

Homesickness and Adaptation: How AELO Swiss Academy Helps New Students and Reassures Parents

There is a particular kind of quiet on a residential corridor at ten o'clock on a September night. Doors are closed, the study lamps are off, and somewhere near the stairwell a student sits with a phone, whispering to a parent that everything is fine. A week later, the same student sits in the same spot and does not say everything is fine. She says she wants to come home.

I have spent enough Septembers at AELO Swiss Academy to know how this story usually goes, and I have learned that the most useful thing a school can do is refuse to treat homesickness as an emergency while also refusing to treat it as nothing. It is neither a crisis nor a triviality. It is a predictable, well-documented part of leaving home, and the difference between a student who settles and a student who does not has less to do with the strength of their feelings than with the quality of the structures around them.

This piece is written for two audiences at once: the student lying awake missing a kitchen they never realised they loved, and the parent lying awake several time zones away doing the same arithmetic. Both deserve an honest account of what homesickness is, what it is not, and what actually helps.

Homesickness is not a character flaw

Clinicians who study transitions describe homesickness as an adjustment reaction, and the description is worth taking seriously because it changes how adults respond. An adjustment reaction is not a disorder. It is the mind doing exactly what minds are built to do when the familiar disappears: it protests, it searches, it grieves a little.

What students are grieving is usually not the big things. It is the smell of their own kitchen, the sibling who annoyed them, the dog, the corner shop, the sound of their street at night. A student once told me, three weeks into her first term, that what she missed most was being bored at home. That sentence has stayed with me because it is [commercial pilot school](#) so precise. She missed the low-stakes boredom of a place where nothing was new and nothing was required of her.

It helps to separate homesickness into its two strands. The first strand is the missing itself, and adults cannot fix it, because the people and the place are genuinely far away. The second strand is the overwhelm of the unfamiliar: not knowing where things are, not knowing how systems work, not yet having anyone to sit with. The first strand softens with time. The second strand responds to practical work, and that is where a school earns its keep. When we say we help students adapt, we mean we take the second strand seriously enough that the first strand has room to heal on its own.

One more point before moving on, because parents need to hear it: a child who is homesick is usually a child who is well attached. The bond is working. The distress is evidence of a good thing, misdirected at a difficult moment. Framing it that way, out loud, to your child, does more than a hundred reassurances.

The shape of the first term

Homesickness has a rhythm, and knowing the rhythm prevents a great deal of panic on all sides.

Week one is almost always deceptively easy. Novelty is a powerful anaesthetic. Parents leave in August thinking the transition went smoothly, and in many cases it did, but often the student is simply running on adrenaline and

new faces. Then the novelty wears off, the academic workload arrives in earnest, and somewhere in weeks two to four comes the dip. This is when the tearful phone calls happen, and they cluster on Sunday evenings, after a weekend with less structure and more empty hours to notice the distance.



Most students climb out of the dip within six to eight weeks. Some need a full term, particularly younger students, students away from home for the first time, or students for whom the move was more their parents' decision than their own. A small number need more structured support, and I will come back to how we recognise that group, because the boundary matters.

The variable parents underestimate is birthdays. A birthday spent away at fourteen feels, at the time, like a small catastrophe. We plan for them. So should you, from a distance, with a letter posted early enough to arrive.

The first seventy-two hours

Adaptation is won or lost in small, unglamorous details at the start, so let me describe what arrival actually looks like here.

On the first day, we unpack with the student, not for them. There is a difference. A room assembled by a parent is a room that belongs to the old life. A room assembled by the student, photos pinned where they choose, is the first small act of building a new one. Before parents leave, we make sure the roommate has been met and the assigned buddy has knocked on the door, because the first friendly face should already be known before the goodbye happens. That sequencing is deliberate. A student who watches the car leave with a stranger's back turned to them has a worse first night than one who leaves the car park with two names already in their pocket.

The house parent does the tour, the first dinner is taken with the buddy group, and the first weekend is kept full but not frantic: one walk, one trip into town, one relaxed house evening with a film and too much popcorn. The principle behind all of it is competence before comfort. A student who can find the laundry room, the library, and the dining hall unaccompanied by day three feels measurably less lost at night. Comfort follows competence, almost never the other way round.

The structures that do the quiet work

Once the first days are past, adaptation is carried by routines that students barely notice and adults should never take for granted.

Fixed mealtimes, a predictable study hall, scheduled activity afternoons, and regular house evenings do something neurological as much as social. An unsettled brain treats every unknown as a potential threat, and an unfamiliar environment presents thousands of unknowns per hour. A timetable quietly deletes most of them. The student stops asking where, when, and with whom, and starts spending that energy on the actual work of being somewhere new.

Food matters more than adults expect, and we treat it accordingly. There are familiar options at every dinner, there is a feedback channel to the kitchen that students actually use, and there is permission to say "I hated that" without drama. A student who feels heard about the small things will mention the big things eventually.

Language deserves a paragraph of its own. A student who arrives with strong grades in English may still go quiet for weeks in a multilingual environment, because classroom English and social English are different muscles. Teachers here know to allow that silence, to pair spoken confidence carefully, and to treat going quiet as a phase rather than a personality change. The same applies to the local language for students who arrived with none of it; the goal for the first term is functional survival phrases and the confidence to use them badly.

