

Expatriate Children : for a successful schooling

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Last month we have stressed how important it was for a successful expatriation to take into account the particular needs of the expatriate's children, and gave you some pointers which you yourselves should follow up to help your children (small or older) maintain a good psychological balance. Yet these efforts may well come to naught if you do not take into account their priority need: a good school!

In fact, your children spend much of their time at school. It is there that they make friends, and develop and affirm their personality. It is also at school that they decide what they want to do later, and that they acquire much of what they need to grow up as balanced and responsible adults. School – often more than their own bedroom – is their home and their universe. The choice of their school is thus a matter of great – and even vital – importance.

Regardless of what your final choice will be, you should remember that schooling in a foreign country is a double-edged adventure: on the one hand it is a valuable experience that will enrich the child's personality and skills. On the other hand, however, the child will have to face the unknown and to overcome many other obstacles. While it is not be easy to anticipate all contingencies, the choice of a school cannot be left to chance: the following steps will help you to make a success of your child's experience.

1. Choosing the right school: three possible tracks

Three basic factors must be taken into account in this connection: the child's age; the likely duration of the expatriation; the school's distance from the place of residence. The choice will generally be between a local school (language and syllabus of the host country) and a school of the expat's country of origin (teaching in the child's mother-tongue, and home country's syllabus), although other possibilities may present themselves.

(a) Schooling in the host country language and syllabus

One of the advantages of host-country schooling is that the child will very rapidly become bilingual. This choice is particularly advisable for small children (at kindergarten level), who will easily integrate and may soon be more fluent than you in the host country language.

On the other hand, older children may experience difficulties with their integration and ability to follow the curriculum unless they already have some familiarity with the host country language. It is particularly evident that the acquisition of reading skills will be affected if the child is taught in a language he does not fully master. This means that local schools are not advisable for children between the ages of 6 and 8, unless they already speak the host country's language.

Beyond that critical age, local schools are advisable if the expatriation lasts two years or more: they facilitate the child's integration in the host country. They are generally closer to the expatriate family's domicile: children will meet their neighbors also at school, and will thus develop real friendships.

If you envisage such a solution, however, you should make sure of the registration dates and conditions (administrative formalities; vaccinations, etc.) You should also see to it that your children learn the host country language, if at all possible before arriving there. And you should of course be aware that the local school solution also has some drawbacks: thus teachers may not always be patient with language mistakes; other school children may make fun of the new arrivals, and even where your children have done well in your country of origin, they may – at least at first – get poor grades and will consequently feel humiliated. Given differences in the school programs and syllabi, they may later also lose a year upon returning to your home country. While the local school approach is thus culturally enriching, it should be considered only in the case of a long-term expatriation, so as to give the child enough time to reap the rewards of all the additional efforts he is called upon to make.

b. Schooling in the expat's mother-tongue

This approach is particularly advisable for 6- to 8-year olds who do not speak the host country language: it will in particular improve their capacity to learn by reading, an essential tool for the success of their future schooling. Schooling in the mother-tongue is also appropriate for the children of short-term expats: it will be easier for the child to be re-integrated in the home-country school system upon return there. Last, many teenagers who for the first time go to live abroad may prefer this alternative, since they will attend school and share thoughts, hopes and fears with other expats of their own age.

The problem is, of course, that such schools are not available everywhere, and that they tend to be more expensive than the local school system. The schools may be at some distance from the expat family's residence, meaning that the children must be driven to school by their mother. It must also be kept in mind that such schools generally rely on a special type of teacher – often expat spouses who may have some teaching experience, but who may also leave school at mid-term if the other spouse's expatriation comes to an end. This means that the children will be exposed to frequent teacher changes, to the detriment of their feelings of stability and security.

c. Bi-lingual or international schools.

Such schools present the advantage of mixing different cultures and to facilitate cross-flows between the expatriate's home culture, the host-country culture, and often also of a variety of other cultures represented by schoolmates of different nationalities. Since the teaching is offered in the two languages, the transition from the mother tongue and the host country language is of course facilitated

Again, however, such schools are not available everywhere (or in any event not everywhere in the host country), nor do they offer schooling in all languages. They are generally attended only by children of short-term expatriates: this means a rapid turn-over of the student body, and makes it difficult for the child to develop lasting friendships. Also, like mother-tongue schools, they are often located far from the expatriate's residence, calling for the mother to become her children's driver.

2. Children who have already attained maturity: what visa? what studies? and what about jobs?

In many instances children attain the age of maturity while their expatriate family is still abroad. Quite apart from the problems posed by the fact that the legal age of maturity may vary from country to country, many questions arise and should be considered at that stage. May the child remain in the host country under his expat parents' status, or will he be treated like any other immigrant? What administrative steps should be taken? Can he hold a job, at least to pay for his studies or to start a career? May he claim double nationality? If he wants to continue his studies, will he be entitled to scholarships? Does he want to pursue his academic career in his parents' host country? In his country of origin? Or in a third country?

In principle, all these questions should be considered well ahead of the child's 18th birthday. *L'Élan* may help you to find the appropriate answer, but you yourselves will have to face them, and this as soon as possible.

The schooling of expat children is thus not a simple matter. The problems it poses must be taken seriously, and it is important that you take your time to find the schools that are most appropriate for your children. These few suggestions of *l'Élan* may help you make the right choice, and give your children a rich and valuable multi-cultural experience – even if they have already left their (mobile) family setting. In fact, there is nothing like than an international childhood to prepare for, and succeed in many exciting professional tracks.



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*. A series of three articles published in June, September and 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:

Nancy J. Piet-Pelon et Barbara Hornby. *Women's Guide To Overseas Living*. Intercultural Press. 1992. Chapter 10: "Moving Overseas With Children". Pages 139-141 (paragraph on "School and Related Concerns").