

Why Parents Can Be Persuaded

When Michelle She started her first year of college in Tennessee far from her home in Maryland, her parents weren't concerned about the distance or her year delay in starting. At least not in comparison to where she went the year before, and what she gained in return.

“At first we were concerned our daughter is going so far away for college, but after her experience in Germany it is like nothing. It was good in preparing her,” says Michelle’s father, Mingda She.

When Michelle told her father she was applying for an exchange program after high school, his first concern was that it would delay her going to college. As parents, their other concern was about how her disability would affect her experience abroad. What if their daughter got lost or fell on the snow in Germany, since her cerebral palsy can create difficulty with walking, balance, spatial awareness, or sense of direction?

Although Michelle had traveled abroad with her family to visit grandparents in China, her trip to Germany on the U.S. Department of State-funded Congress Bundestag Youth Exchange (CBYX) would be the first on her own.

Looking back now, her parents can see the overseas experience was very good training for her, but in the beginning she had to persuade them.

“Michelle just insisted she was able to overcome those difficulties, such as her fear of crossing busy streets even at traffic lights. She said she will live in someone’s home and felt it was a good opportunity to gain independence,” says Mr. She, who agrees that under the pressure of being on her own, Michelle achieved just that and a sense of maturity that comes with it.

“We felt Germany would be similar to the United States in how they treat disabled people; if she is able to live here, she should be able to live there as well.”

It also helped that Michelle had a love of languages and other cultures, and wanted to pursue an international and education related career. “It was a good match, so we said we better let her go.”

Between the sturdy, waterproof, and warm shoes they bought for Michelle, and Germany’s good public transportation and snow clearing of streets – she settled in to her year abroad.

The AFS Intercultural Programs staff, who administered the CBYX program and were informed of her disability, were good at communicating and taking care of any health issues that Michelle experienced during the program, says Mr. She.

“Sometimes it is harder than you think,” admits Mr. She with a chuckle, though he advises other parents of youth with disabilities that they need not worry so much.

They are by themselves, in another country, and may face difficult situations, but they have the potential and they will learn quite a bit. They are more capable than you think. It is a good opportunity for them to get these kinds of experiences.





INTERNATIONAL
EXCHANGE

NAME

MICHELLE SHE

FROM

USA

TO

GERMANY

PROGRAM

CBYX



0123456789





As an international exchange professional, you can work with parents of young people with disabilities to understand and address concerns parents may have. Keep these tips in mind.



Explain to parents that your international exchange program is for people with and without disabilities

Parents of young people with disabilities often have a long history of advocating for their son or daughter's participation in all types of programs. They may be skeptical about an exchange program's ability to effectively include people with disabilities. Address this potential concern head-on by making sure disability is represented in your materials and resources, whether it is making sure photos of students with disabilities are represented in your promotional materials, sharing stories and anecdotes of other young people with disabilities who have gone abroad on your programs, including language around disability in anti-discrimination policies, or connecting the parents of prospective applicants with other parents of young people with disabilities who have gone abroad.

Share information about how parents can stay connected

For some parents, the idea of not having consistent access to communication with their child is a significant barrier. Will your program be active on social media (Facebook, Twitter, blogs, or more) or does your program have an update system that makes parents feel connected to what's happening, even if their son or daughter isn't communicating directly?

Connect with disability rights organizations in the host country to learn about local disability culture, support, and legal protections

If parents are nervous about their son or daughter's disability-related needs, it may help to remind them that people with disabilities similar to theirs already live in the host country! When planning a program, research information about the disability organizations, networks, and laws in the hosting country (or countries). Knowing that a program is already aware and connected with local information in the host country is reassuring to parents and prepares you with local resources and support should a need arise.

Develop a student-specific emergency preparedness plan

Start by working with parents to identify a travel health insurance plan that will effectively cover the participant's disability-related and emergency needs and identify a communication system that involves the parents and other resources should there be an on-site emergency issue. Many travel insurance plans include a provision to fly a parent or emergency contact should a person be hospitalized during their exchange experience. Encourage parents to have a current passport just in case.