

Get Involved

The U.S. Department of State is requesting public comments on proposed changes and clarifications to rules governing secondary school exchange programs. These changes would apply only to foreign students visiting this country. We believe they serve the best interests of students and host families alike. We also believe the State Department should move quickly to initiate similar and even stronger protections for U.S. students and young people participating in 'ambassador' and other similar programs abroad. Please use these links to read the proposed changes and submit your own comments by the end of the day on Wednesday, June 2, 2010.

There are many ways you can step up to support the Traveling Youth's Standards of Safety bill (TY's S.O.S.) and help ensure the safety of students traveling abroad:

- Write your State Legislator
- File a Complaint with the FTC
- Notify your State's Attorney General
- File a Report at the Better Business Bureau
- Register to Support TY'S S.O.S.

Thousands of children participate in foreign travel programs each year in more than 30 countries. There are many ways you can get involved to help ensure their safety:

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A PARENT'S GUIDE TO TEEN TRAVEL TRIPS: ARE THEY RIGHT FOR YOUR CHILD?

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For months, 14-year-old Kate had eagerly anticipated her two-week trip to Europe with a teen travel program. However, during her first couple of days overseas, she developed a stomach virus. She had difficulty eating and sleeping and quickly became dehydrated, homesick and anxious. Those leading the tour — themselves jet-lagged and preoccupied with the responsibility of looking after their many young charges — assured her she would bounce back, while privately agreeing they did not want to reward "needy" behavior. But Kate felt increasingly alone and continued to suffer from a suppressed appetite.

By the time Kate returned home two weeks later, she had lost 12 pounds. She also felt highly stressed and viewed herself as a failure. In the weeks that followed, her anxiety level remained high, affecting her school performance. Eventually, her family sought mental health care to help their daughter regain her emotional equilibrium.

Thousands of American children travel internationally every year through organizations that specialize in student excursions. Many children enjoy the adventure and enlightenment that comes with experiencing other cultures, albeit briefly. For some, however, these trips can become nightmarish scenarios. Thousands of miles from home and without the coping capabilities that come with more maturity, they struggle to deal with significant physical or emotional stress. Often compounding the problem are the adult trip-leaders, who may have varying degrees of training, sensitivity, common sense and kid-friendliness.

Parents need to be aware that despite upbeat advertising and hefty fees, teen travel trips do involve risk. Children have been injured and, in rare cases, have even died on these trips. Keep in mind also that today, no federal regulations or safety standards exist to protect children's health and safety rights while traveling with teen travel programs.

Parents should ask themselves some serious questions before allowing their child to embark on a trip with any organization, regardless of its reputation, size and history of operation. The following information will help you:

1. Decide whether your child is ready for a group travel experience.
2. Determine whether a sponsoring organization has the procedures, policies and people in place to enable your child to have a safe and successful experience abroad.
3. Evaluate whether a specific excursion would be a good match for your child's personality and interests.

1. Should I send my child on a teen travel trip?

The most important consideration is your child's maturity, emotional stability, physical health, and overall readiness for potentially uncomfortable travel away from home and family.

Disciplinary considerations. How self-disciplined is your child? One of the most common negative outcomes of these trips is teens being sent home early because of discipline problems. When they are away from the supervision of mom and dad, some children take advantage of opportunities abroad to experiment with alcohol, drugs or sex. Program sponsors will not tolerate these behaviors and won't hesitate to send a student home mid-trip. This situation is not only embarrassing for both the child and the parents, it can create logistical chaos and unexpected travel costs for the family.

Before agreeing to an international excursion, assess your child's capacity to follow the rules in a more independent situation. Inquire about the travel sponsor's policies toward behavioral incidents, and assess the adult leaders' abilities to safely monitor teens and respond to their different personality types. For example, a child who enjoys testing limits might do poorly with leaders who tend to be warm, fuzzy and somewhat loose in their disciplinary style. Conversely, an affectionate child who tends to be anxious and needy may do poorly with a group of leaders who are highly discipline-oriented and impatient with a child who may need a bit of extra reassurance and support.

Health considerations. If your child has a chronic condition such as diabetes, asthma, allergies, migraines, gastrointestinal difficulties or other physical limitations, ask yourself: Is my teen able to handle his or her condition completely and independently, even in unfamiliar situations? Don't forget the element of jet lag and the possibility of other travel-related reactions, such as vomiting, diarrhea or acute homesickness. Is there anything about this trip that could trigger or exacerbate your child's particular limitations or illness, possibly overwhelming his or her coping mechanisms?

Before signing on with a sponsor, make absolutely certain that the trip leaders are fully prepared to deal with your child's special needs, in a foreign country with an unfamiliar medical system. Do not assume, even with larger organizations, that the reassuring words of the marketing department accurately reflect the abilities of adults leading your child's particular trip, especially when it comes to handling special challenges that may arise.

Speak directly with the trip's leaders about your child's special needs before embarkation, and make sure you'll have that opportunity if necessary during the trip. Make sure your child's caretakers have clearly heard and understood the nature of your child's problem. If you are not fully satisfied with their responses, proceed with caution: Your child and these particular leaders may be poorly matched.

