

NEWS FEATURE

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Spanish exchange was a life-changing experience

If your child is struggling with languages, a new form of exchange programme could be the answer, as one St Albans mum discovered.

Jo MacGregor, from Fleetville, found out about a privately arranged student exchange programme while listening to a radio show, and decided to enrol her daughter Abby, then 13 and a Year 9 pupil at St Albans High School.

The programme involved Abby going to live with a Spanish family for six months, with the Spanish student then living with her family in the UK for the same time. Families were strictly vetted and the selection process ensured the right family match for students.

Abby's school gave her the go-ahead because although she would miss a term and a half, the programme was educational and she would be attending school full time in Spain.

Abby said: "After I was selected and received pictures of the home in Spain and the family I would be living with I was really excited to be going."

"I didn't really think about the time I'd be away because it was something completely new I was doing that no-one else I knew had

done. It felt like an adventure, but an entirely safe one."

But things were a bit more emotional for mum Jo: "I flew over with her and we went for a walk on the beach, it was a lovely day together, but I was advised to only stay for half an hour once she was with the family because of becoming emotional."

Abby's exchange partner Iria Dominguez Baños and her father let her communicate in English for the first week, but after a couple of days she was thrown in at the deep end and started school, which was very different from the UK.

"It made me realise really what good facilities we have in UK schools. In Spain there weren't any non-academic classes and we had all our lessons in one class which was quite old-fashioned," said Abby.

In the evenings the family would help her with basic Spanish words using toddler books and friends at school helped by writing her homework down.

After a month and a half Abby said she noticed a huge improvement in her Spanish and by the end of the trip she was thinking and counting in the language. In fact when her grandparents flew back to the UK

with her she kept answering their questions in fluent Spanish.

Back at school Abby caught up quickly and was able to take and pass her Spanish GCSE a year early, gaining an A*. She also noticed it had helped with her French, which before was a B-C grade, but she also got an A* for her GCSE.

But Abby said the benefits weren't just academic: "I got to experience a different culture, celebrating Christmas and New Year differently, experiencing a different sense of humour and different family life."

"I learnt to play volleyball and the piano, experienced new food, a new school system and even got to go skiing on their school trip. I got so much out of it and want to do more new things in the future."

Jo added: "I absolutely made the right decision encouraging her to go despite missing her terribly. We met the family first and the selection process is so thorough I never doubted she would be well cared for and was in regular contact with the parents."

Abby's school also supported the programme. Maureen Harcourt, head of house, said: "Abby thrived in Spain and as well as becoming fluent in the language she made lots of



■ Exchange student Iria Dominguez Baños and Abby MacGregor at the Olympic Park in Stratford

good friends and loved the independence and freedom of the experience.

"On returning, she was very conscientious about making up missed work and was supported in this not only by the school but also by her family who supplied extra tuition where necessary."

"I would definitely recommend it to other students. The school also benefits from the exchange students who have much to contribute not only in lessons but also in extra-curricular and social activities."

Now Jo is the UK rep for a new exchange programme, Adolesco, which offers a similar scheme for

nine to 17 year olds but with placements of between three weeks to three months, meaning students can take the exchanges in school holidays if they wish to.

■ **Adolesco UK is being launched this year to encourage more students to improve their language skills as well as experience life with a family in Spain, France or Germany. It is a non-commercial operation, not-for-profit, charging just arrangement costs and no money is exchanged between families. For more information see www.adolesco.org**

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