

PREPARING FOR THE RETURN

1. Recognize the Feelings

As the end of the year approaches, you need more than ever to examine your thoughts and reactions and understand your feelings. Most students will probably have a number of different and maybe conflicting emotions as they prepare to leave. You may be nervous, relieved, sad, angry, confused, and even other. All of these feelings will affect your behavior to some degree. By recognizing them and how they affect you, you can begin to soften that impact.

2. Accept Feelings of Loss

It hurts to leave family and friends and to know that the good time together will soon come to an end. In returning home, you are completing an important stage of your life. While you may have developed close relationships with your host family and others that will continue to be important to you for years to come, you will never share your life with these people in quite the same way again. Some exchange students are afraid to face the sadness of leaving and try to push away their thoughts about missing their new families and friends. **This does not work well!** The loss is real, and the hurt does not go away by ignoring your feelings about it. Accepting and understanding your feeling of loss will allow you to overcome some of your fears about returning. Also remember that your host family and friends are going to miss you when you leave. Sharing the feeling of loss may make it easier for all of you. A group discussion with all family members present is the best way to preserve what has been created within the home setting – even if YOU have to make the first step to plan it. Similar conversations with friends are also a great idea!

3. Prepare for the Separation

Some students find it difficult to separate from their host families because they are afraid of hurting their host family's feelings by appearing too eager to return home.

It is important that you and your host family prepare for your departure long before the last day. One way to do that is to share with your family some of your hopes and plans after your return. Tell them what you will be doing with your family and friends when you get back. You should also tell them what you will miss from your life with them. **Show them too!** EXAMPLES: Ask them for the recipes for some of the foods you have liked, collect addresses and phone numbers for extended family and friends that they have introduced you to, arrange for copies of pictures of special moments so that you and both have them. You might also select unique trinkets or gifts to leave behind which relate to special times that you have had with your host family.

4. Review the Experience

It will be only a matter of hours from the time you step on the plane until you are back home. When you return home, you should be ready to focus your attention on your life there and re-adjusting to your home culture. It helps if you have taken the time before your return to review your year as an exchange student, because this allows you to complete the year and leave it behind; go forward. *Like other major events in your life, the end of your year as an exchange student should be commemorated in a meaningful way.* Spend some time with your host family and friends talking about your first days here and the various experiences you have had together. Talk about the way you felt when you first arrived. Remind them of the funny things you may have done when you didn't fully understand the culture. Think of some of the highlights of your

PREPARING FOR THE RETURN

year and some of the more difficult times as well. Discuss how much you have changed since then and how much you have learned.

**** There is no dress rehearsal; you only get the chance to do this once! So, reviewing your entire experience will leave you less likely to become obsessed with regrets after your return. ****

5. Prepare for Reverse Culture Shock

When you arrived in the United States you knew some things would be different and that you would have to adjust. Now that you are going home, you may not think that culture shock will be a problem for you. **Well...You're in for a surprise!!!** For many exchange students, returning home is even more difficult than going for exchange. Part of the reason for this is that no one expects to have problems going home to a familiar place, so students return to their native surroundings unprepared to cope with adjustments. The fact is, it will take anywhere from six months to several years to adjust to your surroundings. Some of the things you've learned you may not realize for quite a long time!

Some suggestions on how to prepare for and deal with Reverse Culture Shock:

- a. Remind yourself that during this year, changes have occurred both in you and at home. You cannot return to the exact same place you left – time elapsed, and life went on there too. Be prepared for your parents to tell you news that they may have felt important to save until your return.
- b. Discuss your feelings with your host family.
- c. Examine the skills you have gained during your exchange and look at ways you can use them to help you adjust after your return home.
- d. Join a club for exchange student alumni – there might be one through the organization's office in your home country. Make friends with others like yourself.
- e. Get involved in community service projects or start a group that endorses the idea of volunteerism and helping others that you might have experienced while in the USA.
- f. Understand that your friends may not have changed in the same ways you have – you might not have as much in common.

6. Plan Your Farewell

Saying goodbye is not easy, but important! It would be a shame to leave at the end of the year without marking the occasion in some special way. **DO NOT WAIT UNTIL THE LAST DAY TO THINK ABOUT HOW YOU WANT TO SAY GOODBYE!** Many students do something special for their host family and friends to make an event of their departure. You might consider:

- a. Writing special letters or poems.
- b. Making a CD, Video, or Audio Tape.
- c. Creating a web page or small scrapbook.
- d. Giving symbolic gifts which will remind your hosts of special times with you.
- e. Purchasing and plant a tree in the yard.
- f. Cooking a special dinner with recipes you made during the year that they liked.

Remember, even though you must say farewell, this is not meant to be the end, but an evolution to the way you relate and continue to build the bridge between your cultures.