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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