Documentation about your child's special needs is equally important. Provide detailed information in writing, with a written acknowledgment from the organization. Also be prepared to ask the sponsoring organization questions, such as: What type of official paperwork/medical alert accompanies my child on the trip, and does it explain the nature of his or her condition and measures that should be taken if problems arise? Is the paperwork in English and in the language of the host country, to allow a doctor to make informed decisions or ask for answers in case of an emergency? Also, if a host family is part of the trip, make sure they are informed of your child's needs, and have proper emergency contacts and phone numbers.

Emotional considerations. Children react differently to jet lag, culture shock, homesickness, food changes and the demands of keeping up with the pace of a group tour. Even teens without a previous history of depression or anxiety may find themselves in trouble in unfamiliar circumstances. Quite often, leaders don't have the time, ability or inclination to be the sort of "surrogate parent" that some children (particularly younger teens) may need when traveling abroad with a large group. Even leaders who are professionally trained to work with kids, such as teachers or guidance counselors, are often poorly equipped to recognize and appropriately deal with a child's special emotional needs in a non-classroom setting.

To assess your child's mental preparedness for an independent trip abroad, consider how he or she responds when pushed beyond their usual comfort zone. Is your child the sort who initially holds back, but after experiencing a success, feels confident and competent? Or is your child the sort who does better with customized small steps that he/she controls, with a tendency to become more anxious when pushed from the outside? If your child falls into the latter category, think carefully whether he or she is ready for a trip where emotional support may be scarce, and where a struggling traveler may or may not receive the attention she/he requires. Anxiety that arises in such situations can persist for weeks or even months after returning home.

Ask yourself whether this is the best year for your child to travel, or whether they should wait a year or two to further mature. For some children, what might end up as an emotional trauma one year could become a success story the following year.

2. How should I select a sponsoring organization?

Research, research, research. Remember that you are entrusting your child's physical and emotional welfare to the care of this organization. As you research different groups, you will find that their structures vary widely. Some are for-profit companies, some are not-for-profit. Some will recruit teachers as leaders, some have a staff of leaders who have been hand-selected by the organization. In smaller organizations, the actual owners of the organization may travel with the children.

Before you select a travel sponsor, get a sense of the organization's history and the reasons it's in the business of international student travel. If possible, get references from parents whose children have traveled with this organization. Most importantly, learn about its track record for safety. Contact the organization directly with questions such as: How many serious illnesses, injuries, molestations, lost child incidents or deaths have occurred in the past three years?

The Internet can reveal a lot about a student travel organization. But don't be satisfied with information solely from the organization's own Website because it's unlikely to reveal a record of problems. An Internet search using the name of the organization and the word "complaints" or "injuries" may bring up valuable information from the Better Business Bureau, state attorneys general and other online resources. Check out news stories, as well as message boards.

Leader selection/screening. Teen travel programs are usually staffed by non-medical personnel only, and their common sense, emotional stability and intelligence may be put to the test during the trip. Find out how leaders are selected. What about background checks? Also, are they screened and tested to assure they are up to the physical and emotional challenges of leading a teen trip? Does the organization allow them to "take the test until you pass" or is there a pass/fail policy that is more likely to protect your child? How are these leaders trained? Find out the nature of the safety training provided to leaders.

Remember that being granted the title of "leader" by an organization does not automatically confer sensitivity, patience or emotional stability. Someone who functions well as a teacher for 45 minutes in a class and can depend on the school nurse when a child is ill may behave quite differently when dealing with the needs of a diverse group of teens, 24/7, in a place far from home.

Leader job description. Organizations are not uniform in their treatment of leaders. Find out whether the organization offers leaders "down" time during tours. A rested leader who's had an occasional afternoon off will be in a better mood and more safety-aware than one who's exhausted and overworked.

Emergency medical procedures. Unless there are medical personnel on the trip, remember that you are trusting non-medical personnel to make judgments about the severity of a health problem. The quality and availability of medical care varies among foreign countries and can be very different from what we enjoy in the United States. Consider these questions: How easily will leaders be able to get help if a child is injured? How will language barriers in the host country be overcome? Make certain that the children will be taught how to dial and ask for emergency help in their host country.

Procedures involved in sending a child home early. What if your child needs to come home early, whether for a medical or a disciplinary reason? How will the organization handle this? Some take the child to the nearest airport and let them fly home unaccompanied. Others will send a leader home with the child and charge the parents for both tickets. In some cases, the parents must travel overseas to collect their child. Clearly, parents need clarity on this matter upfront so they can be prepared with the necessary funds and paperwork, such as a valid passport. Also, in the event of severe injury, is there insurance coverage to bring the child home swiftly and safely?

Methods of communication. For a child struggling either emotionally or medically, a call home can be critical to his or her well-being and safety. So outfitting your child with a reliable method of contacting you is critical. Ask the sponsoring organization about its policy regarding calls home and cell phone use. The sponsor should be able provide specifics about whether cell phones can be used in the foreign locales your child will visit, and which carriers actually provide service there. Consider purchasing phone cards so children can use landlines.

