

The First Semester Away: What Parents Can Expect When Their Child Studies at AELO Swiss Academy

The drive to campus is quieter than https://www.reddit.com/r/flyingeurope/comments/1nnhrnv/anyone_from_aelo_swiss_any_advices/ you expected. Your child sits beside you, half-scrolling, answering in fragments, while you do the arithmetic every parent does on that road: how many weeks until the winter break, how many hours of flight time between you, how many ways this could go wrong.

Then you carry the bags upstairs, make the bed together, and say goodbye in a stairwell that smells of fresh paint and someone else's cooking. You hold it together until the parking lot. Most parents don't hold it together much past the parking lot.

I want to make a case to you before that day arrives, because the case matters more than the packing list. The first semester away at a residential school like AELO Swiss Academy is the hardest stretch of the entire journey, and it is also the stretch where your child changes the most. Parents who understand the shape of those months make better decisions in October than parents who are improvising. So here is the shape, drawn from years of watching these semesters unfold.

The drop-off: keep the goodbye short

The single most common mistake on arrival day is the long goodbye. Parents linger. They return to the room for a forgotten charger. They take one more walk around campus, give one more hug, say one more thing they've already said. Every extra minute communicates the same message: this is dangerous, and I am reluctant to leave you here.

Your child is nervous on arrival day whether you stay ten minutes or three hours. The difference is what they do with that nervousness once you leave. The student whose parents departed cleanly, with a clear plan for contact and a warm, brief goodbye, starts building a life that same evening. The student whose parents stretched the goodbye over an afternoon spends that evening managing the worry they just inherited.

Say the practical things. When you'll talk, how money works, when you'll see them next. Then say something true and warm, and go. It will feel abrupt. It is not. It is the first gift of the semester, and it costs you the most.

The first ten days: silence is not a crisis

Most boarding academies deliberately front-load September, and AELO Swiss Academy is no exception. Orientation runs thick with house meetings, placement conversations, activity sign-ups, and the first excursions out into the countryside. Schools do this on purpose. Busy students adjust faster than idle ones, and a full calendar crowds out the hours when homesickness does its worst work.

The side effect is that your child may send home almost nothing. A two-line text. A blurry photo of a mountain. Then silence for two days.

Parents read that silence as misery, and I have watched the escalation that follows: repeated calls, anxious voicemails, messages to the school asking whether everything is fine. Almost always, the silence means the opposite of what you fear. It means your child is tired, occupied, and living a life that doesn't pause to file

reports. If you had asked me to summarize ten thousand first-week messages, the honest summary would be this: the parents were suffering more than the children.

Agree on a rhythm before you leave, something modest like a short call on Sunday and messages in between, and then hold to it without escalating when replies come slowly. Also expect the jet lag. For families arriving from overseas, sleep runs strange for the first week, and a groggy video call at an odd hour is a scheduling problem, not an emotional one.

Homesickness has a shape

Homesickness is not a flat experience that lasts until it stops. It has peaks, and in my experience those peaks land somewhere between week two and week five, hitting hardest at night and on Sunday evenings. Sunday is the classic. The week's structure dissolves, the house goes quiet, and home is suddenly very far away. The child who cries through Sunday's call is frequently the same child laughing at dinner on Tuesday. Both versions are true, and if you only ever see the Sunday version, you will badly misjudge how the semester is going.

Understand what homesickness actually is: grief for the familiar. Nothing more sinister. It resolves the way all grief for the familiar resolves, by the slow accumulation of new familiar things. A preferred table in the dining hall. An inside joke with a roommate. A teacher who pronounces their name correctly and remembers what they said last week. Smaller schools do this work faster than large ones, because a student is noticed by adults within days rather than processed by a system within weeks.

What helps is normalizing. "Of course you miss home, everyone does in September. What's been the best part of your week so far?" What harms is rescuing. Booking a flight in week three because a Sunday call was tearful sets a precedent that lasts for years: tears produce tickets. Every hard week that follows will route through you instead of through your child's own growing capacity to cope.

That said, homesickness is not always just homesickness, and a parent who never worries is failing at the job as surely as one who worries constantly. Here is where I draw the line between a rough adjustment and something that deserves real attention:

- Sleep that stays broken for several weeks, rather than settling after the initial adjustment.
- Withdrawal from everything, not just a slow start with one or two friendships.
- Grades collapsing across every subject at once, rather than dipping in one.
- Refusing to attend classes or meals, or avoiding the residence itself.
- Any mention of self-harm, which warrants an immediate call to the school's staff, not just to your child.

If you see these, act, and act through the school. Residential staff see what a video call cannot: whether your child is eating, socializing, and sleeping. Use their eyes.

The communication trap

The daily long-distance call is the most loving mistake parents make. It feels like devotion, and it functions like a tether. A child who spends forty minutes every evening narrating their day for a parent is a child who never fully arrives where they are. The call becomes a nightly commute back home, and the semester stalls.

There is a subtler problem too. Scheduled long calls become performances. Your child, unconsciously, curates. Either they perform happiness to protect you, which leaves them lonely with the real stuff, or they perform misery, because misery gets attention and sometimes gets results. Neither performance is a conversation.

What works better is smaller and more frequent: voice notes, a photo of the dog, a three-minute call on a Tuesday. Ask narrow questions. "What did you have for lunch?" will get you further than "How are you really?" every single time, because it is answerable, and the answer often carries more information than the child intends. Let bad news travel at their pace. They will tell you about the failed quiz faster if the channel doesn't feel like a courtroom.

The kindest thing you can be, for four months, is boringly consistent and calm. Your anxiety travels down the wire. So does your steadiness. Send the second one.

The academics will look different, and that is the point

Swiss academic culture prizes precision and self-management, and it does not warm up with a cushion of easy early assessments. At many schools the first substantial graded work lands around week four or five, and first marks often dip relative to the old school. Parents panic at this dip. Please don't. A dip is the ordinary cost of transfer: a new system, new expectations, possibly a new language of instruction, and teachers who do not yet know how your child learns.

The skill that separates the students who recover from the ones who don't is self-advocacy. The student who emails the teacher themselves, shows up to ask the question, requests feedback on the failed quiz. This is learnable, and the first semester is when it gets learned, or doesn't.

Which is why the parent email in week three is so damaging. It solves this week's problem and guarantees that week forty's problem arrives unsolved. At a small academy like AELO Swiss Academy, adults notice a struggling student quickly; your job is to point your child toward that adult, not to stand in front of them. "Have you spoken to your teacher yet?" is the most valuable sentence you can repeat all semester.

The October phone call

Somewhere around week six or seven, you will get the call. "I want to come home." It usually follows a failed test, a friendship wobble, or plain exhaustion, and it lands like a verdict on the entire decision you made as a family. It is almost never a verdict. It is a bad seventy-two hours with a phone attached.

Here is the response protocol I'd defend. First, listen all the way through without interrupting or fixing. Second, ask what happened in the last three days specifically, because a wobble almost always has a recent trigger, and naming it shrinks it. Third, say you'll talk again on Thursday. The delay is not coldness. Most wobbles dissolve before Thursday arrives, and if this one does, you have taught your child something no lecture could: hard weeks end.

If it doesn't dissolve, bring in the residential staff before you bring in a travel agent. And be honest with yourself about the rare cases where leaving truly is right: sustained bullying the school cannot resolve, a mental health crisis beyond what the environment can support, a genuine mismatch between the child and the program. In those situations, act, and act without shame. But learn to distinguish data from mood. One

