

Guide for Parents and Guardians of Long-Term Volunteers

Congratulations! Your young relative (here after referred to as your son or daughter) will be volunteering abroad with United Planet!

Your son or daughter has chosen an exciting opportunity - volunteering abroad with United Planet! Through this experience, your son or daughter will have the chance to work in collaboration with a local community on a service project while immersing in a different culture and learning about a new country.

Working in partnership with the local community is at the heart of every United Planet Quest and adhering to their needs is the first priority for our organization. In addition to gaining a better understanding of our diverse world through volunteering, your son or daughter will also learn a lot about themselves, develop greater independence, enhance their communication skills and gain greater maturity. United Planet volunteers are independent, flexible, open-minded, and willing to conquer any challenges that may arise during their time abroad. Being a United Planet volunteer is one of the best ways your child can learn about themselves and others.



A little bit of help goes a long way

Your son or daughter will need your support through this experience. They will appreciate any advice you can share from your own life experiences, abroad or otherwise. You may also want to do some research about the destination country, including history, cultures, customs, and a few of the local language's phrases together with your child. However, please try to resist from doing all the work for him or her. This is also a time to let your child take the reins! This is their experience, and in order to be able to handle life on their own in a new country and culture, they will need to have done the pre-departure preparation themselves. This way they will be better prepared when they arrive in country, THEY have the resources and confidence to cope on their own – without mom or dad! The opportunity for them to grow in confidence, independence, and maturity needs to start as soon as they apply.

By giving your son or daughter the chance to ask us the questions you want answers to, and do the administrative work necessary, you are providing them with the skills they will need to have a successful experience abroad. Let your child be the 'ambassador' for the family - they will need the information we provide (and you require!).

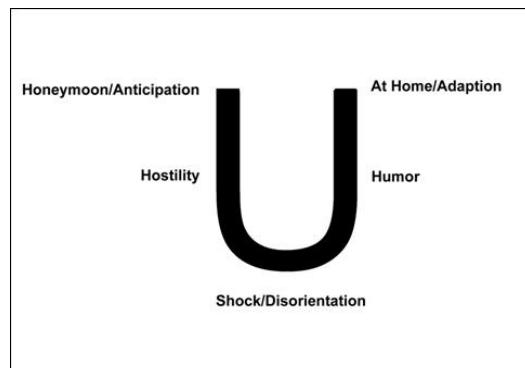
Managing Expectations

What are some “reasonable” expectations for the volunteer abroad experience?

- Well-organized mechanics and smooth coordination between volunteer, United Planet coordinator, and host-country ICYE coordinators.
- Experienced, responsible on-site staff who are available to volunteers during work hours for standard requests and 24/7 for emergencies.
- A timely and courteous response to questions.
- Safe and relatively clean accommodations.
- Support, assistance, and advice from on-site staff. (Note: this does not mean solving problems for the volunteer.)

What are some “unreasonable” expectations?

- Instant response to routine, non-emergency questions from coordinators, especially after business hours and on weekends.
- The accommodations, meal plans, etc. will be similar to those on a package tour. In many places, accommodations may be very simple, and *not* similar to home.
- The maintenance of daily communication between volunteers abroad and parents and friends back home. It is important for parents and friends of volunteers to realize that maintaining their customary communication patterns may deprive volunteers of their chance to have the full cultural immersion experience.
- That every day will be a good day. It is common for your child to go through low days, especially in the first couple of weeks or months of their journey. The widely studied UCurve of Cultural Adaptation reveals that a person entering a new culture often displays signs of anxiety and even rejection towards their new environment as he or she loses all familiar signs and symbols of interaction. This is part of the growing process of an international immersion experience, but volunteers will recover as they adjust to new social norms and a different language. This experience is typical, but how it manifests itself is different for every volunteer.



Staying in Touch: Creating your Family's Communication Plan

It is important to discuss with your child about how and how often you will communicate with one another while she/he is abroad so that you will not worry, and she/he will not be overly focused on matters at home. We encourage volunteers to touch base with their parents as soon as they have arrived in their new location, to assure them that they have safely arrived and are settled in. After that it's best to maintain regular but not overly frequent communication with them, and to find ways to use your communications to support and encourage their immersion into the culture rather than distracting them from it.

These days, there are many different forms of communication that you and your child are able to use, such as the telephone, email, and blog sites. Usually, telephone communications are less expensive when calling from the U.S. You may want to check with your provider about international plans, purchase international calling cards, or use Skype.

