating another person into the household can be disruptive. On a practical level, siblings may have to move rooms or once again share a bathroom. Not to mention the multitude of other things that now have to be shared – the car, the closet, and all sorts of personal possessions.

Siblings may resent having to share attention with the rebounder, when they've had your attention to themselves for the past year. Moreover, they may feel threatened by the rebound sibling, who has been to places and done things that they can never imagine. Young siblings may act out, while older siblings may try to trivialize or make fun of your rebound's experience.

5. What can we as parents do?

You and your rebound student should make every effort to be as patient with each other as possible. You haven't lived together for a year and it will take some time to be comfortable with one another. Be patient with yourself, and resist thinking that there is something wrong with you – or your son or daughter – if the reunion is not going as smoothly as you anticipated.

Take the time to talk with your rebound about the adjustments you are both going through and the problems you both are experiencing. While talking through issues doesn't always make the problems go away, it can help to diffuse the tension.

If possible, talk with the parents of other rebounds. Together you may find solace, even solutions, to the problems of dealing with your newly returned son or daughter.

Readjustment is a very individual process, and no one pattern holds true for everyone. Your student might not immediately feel ready to become immersed in large gatherings of family members or friends; in fact, even a visit to the supermarket can seem overwhelming for some returning students.

During the first few days home, a light schedule may be preferable to one that is too hectic. Although your student is once again physically present, emotionally and psychologically they may not have arrived completely home. They may need time to reacquaint themselves with their home environment as they readjust. It is not uncommon for students returning from abroad to go through a stage in which they criticize much of what is around them, including what they see at home. Complaints can range from wasting food, producing too much garbage, driving instead of walking or taking the bus, over-spending, unawareness of what is going on overseas, and so on.

With your support and patience, your rebound's indignation will diminish and in many cases will transform itself into a determination to work toward new objectives. Some students may feel the need to make specific - occasionally radical -- changes in their lives or identify new goals. These can include looking for opportunities

to go back overseas, switching majors, expressing interest in a new career, changing schools, or even relinquishing personal possessions.

Although this can be disconcerting for parents, patience and talking can go a long way in allowing a deeper understanding of just what changes your student has experienced. Students sincerely appreciate the effort parents make in trying to comprehend how their worldview may have changed and broadened. This attention allows them to feel that the results of their study abroad experience are both valued and respected.

The other request most often heard from students going through the readjustment process is for parents to be open and willing to listen. Since most parents are already curious and eager to hear about their student's experience abroad, why can this become an issue?

One of the challenges is that students process their experience in different ways. Some returning students want to talk continuously from the moment they arrive home, while others need time before they can share their stories. Some find it difficult to put their experience into words. They need to process within themselves before they can talk to others.

Occasionally, students find it easier to talk about their activities or experiences abroad weeks or even months following their return as events can trigger specific memories over time. For some students, this can be an easier way for them to open up about their exchange experience rather than immediately sitting down and answering questions from curious family members.

Many rebounds recognize they are going through a difficult time. They need to hear about what has been happening in the lives of those at home to help them relate to the fact that life has not stood still while they were gone. If you have had occasion to travel and have yourself experienced return culture shock after living or working overseas, share your own stories with your student. Not only will this help create a mutual bond of experience, it will also serve to reassure your disoriented son or daughter that this condition is temporary and will indeed pass.

Help your student in finding ways to keep her experience real and vital in her life. Although many students express concerns about their ability to adequately communicate the impact their year abroad has had on their lives, they are even more apprehensive that they will forget what they have learned or that their heightened awareness of and interest in another culture and global issues will diminish. Students may express concern about losing the knowledge and competencies acquired abroad, including new language skills, increased cultural awareness, and broadened global understanding.

Be patient and open. It will take time to readjust to each other. When your daughter is having a hard time, this is the moment to talk.

- **Time management**

Respect the decisions that your son or daughter is making about managing time. Discuss your role as parent and which decisions, if any, you should control, with respect to rides, friends, curfews, money, etc.

- **Alcohol and Cigarettes**

Your daughter or son was exposed to the experience of drinking, which in many cultures and countries is accepted and even encouraged. Discuss your views on allowing your son or daughter a glass of beer or wine during dinner. Have a conversation about smoking, if that pertains to your student.

- **Money**

Spending habits may need to change, now that your student is back in your household. Discuss finances.

