

families, chopsticks, and clovers

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Imagine a fun learning program with kids, parents, and guests all involved in a short-term communications and cultural understanding activity. Too good to be true for a 4-H activity? You bet not! The LABO exchange program with 4-H has it all for your 4-H families.

LABO/4-H Exchange

The LABO¹ Foundation of Japan recognized the need for their citizens to be multilingual and devised a unique approach to teaching language. They looked for a way to provide a one month intense language and cultural experience (and friend) for the participants. If native-speaking friends are found for each Japanese learning a new language, the learning becomes more fun and important to the learner.

The youth phase of the LABO Foundation negotiated with, and chose, the 4-H program as an exchange group in the United States. 4-H involvement began in 1972 with 179 Japanese youngsters age 12 to 16 coming to Idaho and Washington. In 1973, the United States sent 260 delegates to Japan. In the summer of 1980, 1,677 Japanese students came to America and 338 Americans went to Japan.²

Japanese youngsters may enroll in LABO language activities in their preschool years with the goal of participating in the exchange sometime between the ages of 12 and 16. The Japanese youngster is assigned to an American state by the LABO Foundation. In turn, states, through their organizational network, assign host families (with a child of the same age and sex preferred) to each Japanese child. This exchange operates in reverse for American youngsters visiting Japan.

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What's in this program for American families? A new look at their family as they learn new ways to communicate. Families learned they had many "languages" in which to communicate—art, music, hobbies, games, sports, and the everyday routines and needs of being a family member.

To illustrate how families learn about themselves, here's one Kansas mother's story. "When my Japanese son was asked if he spoke English, I promptly answered for him, 'Not much.' After I did this on several occasions he spoke up and said, 'I speak English, but she not take time to listen.' I began to wonder if I was doing the same thing to my own family and consequently I tried to listen more." This illustrates how people often take habits and practices for granted until they're seriously challenged.

Attitude Survey

In the summer of 1977, a survey of attitudes about the LABO/4-H exchange was sent to 190 Kansas host families.³ Of the 157 surveys returned, 154 families indicated they enjoyed the experience. About one-third of the families indicated language was a barrier. In spite of this, 150 of the families reported the Japanese youngsters made a satisfactory adjustment to their family, and 122 reported their language skills improved.

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The survey showed that 132 families used sign language and other nonverbal communication and 128 families said they had no difficulty finding things to interest the LABO students. A helpful relationship developed between 128 Japanese and American families through letter writing before the exchange.

Other interesting aspects of the study included 108 parents reporting the necessity to think more about the needs of children. And, 98 families noted that their own children seemed more interested in geography and world affairs. One of the major pluses for the LABO/4-H exchange project was that 148 family members reported it improved their ability to relate to others different from themselves.

Unique Laboratory

Beneath the guise of an international exchange is a unique laboratory for families to experience the importance of feelings, communications, human relations, and human development.

To gain the most from this home-based laboratory setting, a many-faceted orientation program is important.

Orientation involves four major areas:

1. The mechanics and logistics of the program.
2. An international understanding of culture, history, food, education, etc.
3. The development of communication skills.
4. Planning of county and group activities.

The mechanics include such things as time, dates, places, how to handle emergencies, who to contact, and what the expectations of the program are for each child and family.

More important is the need to provide enough information about Japan and Japanese culture so families can begin to think about the similarities and differences in the two cultures. Letter writing is extremely important as a means of acquainting the families with each other before the visit; it provides a more secure feeling for both sets of parents. Letter writing also helps families become aware of special interests and talents before the exchange student arrives. Many families said it was exciting to plan together to make the student exchange a meaningful, successful venture.

The "U" Curve

According to the National Association of Foreign Student Affairs Guidelines,⁴ families can expect their young guest to adjust to our culture in a manner described as the "U" curve shown in Figure 1.

Because of the shorter duration of the LABO than the usual foreign exchange student's stay, this curve should be compressed to 30 days. The possible homesickness phase usually starts any time after the second or third day. With their host family knowing this, families can plan more activities and/or special attention to help decrease this reaction.

Orientation and Planning

The orientation usually provides a time period to think about the experience they'll soon be participating in. Learning how to use nonverbal communication may be helpful to many families. American families trying to use chopsticks may be frustrated. This may help them understand the struggle of learning new or foreign ways of doing things.

It's also a good time to plan for any group activities the host families and exchangees might want to share. It's also helpful to plan for the Japanese guests to get together occasionally to solve their problems in their own language. This is also true for host families, as they, too, need a chance to share their experiences.