You may also encourage your child to keep a blog about his experiences abroad. A blog is a good way for everyone –family and friends – to keep up with your son or daughter's adventures. You may also want to think about starting your own blog so that your child will also be able to know what is going on at home.

If your child is busy and fully engaged in the volunteer abroad experience, he/she will have less time to spend e-mailing or calling you and his/her friends back home. (It may also be fairly costly to be online while abroad, or the Internet may not be easily accessible.) This is a positive thing, and should be viewed as such. Encourage your child to communicate with you when he or she can, and to tell you about all the new sights he/she is seeing and things he/she is learning. This will help him/her make the most of his/her experience abroad.

What else you can do to support your child

It is helpful to sit down and talk over certain items before your son or daughter departs. Some items to discuss include:

Communication:

- Know the time difference between the US and your son/daughter's destination. What is the long distance country calling code? Arrange how you will communicate and how frequently (phone, email).
- Please keep in mind that if you haven't heard from your child, he or she may be on a program-related excursion or arranging his or her own travels.
- Encourage your son or daughter to maintain regular contact with United Planet.

Essential Documents:

- Keep a copy of your son/daughter's airline itinerary, passport, visa (if applicable) and credit cards. Copies can be helpful if your son/daughter loses any of these important documents.

Money:

- Have an arrangement for sending money in case of an emergency.
- Familiarize yourself with the exchange rate and cost differential of the country in which your son or daughter will be living.

Culture:

- Familiarize yourself with your child's host country and cross-cultural resources so you can support him or her with the transition to life abroad.

While we encourage you to be in contact with your son or daughter, please be aware that living abroad has its ups and downs. Your child will be transitioning through a range of emotions. It is important for you to understand what your son or daughter is going through and to be patient and supportive as he or she adjusts to the new culture. Adjustment is not accomplished in just a few days; it is an on-going process, which responds to one situation, followed by then another. It is exactly these challenges that constitute a rewarding and memorable volunteer abroad experience.

Additional Questions

Of course we understand that there are many questions surrounding volunteering abroad. We have also included an important list of Frequently Asked Questions, along with the answers. We have tried to be as thorough as possible with the list, however if you do have additional questions, please direct them to your son or daughter to ask us. Also be sure to ask your child to share any information we have provided them with you, as the answers to additional questions you may have already been given to your son or daughter as they move through the pre-departure period.

Pre-Departure FAQs

What are United Planet Long-Term Quests?

A United Planet Long-Term Quest is a unique opportunity to live, learn, and volunteer abroad alongside the members of a local community for either 6 months or a full year. United Planet is the U.S. and Canadian member of the International Cultural Youth Exchange (ICYE) Federation, an international non-profit with 60 years of experience in the field. In conjunction with ICYE, we match our Long-Term volunteers to local projects in over 30 countries based on their interests and experience and the actual needs within the community.

In addition to 35-40 hours of volunteer work per week, United Planet volunteers completely immerse themselves in the local culture of their host community. By the end of a Long-Term Quest, United Planet volunteers are no longer visitors in their host communities – they have a new home away from home.

What is ICYE?

ICYE stands for the International Cultural Youth Exchange. ICYE is an international non-profit youth exchange organization promoting intercultural learning and international voluntary service. It was founded after World War II as part of an international reconciliation program between the United States and Germany. United Planet represents the U.S. and Canada as an associate member of the ICYE Federation. Today, there are over 30 country members (called National Committees) of ICYE who work in partnership to exchange volunteers internationally for 6 month and 1 year placements.

Who can participate in United Planet Long-Term Quests?

Because United Planet is the U.S. and Canadian partner within the ICYE Federation, we can only send U.S. and Canadian citizens and residents on our Long-Term Quests. If you are from a different country, please visit icye.org to see if your country has an ICYE partner.

What is the application process for Long-Term Quests?

1. Choose your top three Quest destinations, select an August or January start date, and then fill in the United Planet Long Term [Quest online application](#).
2. Submit your \$500 deposit at the time of application. You may pay the deposit online with a credit card as part of your application process, call our office at 1-800-292-2316 to provide your credit card information, or send a check to our Boston office.
1. A coordinator from the United Planet team will confirm receipt of the application and deposit and arrange a phone interview with the volunteer.

Why does my child need to pay to volunteer abroad?