- **Chores**

What chores do you expect your son / daughter to do around the house? Responsibilities were likely different when your student was on exchange.

- **Siblings**

Discuss your student's role vis a vis siblings in the household.

- **School**

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Rebound students will often want to do a semester or year of PSEO, especially if they are having a hard time readjusting to high school.

6. Specific Suggestions

Identify neighborhoods where your student can become involved working with immigrants and their families.

Arrange for your student to give talks and presentations to local schools or groups of interested individuals.

Provide your student with information on local radio and TV stations that are related to the language and/or culture of your student's host country.

7. How long will the process of re-adapting take?

Students often go through different cycles when readjusting. The first few days of being home can be euphoric. During subsequent weeks, when the shock of rebound hits, your son/daughter might feel depressed or unsure of him/herself and uncertain about previously made plans. Mood swings are frequent, as are long conversations about goals and priorities. The problem is compounded by the feeling that no one around them can relate to what is happening to them, except perhaps other newly returned exchange students.

There are students who feel out of place from the moment they step off the plane. For them, readjusting to home actually feels harder than the original culture shock they felt when they left to go abroad. It may take weeks to integrate the new person they have become into the reality they left behind. While they are struggling with this process, it is not uncommon for some students to try desperately to find a way to go back overseas.

Students who have traveled extensively or have lived abroad before going abroad through the Rotary Youth Exchange Program often struggle in the same way as students who had never previously left their home country. Frequently, the only difference is that these students remember having gone through the readjustment experience previously and realize that it will eventually pass.

8. Conclusion

Encourage your student to take classes relevant to her overseas experience and to get involved in campus activities that are important to her, such as tutoring foreign students, living in an international house, volunteering on ecological projects, presenting a radio program with host country music, increasing political awareness, and organizing fund raisers.

Encourage your student to cook a meal for your family using ingredients from the host country, with traditional music playing in the background. This experience can provide an enjoyable and positive experience for the entire family.

With patience, perseverance, and a sincere willingness to listen, students and families going through the readjustment process will survive!

Excerpts from:

Discussion Topics for Rebound Students and Their Parents, Rotary District 5010 Youth Exchange Program
A Readjustment Manual for Parents: A Handbook for Parents of Students Returning Home from Studying Abroad, SIT Study Abroad, a program of World Learning, by Leonore Cavallero

Rotary District 5010 YEP Discussion Topics for Rebound Students and Their Parents, February 2007

The Art of Coming Home by Craig Storti

Going Home, by Dennis White

Rebound Training: An Outline of Key Points in Training Rebound Students, by Dennis White

So You Think They're Home Now, by Dennis White

Compiled by North Star Youth Exchange Rotary Districts 5950 and 5960

So You Think They're Home Now

Some Thoughts for Parents of Returning Exchange Students

By Dennis White, Ph.D.

Reverse Culture Shock

They're back! Your "kids" have come home, and the exchange program is over - or so you think! But it's probably not so simple as that. First, the "kid" you sent off a year ago is, for the most part, a young adult and certainly changed in many ways. Second, they may be experiencing some confusion as to where "home" is. And third, while the year abroad has ended, the exchange program and many of its effects on them and you has just begun. You and your son or daughter may have already begun to experience a phenomenon known as "Reverse Culture Shock" or "Re-Entry Shock." (This is explained in more detail in a companion article for returning exchange students entitled "So You Think You're Home Again: Some Thoughts on Returning "Home").

Re-entry shock is essentially the period of disorientation that comes from returning to one's native culture after an extended stay abroad. It may follow a predictable course or be entirely unique. It may last a few weeks or many months. It may be recognizable, or so subtle as to be almost missed. It may be more or less difficult to deal with. But one thing is almost certain -if your son or daughter had the positive, mind-broadening type of experience you wanted them to have this past year, they will experience re-entry shock. If you can anticipate and accept this phenomenon, then it will be easier to deal with, and you will be able to see it as a positive, if sometimes difficult, extension of the exchange program.

