

“They’re back early. What went wrong?”

How to Handle Early Returns

In this breakout session we have to talk about one of the few unpleasant themes in our program, but it is needed to talk about.

But first, please let me introduce myself:

My name is Ursula Gervasi from Switzerland. I am married with Orlando, we have 3 children: Marianne, 30; Franco, 28 and Ivo 25 years old. Ivo was on exchange in Central Oregon – Sisters in 2002/2003. Until today, we hosted 4 students.

I am engaged in this program since about 7 years. I am responsible for almost everything ☺

- Administration – Paperwork
- Placements abroad and in Switzerland
- Coordination of Meetings, Trainings, Trouble Shootings, etc.

Rotary Youth Exchange Switzerland / Liechtenstein is a Multidistrict including District 1980, 1990 and 2000. Each district has a Youth Exchange Committee who is supporting the Multidistrict Youth Exchange Committee.

Please put your questions or give your inputs immediately; don’t wait until the end of my presentation. I try to keep short my presentation, so that we will have enough time for discussion.

Folie KEY SENTENCES

Folie TOPICS

Before we can talk about what went wrong and how to handle early returns we should know what the reasons are for early returns.

Then I would like to give you some ideas how we can avoid early returns. Maybe you can give inputs as well.

Folie WHAT ARE THE REASONS FOR AN EARLY RETURN

HOMESICKNESS and NON-INTEGRATION / ADAPTATION

This occurs very often within the first 3 – 8 weeks.

Homesickness and non-integration are closely related very often. We learned that mostly too close contact to the family and friends at home is the reason. We train our host families to reduce the use of internet (facebook, skype, msn, etc.) and to keep the students busy. At the same time, our Inbound Coordinator asks the sending district to take influence to the student's parents reducing the contact from their end. This works mostly very well.

Another reason for homesickness/non-integration can be wrong expectations or illusions like travelling through the whole country, continue to live to same life like at home, etc.

ILLNESS

More and more we are confronted with students who are suffering under depression, anorexia/bulimia or other diseases. They arrive with medication against depression in their luggage but nothing was mentioned in the application. This situation is very difficult to handle by host families and clubs and demands great additional efforts by all involved people.

In Switzerland, it is very uncommon that Youths take medication against depression or other psychological diseases and they get it just in relation with a psychological treatment.

On our first orientation meeting, I always say to our candidates and their parents that an exchange year never can be a running from school, family, drug or other problems. Our exchange program is not a treatment program.

In the past, it happened that outbounds from Switzerland had to be sent home because of such problems and there was nothing mentioned in their applications. Therefore, we include a clause in our agreement with the parents that the parents have to inform us if data in the application should change until departure and that they are aware if they do not so the student can be sent home immediately.

BREAKING RULES

I think this is more or less clear. All of you know the 4 D's: especially consuming drugs and alcohol are followed by an immediate early return.

BAD BEHAVIOUR

Missing school and/or travelling without permission get together with lying very often. A serious talk and the yellow card put the things right mostly. If not, an early return can be the consequence as well.

Folie HOW CAN WE AVOID AN EARLY RETURN?

What preventive measures the sponsoring district can take?

Careful selection:

The student should be a physical and mental strong person.

The student should have the right attitudes like open-minded, the will to cut the relation to his/her family and friends at home and the will to keep the rules.

A good briefing and training about the rules and expectations

Good language knowledge and profound information about the host country can be helpful for a fast integration and adaptation.

Folie HOW CAN WE AVOID AN EARLY RETURN? BY HOST DISTRICT

What preventive measures the host district can take to be well prepared?

I am convinced that carefully selected and well briefed and trained host families are one of the most important keys of a successful exchange. They should be aware, that their host student is not adult yet, s/he is just on the way to become one and that their student has a 16 years long educational background. It is not up to the host parents to change this education; they just have to adapt this education to the new situation and to broaden this education.

The YEO and the Counselor play an important role. They just can support their student and host families if they are trained and briefed according. This is a must.

All involved persons must be aware that these kids are kids and not adults. Unfortunately, an exchange fails often because of too high expectations or on the other side because of too much regard to the new situation of the student.

However, also the students should know what is expected of them, what the rules are in their host country, etc.

About two weeks after arrival, our inbound students have to attend the Welcome Meeting, where they are informed about the most important things like travel rules, code of behavior, school, language, etc.

8 – 10 weeks later, they are invited to a Follow-up meeting, where we discuss with the students their first experience, questions and where we can see if they have settled in well or if there are any problems to solve.