Academics get their own early attention, because a wobbly first month in mathematics can calcify into a lasting belief that one is bad at mathematics. Extra help is offered early and framed as completely normal, which it is. And behind all of this sits the counselling provision, accessible without a referral and without stigma, supported by residential staff who are trained to notice the specific kind of quiet that signals trouble: the student who is present at meals but not talking, in the room but not in the group, attending everything and belonging to nothing.

The call every parent dreads

It usually arrives on a Sunday in week three. Your child is crying, the sentence "I want to come home" has been said, and every instinct in your body is telling you to fix it tonight.

Here is the guidance we give parents, learned from many of these calls. Agree with your child, in advance and in writing if it helps, that big decisions wait forty-eight hours. The feeling on Sunday night is real, and it is also almost never the same feeling on Tuesday afternoon. Do not promise a rescue at midnight, and do not vanish either; both extremes teach the wrong lesson. Scheduled calls beat daily marathons. Twenty minutes, two or three times a week, with the timing agreed in advance, works better than an open line, because an open line keeps both parties in a state of low-grade monitoring that serves neither.

During the call, listen first, validate second, and then redirect to one concrete thing. "What is one thing you have to do tomorrow?" is a better closing sentence than "I hope you feel better." On our end, the house parent checks in the next morning, not to interrogate, but to hand the student one small task and one social anchor for the day. The student who cried on Sunday needs, on Monday, to be needed.

How we keep parents in the loop

Parents should never learn about a difficult adjustment weeks after it started. The advisor makes contact in the first week, there is a structured check-in around week three when the dip typically arrives, and updates continue through the settling period. Waiting for the scheduled update is right for most things. It is wrong for some, and we act rather than wait when we see the following:

- A student eating very little for several consecutive days
- Sleep disrupted night after night, rather than the occasional bad night
- Withdrawal from friends that persists for more than about two weeks

- Repeated physical complaints, such as headaches or stomach aches, with no medical cause
- Any talk of hopelessness, or of not wanting to be here in any sense of the phrase

That last item is in a different category from the rest, and we treat it that way. If we call you about it, please take the call seriously and work with us quickly.

What parents can actually do from a distance

Distance limits what parents can do, but the remaining levers are surprisingly powerful, and most of them cost nothing.

Letters beat texts. A letter is a physical object that can be kept in a drawer and reread on a bad night; a text is consumed and gone. Care packages with familiar snacks, within customs rules, arrive as small acts of home at exactly the right moment. Managing your own anxiety is the hardest item on this list and possibly the most important: children read parental fear instantly, and the goodbye you gave in August is the script they replay in October. If you delivered it with confidence, they have confidence to draw on. If you delivered it through tears and apologies, they will feel they have something to feel guilty about.

The questions you ask matter more than the reassurances you offer. Vague questions produce vague answers, and a homesick student will answer "how are you?" with whatever ends the call fastest. Specific questions open a door:

- Who did you sit with at dinner this week?
- What was the best and the worst part of the last seven days?
- What is the food actually like, honestly?
- What is one thing you figured out on your own this week?
- When is your next match, concert, or trip, and can you tell me about it?

Notice what these questions have in common. They assume a life is being built here, and they ask the student to describe it. That assumption, repeated gently over weeks, becomes the student's own.

The mistakes to avoid are just as consistent: hourly texting, promising an early visit as a rescue plan, criticising the school in front of the child, and compensating for guilt with gifts. All four are understandable. All four make the settling harder.

When it is more than homesickness

Homesickness has a texture and a timeline. It flares at predictable moments, it responds to structure and connection, and it fades along a curve even when the curve is slow. When a student's symptoms intensify rather than soften after the first month, or when none of the normal anchors reach them, we involve our counsellor, and where necessary we bring in external professionals, and we say so to parents plainly rather than managing the situation quietly.

There is a harder sentence that honest schools must be willing to say: not every school fits every child. Occasionally, after everything has been tried, the right answer is a different school, a year at home, or a day arrangement instead of boarding. Our obligation is not to preserve every enrolment. It is to keep every child moving forward, and being straight with parents about that boundary is part of the service, not a failure of it. In practice it is rare. Most of the students who trigger that conversation in October are thriving by spring. But the conversation happens when it needs to, and both sides are better for it.

The long arc

Last August I watched a returning student stand at the front of the orientation group and explain, with a dry joke about her own first night, exactly where the late-night snack drawer was and which washing machine ate socks. Two Septembers earlier she had been the girl on the stairwell with the phone, insisting she could not last the term. Nobody in the new intake would have believed it, and that is precisely why she was the right person for the job.

This is the arc we are really working toward. The student who has built a second home has acquired something that no curriculum teaches directly: the knowledge that they can lose their footing and recover it, in a new place, in a new language, among people who were strangers a season ago. Parents who receive a November call in which their child sounds, frankly, a little bored, should celebrate quietly. Boredom is the sound of adaptation. It means the extraordinary has become ordinary, and ordinary was the goal all along.

The ache is real. So is the growth. You are not abandoning your child by letting them feel it, and we are not ignoring them by refusing to rescue them from it. Between a school that structures the days, notices the silences, and tells you the truth, and parents who stay steady, ask good questions, and trust the timeline, the overwhelming majority of students do not just survive the first term. They come out of it larger than they went in.