

Guide for Parents and Guardians of Volunteers

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

This is an exciting opportunity, and will open many doors for the volunteer. 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 respecting their needs is a 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 enroll.

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!).

As a parent, there is important information you need and questions you will have. Our philosophy is that the same information shared with parents is also shared with volunteers. All parents of volunteers ages 16-18 are required to participate in a phone session with a coordinator in the office which corresponds to a phone session with the volunteer. Here you will receive lots of useful information, and can also ask questions. Parents of volunteers who are over the age of 18 are also welcome to participate in a phone session with a coordinator.

Managing Expectations

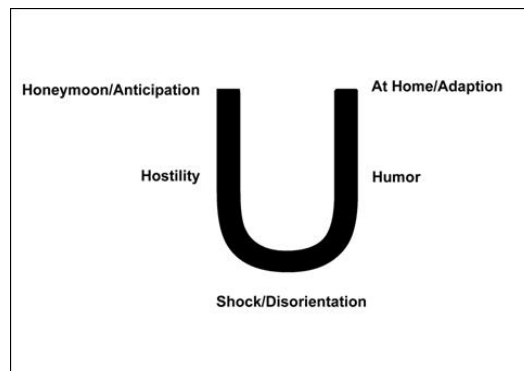
What are some “reasonable” expectations for the volunteer abroad experience?

- Well-organized mechanics and smooth coordination between volunteer, United Planet coordinator and in-country coordinator on site.
- 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.

What are some “unreasonable” expectations?

- 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.
- Frequent 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 everything will be easy. United Planet programs focus on cultural immersion, and even in a short period of time volunteers may feel challenged as they enter a new culture.

In a new culture, many things like familiar signs of interaction, language, and cultural values may be different, and sometimes this causes unease. It is most important to recognize that these feelings of discomfort are normal, and positive. This challenge is an opportunity for the volunteer to grow and learn things about themselves as well as others. Below is the widely used U curve, which is a way to visualize the adjustment many volunteers go through. However, this process is different for all volunteers.



Staying in Touch: Creating your Family's Communication Plan

It is important to discuss with your child 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. It is best for your son or daughter to call you when they arrive, rather than the reverse.

Note you have been provided the 24/7 phone for the in Country Coordinator in the emergency contact card mailed to your home. The United Planet office is open 9:00 AM-5:00 PM EST Monday-Friday. The in Country Coordinator is the first point of contact for any emergency, problems, etc as they are locals, know the culture and community, and can best assist you quickly.

You can expect that communication will be less frequent than you are used to at home. Please discuss this together before the volunteer leaves home. We find it is best to maintain regular but not overly frequent communication, and to find ways to use your communications to support and encourage their immersion into the culture rather than distract from it.

These days there are many different forms of communication that you and your child abroad 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.

My Child Has Called And Is Not Enjoying Their Quest – What Can I Do?

The Country Coordinator and on site supervisor are resources who are there to assist the volunteers with issues they may encounter. The best way to address a problem is for your child to speak with the coordinator on the ground directly. However, your child may also need your support and a reminder that 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 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!

Safety and Rules

United Planet takes great care to ensure the safety of all volunteers. You can see more information here: <http://www.unitedplanet.org/volunteer-abroad/health-and-safety>. All United Planet projects approved for volunteers under 18 years old are specifically chosen because of their proximity to the main office/Country Coordinator, as well as the environment of the project. Volunteers are placed in safe and caring host families and have a 24/7 contact number of a coordinator on the ground.

However, volunteers are often in big cities, and just like any big city in the United States, we do not recommend being out late at night, especially alone. It is important to realize that volunteers have a lot more freedom than they may have at home, and are ultimately in control of their decisions. We recommend you speak with your child about making safe and smart decisions before they leave.

It is important to read over the contract carefully with your child, as you must co-sign this contract and violation could result in expulsion from the program.

What else you can do to support your child

Some items to discuss include with your son or daughter before they depart 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), insurance, 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 them.