

## HRDs : Don't forget your expats' children

*September 2003*

Tim – a nine-year old -- and Joe<sup>1</sup>, 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. Seeing that their children are happy, they are relaxed, and pleased with the opportunity of working abroad: this means that the expatriate will give his best also on the job.

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 these problems may cause the expatriate parent to put a premature end to his international assignment. A waste for everyone concerned, including the employer. Indeed, it is evident that the success of an expatriate's foreign posting must also build on the wellbeing of his children. Tim, Joe and their parents are living proof that this can be done. How? After a brief survey of the underlying issues, we would suggest some avenues which you might want to explore to prevent or cope with the problems confronting expatriate children.

### 1. Three challenges.

If you want to give your expatriates the best possible chances to succeed in their foreign posting, you must understand the pressures to which they are exposed – and those relating to their children figure prominently among them. Three major problem areas deserve special attention:

#### a. “And their buddies?”

Prior to departure, 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 environment: 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 in the new country, especially if they don't speak its language. Even brilliant children may not be able to follow the school program, they may bring home poor marks, they may be made fun of by the other children, or have to face impatient teachers. And there is 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 “sub-performers”.

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<sup>1</sup> The names are fictitious.

**c. Loss of control, and feeling abandoned**

With the move, 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, who are in need of fixed points of reference and identity. For them, the move to a foreign country 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. Three steps to be taken prior to departure**

Once the expatriate is installed in his foreign posting with his family, it is often too late to repair the psychological trauma of the children torn from their familiar world. For this reason, important measures should be taken before the actual move, standing-by to help them while the departure is being prepared.

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 measures should be taken before the family leaves:

**a. Helping the parents**

The most important thing the DHR can do to help future expatriates' children, is to lighten the burden which the move places on their parents' shoulders. If the firm takes care of all necessary but cumbersome formalities, especially with regard to immigration papers, as well as of the actual move, the future expatriate will have more time to devote to his children. He/she will be physically present, and will be able to answer questions, and listen to the children talking about their fears and expectations. If the children will not have the impression of being abandoned or ignored, this can only facilitate the move to the foreign assignment.

Quite evidently, of course, the DHR cannot take care of everything: the future expatriate and his family will themselves have to go to be vaccinated, and they will have to pack their trunks or boxes. But if the DHR can make the medical appointments, as well as the appointments with the movers, some of the workload will be taken off his shoulders.

**b. Exploratory visit**

In some firms, future expatriates are offered a preparatory trip to establish contact with their future colleagues, explore the layout of the new place, with its challenges and difficulties, as well as to cope with possible cultural difficulties, and adjust themselves to new working methods and atmosphere. Wouldn't it be possible to allow the family to accompany the expatriate parent? The children could thus also explore their new environment – schools, parks, athletic facilities, shops, and so on – and see by themselves what sort of people live in their new country, how they dress (important especially for teenagers), and familiarize themselves with the sound of the new language, and so on. This will obviously reduce their anxieties and fear of the unknown.

**c. Language training**

At times employers offer language training to the future expatriate, without realizing that his family will probably be in even greater need of it. In fact, how will his children be able to communicate with school- or playmates, and with neighbors, if they do not speak or – to start with -- do not even have the rudiments of the local language? Language training will of course be particularly needed if the children are to attend a local school. If such training programs are not provided by the employer himself, the future expatriate should at least be channeled to appropriate language training institutions, either before or after the move.

**3. Three possible solutions once the expatriate have arrived in the new posting**

**a. Helping the parents**

What has been said for the period preceding the move applies also to the life of the expatriate family once it is in place: the more time the expatriate will be able to devote to his family, the less his children will feel abandoned. Quite evidently, the expatriate will have to learn to manage his/her time, and will go through an adaptation phase during which he must learn all about his new job, the corporate culture, the host country market, and so on. But these challenges should not impinge too much on the time the expatriate can spend with his family, which in that phase will be in particular need of his presence. The HRD should thus encourage the expatriate to stick as closely as possible to his working hours, and perhaps to undertake frequent family weekend outings. At times the firm itself organizes such excursions to allow the expatriate to discover his new country; it would be desirable that the expatriate's family should be allowed to join; special children's outings might also be organized.

**b. Helping with childcare**

The firm might also offer its help with young children while the expatriate is at work. As a minimum, it should provide the family with a list of reliable baby-sitters and expatriates' associations, and put them in touch with the services that may be advised by the respective consulates. If the firm is prepared to do more it might -- through its staff council or association -- take care of the children and their extra-curricular activities. To that end, effective coordination between the staff council or association at headquarters and those that may exist in the foreign country will of course be of the essence.

**c. Psychological counseling**

In serious cases the firm might also propose the assistance of a child psychologist, or at least put the family in touch with competent professional specialists. In any event the HRD should encourage the family not to withdraw with its problems into its own corner, but instead seek help where help can be found.

**4. Counseling on the choice of schools**

All the steps suggested above can help expatriate children to maintain a sound psychological balance. It should not be forgotten, however, that a child's life is to a large extent taken up by his schooling. It is in effect in school that he will spend most of his time, where he will find his friends, and affirm his personality. To receive part of his schooling abroad can be an enriching experience, but it also implies very specific challenges, first among which being generally that of the language. For that reason the HRD should be prepared to advise expatriates – and future expatriates – on the schooling of their children in the foreign posting. 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 outline some of the main topics:

**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**

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

Quite evidently, it is not possible to move a staff member with all his family to a foreign environment as one would move a pawn on a chessboard. The expatriate is not a free electron that can be effective regardless of the environment in which it finds itself. Quite to the contrary: his family's well-being, and especially that of his children, has a major impact on his professional life. If you can help him to maintain as serene as possible a family life, the employer will find his reward in the expatriate's performance.



**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.