

## **HRD: Expatriate Children: for a successful schooling**

*November 2003*

Last month we have stressed how important it was for a successful expatriation to take into account the particular needs of your expat colleague's children, and sketched some ten tracks help him and his children (young or old) maintain a good psychological balance. Yet these efforts may well come to naught if they do not take into account their priority need: a good school!

In fact, 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 in life, and that they acquire much of what they need to become balanced and responsible adults. School – often more than their own bedroom – is their home and their universe. It is thus essential that the parents make the right choices – and advice by a HRD can do much to help them in that connection.

We are thus offering you some suggestions on the relative advantages and disadvantages of the school systems that may be available for your expat's children. It will then up to you to help them make the right choices.

### **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 expatriate'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 their parents in the host country language.

On the other hand, older children may experience major difficulties with their integration and ability to understand the teaching 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 language.

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

Before envisaging such a solution, however, the parents should make sure of the registration dates and conditions (administrative formalities; vaccinations, etc.) If you already have some of this information, you should pass it on to the expatriate. It is also essential that the parents give their children and opportunity to learn the host country language, if possible before arriving in their new assignment: you could thus help them by suggesting that the children participate in language training programs you may offer to your expats.

One should of course also be aware that the local school solution may have some drawbacks: thus teachers may not always be patient with language errors, other school children may make fun of the new arrivals, and even where the expat's child has done well in his country of origin, he may – at least at first – get poor grades and consequently feel humiliated. Given differences in the school programs and syllabi, the child may later also lose a year upon returning to his parent's 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 required of him.

### **b. Schooling in the 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 should also be envisaged for short-term expatriations: 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 it means attending school and sharing thoughts, hopes and fears with other expats of their own age.

Such schools may of course be located at some distance from the expat'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 expatriate's 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.

The real problem, however, is that such schools are not available everywhere, and particularly also that they are more expensive than local school systems. For this reason, many large firms, especially in America, offer their expatriates an **educational allowance** for their children. This should be negotiated before the expatriate leaves for his new assignment, and should be part of the expatriation contract.

### **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 cultures represented by other schoolmates of different nationalities.

Since the teaching tends to be offered in the two languages, the transition from the mother tongue to the host country language is of course facilitated. However, such schools are usually expensive – hence the need to offer the expat an educational allowance for his children.

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 the 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. Last, like mother-tongue schools, bilingual schools are often located far from the expatriate's residence, calling for the mother to turn into 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, we must draw your attention to a number of questions that arise and should be considered at that stage. May the child remain in the host country under his expatriate 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 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. It is the job of a HRD to draw the parents' attention to them, and make sure that they are considered as soon as possible.

The schooling of expatriate children is thus not a simple matter. The problems it poses must be taken seriously, and you should make every effort to ensure that your expats find the most appropriate school for their children. These few suggestions of *l'Élan* may help you make steer your expats to make the right choice, and give their children a rich and valuable multi-cultural experience. This will give your expat colleagues greater serenity, and help them make a success of their foreign assignment.



**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").