

Expats: making sure that the children can take full advantage of your move

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Tim – a nine-year old -- and Joe¹, his eleven-year old brother, are Australians. They arrived in France some months ago, for what turns out to be their fifth expatriation! They are delighted. They have already made a lot of new friends; they are learning French, and like it. Their parents too are proud – proud to be able to open for their two boys a window on different cultures. And nothing is more contagious than enthusiasm: the parents' happiness is quite naturally mirrored in that of their children.

And yet...the expatriation can be a source of infinite tensions for children – tensions which they have all too often to face in silence, since nobody asks them for their views. If the challenge is not met, there may result serious consequences: school failure, emotional imbalances, relational problems, and so on. Any one of them may lead the expatriate parent to putting a premature end to his international assignment.

Tim, Joe and their parents, on the other hand, are living proof that this need not be so. How? After a brief survey of the underlying issues, we would suggest some avenue which you might want to explore.

1. Three challenges.

Expatriate children tend to face three main sources of tension, both before departure and once in their new setting:

a. “And their buddies?”

Children are quite naturally afraid to leave their friends (they may be their cousins, or even their grandparents). They are also worried that they may not be able to make new friends in their new country: in fact, the quest for new buddies may be particularly difficult if the children do not speak the new country's language.

b. School problems;

Children also sense that they may face school problems, especially if they don't speak the new country's language. Even brilliant children may make no sense of the course work, they may bring home poor marks, they may be made fun of by the other children, or have to face impatient teachers. There is also always the fear that upon returning to their home country they may lose one – or even several – years due to the different school programs, and thus find themselves among the “non-performers”.

¹ The names are fictitious.

c. Loss of control, and feeling abandoned

With the change, children tend to lose control over their lives and environment. They may also feel neglected by their parents, who are busy preparing their move of adjusting to the new setting.

All these conflicts are particularly felt by teenagers looking for fixed points of reference and identity. For them, leaving may be particularly traumatic if they have to leave behind a girl- or boyfriend.

In order to cope with these challenges, the first and most important thing is to recognize the difficulties for what they are, and not pretend that they don't exist. Once that is done, there are a number of simple ways to help the children maintain their psychological balance, and ensure success in school and in their new social environment.

2. Ten approaches to help your children maintain a healthy psychological balance

While most of the suggested steps refer to problems experienced by the children once they have arrived in the new country with their family, some things should be taken care of before the family leaves:

a. Before leaving

(i) Listening

The first thing to do in order to ensure that your children maintain a sound psychological balance is to listen to them, encouraging them to talk about their feelings and their worries. This will prove to them that you understand them, that you are there to help, and that they are neither alone nor indeed abandoned.

(ii) Discovering

If at all possible, make a preparatory trip to explore the layout of the new place, manners of dressing and fashion (particularly important for adolescents), and so on. This will limit the scope as well as the fear of the unknown. If such a site survey is not feasible, the children should be encouraged to find out more about the new place through books, articles, video cassettes, and not everything down.

(iii) Autonomy

Depending on their age, children can be asked to do some of their own packing/unpacking, and to clean and lay out their own closets. This will allow them to gain some control over the new environment. And by the way, it will also give you some time and energy to listen and talk to them.

(iv) Language training

To the extent feasible, let the children take language lessons in order to allow them to communicate as soon as possible in the language of the new country.

b. In their new county

(v) For a smooth transition

You no doubt wish for your children to adapt at once, and to make lots of new friends in a few days. While this is not impossible, it is not necessarily the best thing for them. Your children need some time to take their bearings, and to adjust to change as radical as an expatriation! Give them enough time, and don't push them from day one to embark in extra-curricular activities, even if it is desirable for them to do so in due time.

Beyond this, you might encourage them to correspond by E-mail or letters, or even to make phone calls during week ends, when the tariffs are lower, in order to tell their friends back home about their new experiences and environment. This would no doubt facilitate a smooth transition.

(vi) Family Outings

One of the first things one likes to do upon landing is to go out and explore the new country. As often as possible these outings should include the whole family. It will give your children that impression that they are part of a team, which will jointly face the challenge of the new environment. It will reduce any feeling of being abandoned, and they will be delighted to discover the feared unknown in complete security

(vii) Regularity

Children tend to be troubled by any change. By all means continue whatever family habits to which they may be accustomed. This may refer to things as simply as the hour of getting up or going to bed, taking one's meals, or looking at TV. Regularity of timing is particularly important.

(viii) Expression

If it is advisable to have the children talk their feelings before departure, it is even more important to do so after arrival in the new environment. It is important that any internal turmoil they may experience be externalized. They might thus be encouraged to keep a diary or, for the younger children, to draw and paint.

(ix) Visits

When one lives abroad, there are generally many friends who want to come and visit with you. This should be encouraged also for your children's friends. They could come and stay with you during their vacations, or you may have them spend them with their grandparents.

(x) Contacts

What applies to the expatriate's spouse, holds true also for their children: they should stay in touch with other expatriate children, so as to have some friends who speak their own language.

All these suggestions may seem obvious. In the “heat of battle”, however, certain attitudes or behaviors may be forgotten. It is thus important to give these matters some thought in advance, so that on J-day everything will run smoothly and naturally. As the example of Tim and Joe makes very clear, the parent's attitude plays a key role in shaping that of their children.

Beyond this, of course – ad even if their psychological balance is maintained -- children are confronted with another set of problems, this time concerning school rather than family. The right choice of school is of course of crucial importance. We will come back to this subject in one of our next monthly reports, but would at this point simply map outline some of the main considerations:

3. Choosing the right school: four possible tracks

The choice of the most appropriate school for expatriates' children depends on three basic variables: the children's age; the expected duration of the expatriation; the location of the school in relation to the place of residence. In most cases that choice is between a local school (language and programs of the host country), and schools of the country of origin (with its own programs and mother tongue), although other alternatives may be possible in particular cases.

a. The different school systems :

(i) Schooling in the host country's language and programs

(ii) Schooling in the mother tongue

(iii) Bilingual or International Schools

c. Adult children: What visa? What studies? And what about jobs?

To share the expatriation adventure with one's children can potentially be an exciting experience for them as well as for the parents. This presupposes, however, that the problems are faced and taken seriously, without neglecting any aspects. An expatriate child needs very special assistance: he must be listened to with much love and affection, and needs firm points of reference. If the parents can give that to their children, the child will see the international and multi-cultural experience you offer them as a gift of heaven. It may well be that upon reaching adulthood he too will want to take his own family to a foreign country....meaning that their parents will themselves become expatriate grandparents.



For further reading:

Articles :

Diana Morales. "Scolarité des enfants anglophones arrivant à Paris". In *La lettre de Cocitra Mobilité aux Responsables de la Mobilité dans les Entreprises*. June, September, December 2000.

Julia Goodwin. "Family-Related Issues And How They Impact The Relocation Process". In *Mobility*. January 2000. Pages 41-43.

Donna J. Malinak. "Picture two little girls..." In *Mobility*. April 1999. Pages 21-24.

Books :

Karen Curnow McCluskey. *Notes From A Traveling Childhood*. Foreign Service Youth Foundation. 1994. 123 pages.

Nancy J. Piet-Pelon et Barbara Hornby. *Women's Guide To Overseas Living*. Intercultural Press. 1992. Chapter 10 : "Moving Overseas With Children". Pages 131-155.