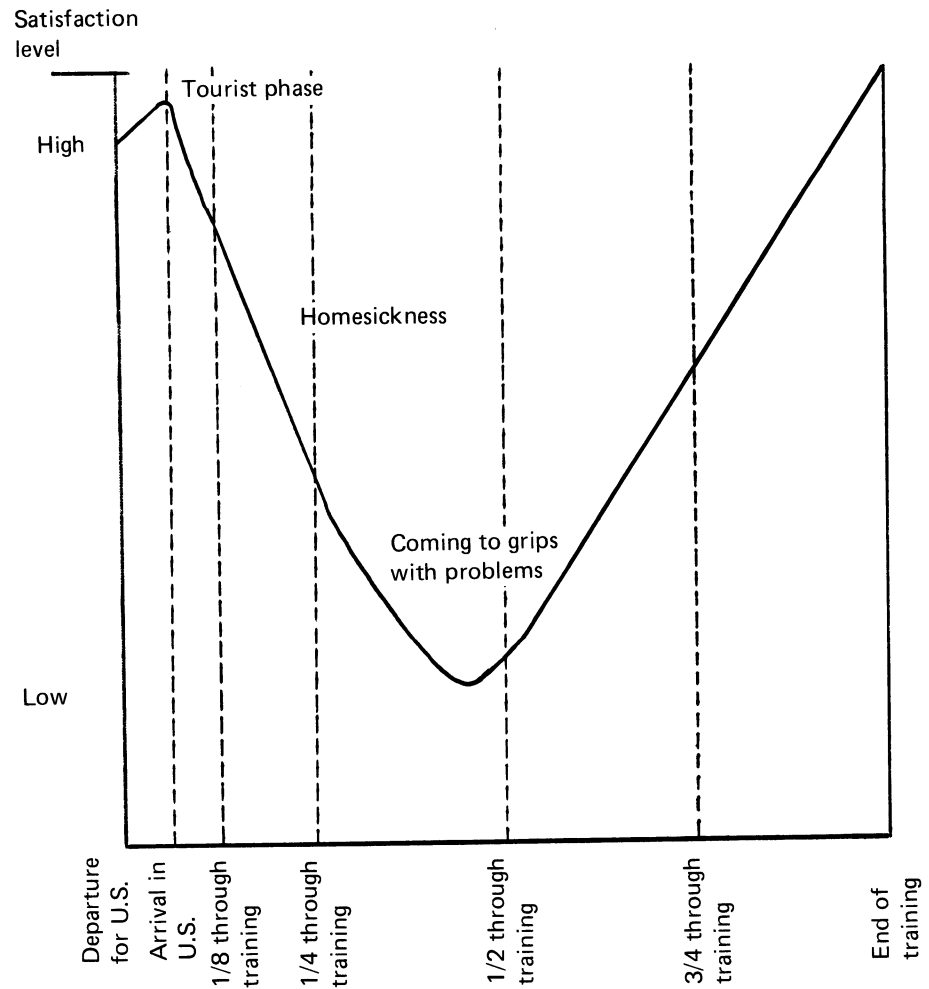


Figure 1. The U Curve.

It has been noted that Japanese businessmen are diligent in their efforts to study the culture and the language of a country they expect to do business in. Americans seldom do this.⁵ It's not hard to guess why Japanese businessmen are so successful. Likewise, the states and the host families who put *considerable effort into understanding another culture* are more likely to have a successful and satisfying experience. Orientation is the key.

Volunteer Coordinator

A program that involved 190 host families in Kansas was helped by a core of host county volunteer coordinators (HCVVC). Each volunteer is selected at the county level and trained to

recruit and orient host families and assign Japanese children to each family. The volunteer may become so effective that the program is thought of as a county-based program rather than as another program handed down by the state office.

The HCVC has the advantage of being at hand if any problem arises. He/she can quickly respond to any and all situations with empathy, and help solve problems.

The HCVC saves the county agent time. In 1977, the 15 HCVC's reported spending an average of 11.4 days on the LABO/4-H program. Each county averaged 10 to 20 host families. The county agents reported spending an average of 4.4 days with the program. Eight of the county agents reported that the coordinators were excellent models of a volunteer at the management level. This has proved to be an advantage in transferring this model to other parts of the 4-H program.

Summary

The LABO/4-H exchange program has provided families of both countries with an intense but caring experience in cultural understanding and at the same time a closer look at their own family strengths and practices.

Here's a program that offers much to 4-H in the form of:

- A family-oriented program: child-centered.
- An intense one-month project.
- A model of volunteer management.
- A laboratory in communications and human relations.
- Fun.
- Fulfillment of many goals of the Century III policy statement.⁶

Footnotes

1. LABO is the English spelling for the Japanese symbol that means language laboratory.
2. Statistical data courtesy LABO International Exchange Foundation, Yoshio Ishikawa, Director-General, Tokyo, Japan, 1980.
3. Charles L. Lang and Mary K. Munson, "LABO Host Family Questionnaire" (Manhattan: Kansas State University, 4-H Department, 1977).
4. "National Association for Foreign Student Affairs: Guidelines, Special Programs for Foreign Students, Host Family Program," NAFSA, 1860 19th Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009.
5. John Gillespie, "Made in Japan, Sold in America," *OSU Quest*, II (No. 4, 1980), 11.
6. Task Force for 4-H in Century III, "4-H in Century III" (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1977).