“Living in a foreign culture is like playing a game you’ve never played before when the rules haven’t been explained very well. The challenge is to enjoy the game without missing too many plays, learning the rules and developing skills as you go along.”

This comparison of playing a new game with learning to adjust in a new culture, was made by cross-cultural educator L. Robert Kohls and his ideas are verified by thousands of former YFU students and their host and natural families. The difficulties of living in a foreign culture and understanding a totally new way of life continue to occur until participants learn the skills of communicating effectively in another language, can observe what is going on and can sort out meanings, and can understand cultural differences and practice effective behaviors. The adjustment process for overseas living is normal and predictable. Understanding it will help create realistic expectations for the experience, and will help participants understand the variety of emotions and feelings that they will experience.

ADJUSTMENT A PROCESS FOR LEARNING:
For exchange students, adjusting to a new family in a new culture is often a process of ups and downs. It is both an exciting adventure and hard work, often with discouraging moments. Like the anticipation of any important event in life, YFU exchange students and host families usually begin with great excitement and expectations. These feelings frequently give way to more normal and routine acceptance of daily life after a period of time. Sometimes this adjustment process is smooth flowing and natural, and sometimes rather bumpy. There may be periods of high frustration, confusion, homesickness, and loneliness. These periods can last for hours, days, and sometimes even for weeks. A letter from home, a birthday or special national holiday, can all unlock unexpected feelings in the adjustment process.

High and low points are a part of everyone’s life. But the feelings may be deepened and magnified if they take place while you’re in strange surroundings. Adjustment to life in a different culture is not easy, but learning about oneself in a new culture produces the greatest personal growth in YFU students. One former exchange student summarized his new skills and personal knowledge this way: “I have learned to solve differences with other people, to appreciate my own family, as well as my host family, to be open is one of the most frequent pieces of advice from former hosts. One student says: “I’m giving value to things that didn’t have any value for me before.”

There are three major steps one must take in order to learn while going through the adjustment process.

STEPS IN THE LEARNING PROCESS
The first is having the self-confidence to try something new. It means risking your behavior and beliefs. It also means opening yourself up to feeling inadequate and silly. A Brazilian girl put it like this: “When you get there, you have to be friends. Don’t be afraid to ask questions, to make mistakes. You have to talk even if you talk wrong because in saying wrong things you will learn.” It is not easy to take the risk; it is uncomfortable, but the reward is worth the effort.

The second step is actually learning from what one sees, hears and tries. It means that the strange customs a student first sees, eventually become logical through an understanding of values and beliefs in the host culture. Exchange students can understand another culture by learning to see events through the eyes of their hosts. One student says: “I’m giving value to things that didn’t have any value for me before.”

The third step is, in the words of another student, “to learn to open up your mind and keep it open.” Keeping one’s mind open is one of the most frequent pieces of advice from former students and host families. It means looking at behaviors and ways of thinking as logical in the culture they are practiced. To get along with another culture, one must put aside one’s own value judgments about another culture’s values. This is ultimately the goal of YFU- to foster greater inter- national understanding.

UPS AND DOWNS OF ADJUSTMENT
The adjustment cycle can be thought of as a process, represented by a smooth curve, starting high (1) with the excitement of departure from the home country and arrival in the host country, filled with the first weeks of new discoveries. This excitement may then gradually decrease (2) as students become more accustomed to the new life and emotions are more normal.

At some point, students often experience a depressed period (3), brought about when life is a routine, the newness is gone. This is when the student thinks a lot about “home” and old friends. The student then must try harder to get to know more people in the host country, study the host language and try and understand the culture better. This may help the student feel more and more comfortable (4) and accepted in the host country.

For most students the feelings at the end of the adjustment cycle (5) are very high, with all the excitement of the host country, friendships, enjoyable life in the end of year school activities, parties, and the expectation of seeing the natural family and friends again.
TWO CULTURES TOGETHER

They realize that the exchange experience is often a trade-off between things given up and new things to be discovered. Some of the skills that students and host families have found to be most helpful in cultural adjustment are: a sense of humor, an ability to fail gracefully and to recover, an ability to communicate, warmth in human relations, curiosity, motivation, and the ability to be non-judgmental. Having and using these skills, the student and host family can often overcome obstacles in a way that is mutually acceptable to everyone involved.

As students adjust, they often see that the environment is not changing, but rather their own attitudes are and they learn to get along under a new set of living conditions.

**ADVICE FOR NATURAL FAMILIES**

You, like the thousands of natural families of YFU students before you, will receive letters, emails and phone calls from your child and will have a unique opportunity to offer positive support. The most important advice to keep in mind is to not over react when your child seems depressed or homesick. By the time you receive the letter, email, or call, your teenager will probably have worked out those feelings and be involved in a new adventure, full of enthusiasm and good feelings.

As hard as it may be for you to let go of your child, it is important to let the cultural and adjustment problems that arise be worked out independently. You can offer valuable support by helping your child build on the strengths you have given. It isn’t, however, always helpful to try to solve the problems yourself. Write back to your teenager ways to analyze and handle such situations. Reassure your child with your confidence in his or her ability to solve problems. Encourage the use of the new support system: the host family and YFU personnel in the host country.

The teenage years are a period of rapid growth and change for all youths. Gaining independence, learning to make good decisions, and problem solving are all skills that young people need for their adult lives. Growing up at home is not always easy nor is it painless. Neither will it be in another country when they are also adjusting to an entirely new cultural environment. You indeed should be proud of your teenager for taking up the challenge of tackling so many things at once, and continue to encourage through your love and support.

Understanding the factors involved in cultural adjustment should reassure you that your son or daughter is going through a normal process of learning and growth. It’s not an easy process, nor is it a process that guarantees happiness all of the time. Like your child, you see in the challenge of being an exchange student a wonderful opportunity for growth and independence. Throughout this experience you may have the unique view of that maturation process through letters filled with ever increasing insights and valuable observations. As parents, your skills in interpreting, understanding, giving perspective, showing support, and encouraging independent problem solving will help your entire family through this exciting growth process.

What are the “downs” of adjustment? Little unpredictable things, such as different ways of passing the time, unstated host family rules or expectations, different behaviors that may annoy you, inability to communicate, different or confusing standards and values, boredom, and unexpected personal reactions can all add up to major frustrations. The lack of familiar support systems, such as the natural family and peer group, can cause a feeling of loneliness and isolation. There is a tremendous need for students and host families to talk and share their feelings. “Don’t hold back your feelings, or you’ll ‘pop’ like a balloon,” advises one former student.

To overcome the depression these situations can cause, a student needs to recognize what is causing the bad feelings. It is essential to be able to recognize the differences a new culture presents and make an effort to understand them. If not, the reaction will be anger and a lack of communication. One student advises: “If you want to be happy in your experience, please don’t spend days writing letters or sitting alone in your room thinking about home. You will have all your life at home but the days in your host country pass like crazy. If you don’t enjoy your experience from the first day you will be sorry when you get back home.”

Attitude is the most important factor in the adjustment process for both students and families. For students, cross-cultural living is often seen as an adventure. Upon reflection, they realize that the exchange experience is often a trade-off...