Stages

Returning exchange students (as well as Peace Corps volunteers, missionaries, diplomats, etc.) generally go through recognizable stages in their readjustment to "home". These include:

1. Euphoria - Almost non-stop enthusiasm (and talking) about their experiences and an awareness that they have become "citizens of the world."
2. Hostility and Rejection - Dissatisfaction with anything and everything back home. They may arrive in this stage, without ever experiencing the euphoria stage, for several reasons:
 - a. They probably weren't ready to come home. They wanted the exchange to last longer.
 - b. They may expect things to be just the same as they were when they left. Or just the opposite, they expect everyone to have changed as much as they have.
 - c. They came "home" sad because they have left new "family" and friends that they may never see again.
 - d. They were not prepared to experience reverse culture shock, or didn't think it would happen to them.
3. Denial and Reversion - Instead of No. 2, they may act as if nothing has changed (including themselves) and profess how great it is to be back and to fit in so well.
4. Eventual Adaptation - An ability to integrate what they now know about the world and themselves into a new acceptance of their own culture and their place in it. This is what is known as true biculturalism: the ability to move from one cultural orientation to another as the situation calls for it.

How They Describe It

Many of us wish we could just jump to Stage 4 or mistakenly think we are already there when we step off the plane. But it's not that simple - and - it's a process, just like getting used to the host country, in the first place. Here are some of the common concerns your son or daughter may experience during the re-entry period. They may be reluctant to express some of them, but none are unusual or harmful:

1. My parents don't understand me. They expect me to be the same little kid I was when I left.
2. I feel closer to my host family than I do to my own parents. I'm afraid my parents will be hurt if they find out.
3. It's difficult for me to readjust to my old lifestyle. Everything here is so rushed, so materialistic, so
4. I made so many friends and now I'll never see them again.
5. I don't like it here. I want to go back
6. I didn't have an easy time in my host country. Now everyone is discussing what a wonderful experience I had. They don't know what it was really like.
7. I don't find my old friends very interesting anymore. We don't have much in common.

What You Can Do

Here are some suggestions to help you, and them, go through this process. Most are just that, suggestions, and you may find your own instincts are still your best guide.

1. Remember - they have changed. And they would have changed some even if they hadn't gone abroad. But you would have adjusted to that change gradually because you would have been living with it every day. Some of the "shock" to you comes from seeing it all at once.
2. Remember - you, other family members and friends have probably changed too. They may tell you about that. But life hasn't just been sitting around like a videotape on pause waiting for them to come back. Part of their adjustment problem may be that they expect everything to be as it was, and they will be "thrown off course" when it isn't.
3. They have become more self-confident, self-reliant and independent, which sounds a lot like what we call adulthood. Therefore, there will be inevitable conflict as you and they decide how to handle this. While there is no "right" solution, expect that you will end up giving them more freedom than you did in the past. They, in turn, will have to accept more controls than they think they need.
4. If it's not too late already, try to resist the urge to throw gala welcome home parties right away. For many reasons, these can be overwhelming, even though everyone's intentions are good. Jet lag, changes in diet, climate, clothing, extended travel, separation from close friends (in the host country), and other things are very disorienting. Smaller gatherings, when requested by your student when they feel up to it, can be much more satisfying.
5. In general, as an extension of No. 4, try to help them take everything as "slow and easy" as possible. For the student who has to work or is straight off to college, it may just be a little harder. But most people think, feel and act better when they are rested and get a chance to "re-enter" at a more reasonable pace.
6. Be tolerant of some of their unusual behavior, such as: talking all the time, never talking, being critical of you, your home, their native country, being frustrated that more people don't seem interested in what they did, etc.
7. Along with No. 6, whenever possible, try to validate their experience, even if you can't understand it. Let them know whatever they are feeling, it is okay, and that lots of different feelings are normal.
8. Keep in touch with other returned exchange students, their families, and students who have been back for several years. They can help your student and you through some of the difficult times. They can tell you that it usually does work out in the end, including the fact that most returned exchange students become closer to their families than ever before, while sometimes more distant from friends.
9. Finally and most importantly - listen. Most of them feel a great need to talk, often in what sounds like repetitious patterns. You may soon become the only people who will have the patience to keep listening. While they need to talk, some may do just the opposite and withdraw; this is unusual either. They will talk in time. (One student reported it was a full year before he really shared his experiences with his family. However, he also reported that he felt closer to them almost immediately.)

Remember, re-entry shock is to be expected and is a part of the experience. You have been in on this exchange from the start - sharing many of the ups and downs. Remember about two years ago when they were selected? Remember the whole year it took you to adjust? Remember all the letters and phone calls, the peaks and valleys? Well, you are a part of the re-entry, too. You will be a part of the ongoing adjustment of your son or daughter, so anticipate it, accept it and, in turn, make it a positive experience for all of you.

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