We want your child to succeed. That means having in place the support our volunteers need. We don't just drop your child in country and hope for the best. We provide training before they leave ... language exposure ... 24/7 in-country support ... support for the host families ... accommodations, meals and airport transportation ... activities and excursions. The whole idea is to make the experience successful and productive for your child and the host community, and we have found that these things are crucial. Remember that we are a non-profit, mission-driven organization – we wouldn't spend money on something that wasn't important.

What will my child do while abroad?

Your child will be part of a unique international educational experience that combines intercultural learning with voluntary service. By living with a host family or at the project site and working in community organizations, volunteers are provided an intercultural experience providing opportunities for learning, self-awareness and global education. Our participants acquire cross-cultural skills and problem solving abilities for their personal and professional development. We help them share their experiences, hopes and dreams, and make life-long friendships with people from another country as well as with other international volunteers.

How much does it cost?

Please refer to unitedplanet.org/volunteer-abroad/long-term/prices for a full price list.

What does the Quest program fee include?

- Extensive pre-departure preparation, including a training weekend in New Hampshire with United Planet staff
- Food and lodging in your host country (host family or shared residence)
- Airport transfers in-country
- Emergency medical and travel insurance
- In-country orientation upon arrival and ongoing support and supervision throughout the Quest
- Language training
- Mid-year camp (for 1 year volunteers) and final camp
- Monthly stipend for incidental expenses (varies by country)
- Top notch safety and support

What is NOT included in the program fee?

- Visa processing charges (volunteers are responsible for acquiring the necessary Visa)
- International airfare (volunteers are responsible for coordinating travel itineraries with expected program start dates)
- Any required vaccinations or immunizations
- Travel to the designed pre-departure training site

What is the Pre-Departure Training and why does my child need to attend?

As a Quest participant volunteering abroad for 6 months or 1 year, your child will be required to attend an in-person pre-departure training. The Pre-Departure Training is a 2-3 day training that prepares volunteers for their volunteer abroad experiences, covering topics such as culture shock, adjustment, and health and safety issues. This is also a good time for your child to meet other volunteers that will participate in a Quest at the same time. All costs of the training are covered by United Planet; however, the volunteer is responsible for the costs of getting to the meeting place. Your child will receive more detailed information about the trainings once he or she is accepted into the program.

How can my child pay for the Quest?

Your son/daughter can either pay the full amount directly or fundraise. Please see unitedplanet.org/fundraising for ideas on how to fundraise. Our volunteers can set up a fundraising page online that is hosted by firstgiving.com. It's a fun and easy way for your child to raise money toward his/her Quest. Also, if your child recruits a friend or sibling to participate in a Quest, he/she will receive 5% off the program fee.

Will my child need a visa?

Yes! It is your child's responsibility to acquire a visa according to the regulations of their destination country. He/she will receive information about how to do this once they have been accepted into the program. This process should be started as soon as possible because it can take months to secure a visa for some countries. Initial visa information can be found in the National Profile for your child's destination country.

What is included in the travel insurance coverage?

- Emergency evacuation services
- Repatriation of mortal remains in case of death
- Outpatient treatment by a physician
- Medical treatment and medication prescribed by a physician
- In-patient hospital care, including operations that cannot be postponed

Your child will receive a brochure with detailed information about the insurance company and its benefits.

How can I get more information about my child's Quest?

Please talk to your child often about his/her Quest. He/she has received a lot of information via e-mail and has access to the HUB where we post additional information. Please go through all of the information with your child. There will also be a required 3-day pre-departure conference about one month before the program begins. Have him/her go over this material with you as well.

In Country FAQs

What kind of supervision will my child have in-country?

All ICYE National Committees have local offices and coordinators in each country. They are the first point of contact for your child while they are abroad. It is these offices that coordinate all aspects of the volunteer program. In addition to ICYE Coordinators, volunteers also have supervisors at their work placements.

Will my child be picked up at the airport?

If your child arrives on one of the country arrival dates (provided by United Planet via e-mail to your child), he/she will be met at the airport and taken to the orientation site. Volunteers need to look for a person holding a sign with their name on it. If they do not see this person, they must call the local ICYE Coordinator phone number which is given out by Boston office staff before your child leaves for the destination country.

What type of accommodation will my child be staying in?