After 4 – 5 months the intermediate talks take place. These talks are led by members of the District Committees. Each member takes care about 4-5 students. These talks are conducted with the student, the first and second host family, the YEO and Counselor of the host club. But before these talks, the Committee member has a single talk with the student because the students don't dare very often to say the truth in presence of the host family and the club representatives.

The sense of these talks is to realize problems at the earliest possible point. From experience we know that the most problems occur in the first weeks – months.

And of course, we also request regular written reports from our students.

Folie What is to do before and after an early return has determined?

By the Host District:

We always say to the students: Solve the problems where they occur! But at the end, if the student has a problem s/he calls his/her parents at home, they call their Counselor of the sending club, the counselor calls the district chair and then the district chair inform the host district. This – of course – is the longest way!

This graphic is very interesting and then I created I could not believe how many people are involved and engaged in one exchange. The red line shows you who is entitled to communicate with the sending district.

Folie mit Beziehungsnetz

In case of severe problems and an early return is foreseeable it is very important to keep calm, to talk with all involved persons in single talks or together and to sort out the things carefully. There is nothing, but absolutely nothing which justifies a return within a couple of hours, whatever happened. Maybe, the student did a mistake, but there is no reason to treat the student like a criminal.

Inform the sending district at the earliest possible point.

It is not fair to inform the sending district about an early return if that is already decided. Sometimes it happens that the club, the host family or the student inform the host district too late and it is not enough time to discuss the matter in-depth with the sending district because the situation gets worse. But also in this case, it is important to keep calm and to book the flight just if the genuine parents are informed.

It is difficult to give a general recipe because the reasons of an early return are very individual like the students are.

My own experience last year with a student we hosted in our family. We were the second host family and she came to us after 4 months. She was a wonderful young lady. But she was very quiet and introverted. The most time she spent in her room with reading and writing stories. At the beginning, she came to the dinner, but after some weeks she said that she would not be hungry. Then, I found out that she was eating sandwiches either before dinner or afterwards. She avoided every occasion to speak German with us. She said it is too slow for her.

I talked to her and asked her why she wanted to do an exchange year. She said, that this was never her wish, it was the idea of her parents. I contacted the chairperson of her sending district. She told me that they all were aware of Robyn's problems, but they thought she would become more outgoing during her exchange year far away from home. We should socialize her. From the moment on, she knew that she can go home, she turned totally. In two days, she told me everything about her life, her family, her dreams and what she would like to do. She was the happiest girl....

The other case was one of our outbound students. Two months after her departure, we were informed that the doctor diagnosed an eating disorder. She lost 8 kilos in two months. She threatened with suicide if she would be sent home and she said, that she tried to commit suicide already at home. Our Outbound Coordinator contacted her mother to get to know if she was aware of that and she confirmed that, but her father was not informed. He picked up his daughter in the host country and brought her home safely.

Two years ago, we were confronted with drug abuse of one of our inbound students. The host family was so upset, they wanted to send him home within of a couple of days. His counselor was an Youth attorney and he said, slowly, slowly. First, I would like to talk to the student and listen to his explanation. The student could live with his counselor until his departure....

In worst case, we have a doctor and a psychiatrist available.

But in any case, we always should be focused to the student. Go along with him/her very closely all the time. It is important that s/he has enough time to say good bye to his/her classmates, friends and that s/he can leave the host country with a good feeling regardless what happened before.

After departure of the student, a debriefing with the Club representatives (YEO, Counselor and President) and with the host family is required. Discuss with them why this exchange failed. Otherwise you will lose this club and host family for further hosting.

Folie What is to do before and after an early return has determined?

By the Sponsoring District:

- Respect and accept the decision of the host district. Sometimes it is difficult to understand why the student does not get a second chance. But a break or misbehavior in our country does not mean the same in your country. Sometimes it depends on law, culture and life style. By example: A host student in Switzerland, who is drinking alcohol outside of Rotary, gets a yellow card – a second chance. A host student in USA who is drinking alcohol has to be sent home immediately, because s/he does not break only a rule of our program but also the law of USA. However, in Switzerland it is allowed – unbelievable but true – that you can drink alcohol legally with 16 years!
- Inform the sponsoring club and the genuine parents and tell them not talking to host parents or host district directly
- Keep them informed about all the steps
- Prepare the return (book the flight, maybe organize a psychological support, inform the school)
- Brief the parents, prepare them to the new situation
- Give the student a warm welcome!
- Don't overwhelm him/her with critics!
- Don't give him/her the feeling of failure!
- Organize a debriefing as soon as possible after return
 - first a single talk with the student and then together with his/her parents and sponsoring club
- Let him/her talk about his/her experience in the sponsoring club
- Involve him/her in the briefing and training of the new outbound students
- Contact him/her once a week until you feel s/he is fine and well integrated again