

Connecting During the Family Stay

For Parents and Travelers

Thanks to smartphones and widespread WiFi, your teen can virtually take all their friends and family along on their immersion program! There's only one problem: sharing constant selfies and recounting every detail via social media or messaging can actually inhibit the opportunities for true immersion and growth. There is no doubt that cell phones can be a useful tool while traveling, and many parents like the sense of security and the reassurance of connection that they offer, but when do you encourage your student to disconnect?

As teachers prepare their students for their upcoming trip abroad, many of them will be talking about guidelines regarding cell phones. Mauri Deer, a French teacher from Minnesota, has traveled with students for more than ten years. She prepares students for the challenge of disconnecting simply by reminding them that this trip is an investment: "You could look at France through your cell phone, or you could put a down payment on a car and look at our trip photos on the internet." Or, she argues, they can disconnect. Disconnecting and truly being present for the experience will allow them to notice more about their surroundings and be more intentional in their observations.

Perhaps the hardest obstacle in disconnecting comes during the family stay, when students are feeling a higher intensity of culture shock and homesickness. Homesick travelers are often tempted to stay plugged in to the world they know at home rather than embracing the experiences during their family stay abroad, but this can sabotage a student's opportunity to meet new friends or connect with host family members. Homesickness can be overwhelming, and it's all too easy to pick up that phone and message home to vent or despair. As a parent, it's impossible to disregard your child's declarations, but how can you tell the difference between discomfort and a serious problem? Mauri Deer asserts that the best way to prevent this dilemma is to establish a level of trust between the student and the group leaders before the trip so that the trip participants feel empowered to call their teacher if there is a true problem. Before departure, she meets with students to prepare them for discomfort, but also to help them recognize what is discomfort versus what should elicit a call, for example:

If you are frightened because you've seen a large spider in the bathroom... DON'T CALL

If you hate tomatoes and your family serves them at every meal... DON'T CALL.

If you are left home alone all day...CALL!

If you are bored...DON'T CALL.

(taken from Xperitas' [Call vs. Don't Call activity](#))

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She also empowers students to figure out how to be proactive in a challenging situation:

Is this something I can handle by expressing my concern with my family without my teacher's help? Can I tell them that I don't like avocado, or that I would love to watch soccer, or that I'm really interested in going for a walk in the town center?

If you're wondering how you as a parent can help with this process, consider these guidelines:

- Talk to your son or daughter's world language teachers and ask what their standards are for cell phone and social media use and how they are helping prepare students for this challenge.
- Have a conversation with your son or daughter about the [Call/Don't Call activity](#) and see how they feel as they anticipate the family stay.
- Empower your son or daughter to disconnect, but reassure them that their teachers are the most capable people to help during their trip.
- Encourage them to complain to their journal when they are frustrated; their feelings are real and they can learn from them and grow.
- If you do plan to talk to your child while he or she is on the program, limit communication to only a few minutes and don't expect a daily check in. Don't pressure students to contact you at certain intervals or times, but rather allow them to determine if and when they want to reach out.
- Students should only use the host family's technology if they have permission.
- It is normal to feel homesick. Being with new people in a new home can be uncomfortable, and reaching out to talk with host family members is the best way to work through nervousness and misunderstandings. Encourage your student to give communication in the family stay a try. Don't let them give up and miss out on an opportunity to grow, learn and make lasting relationships!

The family stay is the best opportunity for students on brief travel abroad programs to have authentic experiences that help to develop both language and cross-cultural communication skills. Courage, open-mindedness and a sense of adventure will open doors to new lifelong relationships. You and your child will have stories to share and probably some new friends abroad if the relationship is nurtured during the family stay. And remember, the real learning won't happen until they are ready to step outside their comfort zone!