



Twelve Tips for Welcoming Your Child Home With Advice from AFS Returnees

1. Understand that “reverse” or re-entry culture shock is a real possibility and learn to recognize its symptoms so that you can offer appropriate support to your child.
2. Realize that returning home is often not a predictable process and can be more stressful than you or your child anticipate.
3. Understand that most AFSers 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 son or daughter but your history together will provide a basis for this process.
4. Be aware of your own expectations of your child. You may wish that he or she would just 'fit back in' but it is more helpful if you avoid forcing the returnee into old roles and relationships. It allows them space and time to readjust and connect.
5. Be conscious of all those things that have changed at home. Help returnees to understand what has taken place both in the society and among friends and family. Even if they have heard about these events, the impact at home may not have been obvious. You have much to tell them and they can tell you how events at home looked from abroad.
6. Avoid criticism, sarcasm, or mockery for seemingly odd patterns of behavior, speech or new attitudes.
7. Create opportunities for returnees 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 AFSers experience some sense of loss. Strange as it may seem to others, returnees often grieve for what they have left behind. They may be missing overseas friends, host family members, a stimulating environment, the feeling of being special, experiencing greater freedom or responsibilities, or special privileges.
9. Encourage your child to maintain personal contacts with friends, host family members and institutions in the former host country. She or he will regret it if s/he does not.
10. Offer to mark and celebrate the reentry for the returnees and those who stayed at home. Discuss their preferences for how and when to do so.
11. Expect some critical comparisons of culture and lifestyle. Keep your responses neutral. It can increase your chances to learn something important about the returnee and how their world view has changed. Don't take their comments personally.
12. Make contact with people who have successfully gone through the experience of returning home and refer your child to them - it may help both of you through a difficult period of readaptation.

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For an explanation of the stage of the re-entry process, please review the section in the *AFS Guide for Families of AFS Participants* entitled “More on Coming Home – Your Child’s Re-entry to the U.S.” Please also encourage your child to log on to Culture Trek, at www.afsculturetrek.org and revisit Path Seven, Now in Reverse: Re-entry! Here he or she can read the thoughts and feelings of AFS returnees who have already undergone re-entry, learn strategies for coping with re-entry and be connected to resources and people who can help keep them connected to AFS.

Advice for Parents from AFS Returnees

Parents should read everything AFS sends...parents might like getting together with other AFS parents to discuss a lot of this stuff. They need to understand that their child has had a major life experience and matured beyond a normal year's growth. Eben, Year Netherlands 00-01

Be excited about seeing pictures, ask lots of questions, be excited to learn new things, understand how important the experience is to your son/daughter, and encourage more involvement in opportunities abroad or finding other returnees. Poppy, Summer Ecuador 99

Find out what was a common, or even special meal in their host country. If you have it every once in a while when he or she comes home that would be awesome. The whole family could be involved, and appreciate some of the things their student experienced while away Lauren, Semester Switzerland 01-02

Stay open to hearing about the returnee's experiences, but don't overwhelm them with questions...make sure to give other siblings attention, or they may get upset about the AFSe's return. Lydia, Year Germany 01 02

Accept the AFSe as a changed person and be willing to listen to the stories and try out new things s/he has learned... And be proud, s/he has possibly experienced something that's not possible to experience at all in the U.S. Sean, Summer Japan 02

Talk to the AFSe a lot about his/her family and friends, what life was like there, what they did to spend the time, etc. Give them some space and some time to get organized...Let your child go out and catch up with friends also. And allow for plenty of sleep! Lauren, Summer Chile 02

Don't bombard them right away with all the things they have to do upon arrival (school and SAT prep etc...), give them some time to take it all in and if they want to spend some time alone, don't take it personally, they are probably just reflecting. Yasmine, Semester Costa Rica 01-02

Remember that your son/daughter has had a life-changing experience that aided with development and maturity; they will probably be ready for a little more freedom, but maybe not as much as they had in their host country. Jill, Argentina Summer 02

Talk to your child about the experience...and how they feel that have changed. My parents asked me about my exchange and had me tell my stories, and this really helped them to come to know me again. Heather, Summer France 02

I would sit down with your child and, having taken into consideration the very different way of life that they have been living, come to some common grounds on new rules for them. Catherine, Year New Zealand 01-02

Try to learn about the food, language, culture etc. before the student comes home. Surprise them by attempting an ethnic meal. Don't force them to be with you all the time. Let them have their space; don't feel bad when they miss their host parents, Try to understand how hard it is to have two separate worlds (host and natural). Gennifer, Semester Chile 01-02

Be open-minded. Don't expect your child will go abroad and return the exact same. Your child changes, but they are still yours and love you as much as before they left, if not more...Oh, and never be jealous of "the host family," you have not been replaced. Your child loves both his/her families in different ways. Mirla, Summer New Zealand 02

Be the shoulder to cry on and understand that what we feel as returning from our new homes we can't even describe because most likely we don't know or understand it ourselves. Lauren, Year New Zealand 01-02

Ask lots of questions about the returnee's experience but also be sure to fill them in on everything that's gone on in their absence. Andy, Semester France 01-02

Be positive with the kids, and understand that they may have formed a bond with the host family, and if so they will be missing them a lot. Make sure you let them know that they are loved and needed here and encourage them to keep in contact with their host families if it is possible. Michelle, Summer Italy 02