If possible, have a preset "touch base" date and time to talk. If you don't hear from your child or suspect something is awry, contact the organization's leaders stateside. While many organizations frown on hovering parents, don't be dissuaded by their disapproval.

Some groups also promote the fallacy that too many calls home increase a child's feeling of homesickness. In reality, a child who feels the need to call home more often is probably feeling distressed. Severe homesickness, which is essentially a form of anxiety, can become a serious problem if the child does not eat or sleep properly. Also, talk to your

child about the protocol to follow if he/she becomes separated from the group, becomes ill or is injured. Let children know they should report a rude or abusive leader or fellow traveler.

3. Is this particular trip right for my child?

Itinerary. To decide if a specific trip is a good fit for your child, consider the itinerary and your child's adaptability, skills and personal interests. For example, if your child is an outdoors-person, a trip focused on "Great Museums of Europe" might not be a successful match.

Consider your child's comfort zone, and his or her ability to adapt outside of it. How at ease will your child feel sleeping on the cold floor of a medieval castle or lying on a mat in a remote Japanese village, sharing a public bathroom? If physical exertion is expected, could your child hike in the Alps or walk the Great Wall of China for hours?

Also consider how much time the child will be sitting on a bus or train and, whether that is acceptable. Is the group allowed to rest and recoup, or is their schedule overly packed? This can be exhausting, especially for children still recovering from jet lag. Ask yourself: Will this tour provide a meaningful experience in another culture or is it mostly a sightseeing trip?

Some trips abroad involve visits to people's homes. Find out how long the visits will be, how host families are screened, and how the organization might handle potential problems with hosts. Have there been complaints about this host family in the past? To what extent is the itinerary fixed? Organizations may provide a disclaimer that the itinerary may need to change at the last minute. Find out, if you can, whether this is a regular occurrence for this organization — promising more than it delivers — or truly a rare and unavoidable shift in schedule. You should expect to be notified if your child is traveling to an unexpected location.

Leaders' personal styles. Personally assessing trip leaders in advance is important. Observe their abilities to handle pre-trip meetings and answer various questions. Ask about their CPR/rescue training. Ask about their experiences traveling abroad with children who are the same age as yours. Have there been any serious injuries on trips they have facilitated? Do the leaders seem receptive and attuned to medical or emotional problems that you may have disclosed? How well do they seem to work as a team?

Notice how responsive and interested the leaders seem when you raise a concern prior to the trip. Are they respectful and do they seem to value your input? Do they seem kid-friendly? Observe their personal style and consider how it might match your child's personality. Do you think they would discipline your child appropriately? Ask yourself, carefully and thoughtfully: Could my child confide in these people if he/she had a problem?

Another important question: How does your child feel about the leaders? Ask your child if he/she knows the adults who will lead the tour, and what he/she thinks of those individuals. If your child has what appears to be valid concerns about any leader, you should weigh these opinions in making your decision. If possible, also get references from people who are familiar with the individual leaders of your child's tour, asking specifically how they have conducted themselves as group leaders overseas. Are they well organized? Are they good role models?

Finally, trust your gut — do these people seem capable of leading a group of kids for a week or more, here or abroad? Do not proceed further if you are dissatisfied with the answer.

Leader/child ratio: Different organizations have different child/leader ratios and different procedures for handling illness. Consider the ratio of leaders to children and ask yourself if you feel the number is adequate, given the nature of the trip and the ages of the children. Find out what would happen if a child or one of the leaders falls ill. Could the group operate safely if it lost a leader for some reason, or if one or two leaders needed to stay back with a sick or injured child? If not, would this mean that a child with a 103-degree fever would be dragged around Paris because no adult can be spared from the group?

Fellow travelers. Traveling companions may pose advantages and disadvantages on an excursion. Does your child have a good friend on the trip who might ease his or her homesickness and contribute to good times. Or is one the fellow travelers a person who you think incites your child to misbehave? Consider the mix of personalities among the children when deciding if a particular trip is right for your child. Remember that for middle-schoolers, the social scene can become an additional source of stress and traveling without a friend can make the trip more challenging for a child who is already struggling.

At the same time, keep in mind that friendships in this age group are frequently volatile and thus unpredictable. Regardless of age, do not expect your child's friend to get involved if an injury or illness occurs. Friends will be told to defer to group leaders, who will most likely press them back into group activity.

Summary

A trip abroad can be a wonderful learning experience for children, as well as vicariously for their families. However, parents need to research these trips carefully, keeping in mind that they are entrusting the care and safety of their

children to others.

There is no protocol obligating organizations to report negative incidents that occur during student travel trips, though one American family has been working to pass a bill (Traveling Youth's Standards of Safety) that would mandate safety standards for teen travel organizations. For more information on this topic, check out www.tylerhill.org <<http://www.tylerhill.org>> to read about the proposed legislation, which would help parents make more informed decisions when choosing a teen travel organization.

In the meantime, parents should gather knowledge and insight about a sponsoring organization to maximize the likelihood of a successful and safe travel experience.

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