

## INTRODUCTION

Helping Your Son or Daughter Make the Most of a Wonderful Opportunity...



**CONGRATULATIONS!** In making the decision to explore studying abroad, your child has chosen to consider participating in one of the most valuable experiences a college education can offer.

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**S**tudy abroad is one of the best ways students can develop: greater independence, maturity, and self-confidence; the flexibility to adapt quickly and creatively to unexpected developments and changing circumstances; and the ability to interact effectively with people from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds. They can also gain many other skills and experiences that will become invaluable to them throughout their lives, as well as to their employers as they enter the workforce. More and more, in our increasingly global economy, leaders in business, government, and academia are recognizing the importance of U.S. students gaining international experience, and becoming globally competent citizens and employees. So study abroad is not only fun and exciting—it is an excellent investment, both short-term and long-term, in your child's future.

**DURING**

Being There for Your Child—But Not Too Much!



**STEP 3:**

## HELPING YOUR CHILD MAKE THE MOST OF THE INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

### Staying in Touch: Creating Your Family's Communications Plan

Many of today's students (and parents) are used to the wonderful convenience of 24/7, instant communications available through cell phones, e-mail, instant messaging, etc. (And now there is VoIP that lets you make calls through your computer, sometimes for free.) While these forms of instant communication are invaluable, especially in emergency situations, allowing us to stay in touch with our children, they can have an unfortunate effect on students' ability to become fully immersed in a foreign culture.

It's important to talk with your child about how, and how often, you will communicate with each other while he is abroad so that you will not worry, and he will not be overly focused on matters at home. Most study abroad advisers encourage students to touch base with their parents as soon as possible after they have arrived in their new location, to assure them that they have safely arrived and are settled in. After that it's best to maintain regular but not overly frequent communication with them, and to find ways to use your communications to support and encourage their immersion into the culture rather than distracting them from it. It's not a bad idea to have a prearranged system for getting in touch with each other in the case of a national or international emergency or

communications breakdown: for example, designated relatives or close family friends to call in the U.S. and if possible, in the part of the world where she is staying in the event you have trouble contacting each other.

The cost of telephone communications is usually less expensive when calling from the U.S. than from abroad. Check with your long-distance telephone provider to see if they have an international plan: you may want to have it activated during the period your child is abroad. (Ask if there are higher rates for making calls to a cell phone.) In most places, international calling cards purchased abroad offer the best value and greatest convenience for students calling home. Cell phones are a mixed blessing: some programs

offer them to all student participants. In other programs, they are strongly discouraged and/or may be prohibitively expensive to use. In any case, *overuse of cell phone communication with family and friends at home is one major way of undermining the intercultural experience your child is seeking to gain in studying abroad.*

If your child is busy and fully engaged in the study abroad experience, he will have less time to spend e-mailing or calling you and his friends back home. (It may also be a fairly costly expense to be online while abroad, or the Internet may not be easily accessible.) This is a positive thing, and should be viewed as such by you. Encourage your child to communicate with you when she can, and to tell you about all the new sights she is seeing and things she is learning. This will help her make the most of her experience abroad.

**Supporting Your Child Through Culture Shock and/or Homesickness**

Almost everyone who participates in a study abroad program (or who travels abroad in any other context for that matter) is almost certain, to a greater or lesser degree, to experience culture shock at certain moments in the process.

*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Eleventh Edition*, defines culture shock as “a sense of confusion and uncertainty sometimes with feelings of anxiety that may affect people exposed to an alien culture or environment without adequate preparation.” Most study abroad professionals would hasten to add that even *with* adequate preparation, experiencing culture shock intermittently throughout the period of study abroad (especially in the beginning) is a normal part of the experience. In fact, unpleasant and disorienting though the experience may be at times, culture shock actually presents students with some of the best opportunities they will have for exactly the kind of intercultural learning and personal growth that is one of the best, and most lasting, benefits of study abroad.

**How can parents recognize, and best help their children deal with, the symptoms of culture shock?**

Culture shock is rarely identified as such by a student who is experiencing it: he is much more likely to *perceive* the problem as something wrong with the country he is in, the program he is participating in, the teachers at his host institution, his program advisers, his roommates, the food, the “peculiar/disgusting/annoying” habits and ways of the local population, and so on.

**MANAGING EXPECTATIONS: DURING**

**What are some reasonable expectations for a study abroad experience?**

- ▶ Experienced, responsible *on-site staff* who are available to students on a 24/7 basis.
- ▶ Safe and (relatively) clean accommodations.
- ▶ Support, assistance, and advice from on-site staff in resolving problems. (Note: This does not mean solving problems for him.)
- ▶ An academically sound program.
- ▶ That the student abroad will have “I hate Country X days,” as well as “I love Country X days.” This is a normal and natural part of the up-and-down cycle of adjustment to another culture.

**What are some “unreasonable” expectations?**

- ▶ That accommodations, food, academic expectations, etc. will be similar to, or “as good as,” those found on the home campus. Remember, the idea is to experience a foreign culture: frequently that means things will NOT be the same!
- ▶ The maintenance of 24/7 communication between students abroad, and parents and friends back home. (This is not so much an unreasonable expectation as a bad idea.) It's important for parents and friends of students abroad to realize that maintaining their customary patterns of communication may rob students of their chance to have the full cross-cultural experience they traveled so far to get.
- ▶ That every day will be a good day. Why would this be any truer while students are abroad than it is when they are at home?