Accommodations vary greatly among ICYE programs and depend on the local conditions. The three most common accommodations are homestays, an apartment shared with other volunteers, or housing at the project site. All ICYE accommodations have been approved by the local National Committee for safety and they contain all basic necessities. Volunteers must be prepared for living situations different than those they are used to at home. They may be staying with communities who have no running water and only sporadic electricity. All accommodations are safe and (relatively) clean. Remember - the idea is to experience a foreign culture: this means that things will not be the same as at home!

How will I be able to communicate with my child while they are on their Quest?

Be prepared to communicate with your child much less while on their Quest than you would normally at home. Calling or emailing too much can have a detrimental effect on your child being able to 'let go' of life at home and really immerse in the new culture. The local coordinators will show them where the nearest phone is and how to use it, how to buy an international calling card, or where the nearest internet café is. Arrange with your child prior to their departure how you will communicate. The first week is often extremely busy with orientation and your child is adapting to a new lifestyle. Please don't worry if you don't hear from your child within the first few days after their arrival in country. Your child will contact you as soon as possible. In many destinations, electricity and phone networks are not as reliable as you may be used to and they may not be able to communicate as easily or as frequently. In a lot of cases, volunteers are often too busy to call or email as frequently as at home. You should view this as a positive thing – your child is gaining greater independence and maturity through this process, and he/she is relying on themselves rather than you to work out any issues that are arising.

When will my child know his/her project information and host situation?

According to ICYE regulations, your child should know his/her project and host situation within 4 weeks of their departure date, if not earlier. Please understand that project and accommodation placements are a long process for most National Committees as they accept many international volunteers each year and have to balance the volunteers' interests with the available projects.

Will there be other United Planet volunteers with my child?

Your child will arrive at the same time as other international volunteers through the ICYE Federation. The group goes through orientation together, which is 1-3 weeks in length depending on the country. Then the volunteers go to their individual project placement sites. There may or may not be another volunteer at your child's project. Most likely there will be other volunteers in the same town or city. If your child will be further removed from the ICYE office and other volunteers, the National Committee will discuss this with the volunteer. Keep in mind that when volunteers are forced to really immerse in and engage with the local communities, that is when the real learning and personal growth occur!

Is the destination safe for my child?

No responsible organization can ever guarantee absolute safety of volunteers abroad, nor should they. Every destination that United Planet sends volunteers to is vetted for safety and ICYE National Committees keep us constantly updated on safety and security issues in country. During their orientation, volunteers learn how to react in any emergency situation. Safety is always our top priority and decisions about where to send volunteers are made accordingly.

What measures are taken to ensure the safety of volunteers?

Volunteers on United Planet Quests have access to the help of ICYE National Committees 24 hours per day, 7 days per week. They are provided with an emergency cell phone number of a local coordinator and can call that number at any time of the day or night. The National Committees are also connected at all times through the Federation's Risk Management and Emergency Response Procedures. Host families and host organizations go through a rigorous interview process to ensure that all necessary safety procedures and protocols are in place. However, while United Planet and the ICYE National Committees do all they can to ensure the safety of the volunteers, much depends on each individual making sensible decisions and behaving in a responsible manner during their Quest. Talk to your child about making smart choices while abroad (e.g. traveling late at night, using caution when meeting new people, not drinking to excess or using drugs).

My child has called and is not enjoying their Quest – what can I do?

This is when your child will need your support. Remind them that every day will not be a good day. There are always low moments when your child may miss familiar things from home. Accommodations, food, and culture will not be the same as at home – this is the reality of living in another country. Remind your child that this is the very reason they went abroad – to experience something new and different and to get out of their comfort zone! Remind him/her that we talked with the volunteers during pre-departure training about the challenges of cultural adjustment and that this is a natural part of the process. Only through stepping outside our comfort zones can we truly grow. Urge your child to be the one to find solutions to any problems they are having, as part of what they are there for is to learn to deal with a new place and new situations on their own. Your child will come out of the experience with much more confidence and determination if you let him/her deal with any problems him/herself. Your role is one of sounding board and support.

Post Quest FAQs

How can we stay in touch with United Planet?

Your child will receive a Welcome Back package about how to stay in touch with United Planet and ICYE. We will offer a phone and web re-entry conference that has options for all returning Long-Term volunteers. During this session we talk about reverse culture shock, processing experiences abroad, and how to articulate and use skills they gained while abroad. Our alumni are a very important part of the United Planet family. They will receive our e-newsletter with updates about United Planet Quests, special projects, and other programs. There are many ways to stay involved!