

## Do's and taboos of expat life

**From this week, Hilly van Swol-Ulbrich will be answering your questions about the problems of moving around the globe in a regular Expatica column: Cultural Clues. In her first column, she answers questions from readers about moving to Germany.**

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*Sharon wrote: My 12 year old son and I will be moving to Germany. We do not speak German but will be working and studying in an English speaking environment. Do you have any tips on helping my son adjust to living in Germany?*

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Dear Sharon,

The two aspects in your mail interrelate. Language has always been a key to adapt to a new culture.

Being in an English-speaking environment may have some advantages at first but be aware of the trap — for your German colleagues you remain an outsider. Picture your toothy grins when everyone else is laughing and you do not have a clue what is so funny (yes ... Germans do have a sense of humour).

In your private life you are left to use what German language skills you have gathered. Should you want to encourage your 12 year old to pick up the language, he will measure you by the standards you set for him.

So in fact you will have to try even harder to speak German, as most of the people in your direct work area will conveniently speak English.

Ways out of this: to focus on spoken German rather than on the spelling and the grammar. (Sorry language schools!)

The best approach to this is to be consistent and that what we learn has to be relevant to our needs.

Here are some ideas: print a little notice for your office door that reads: German speaking only between the hours of 9-10.30 am.

Or as a start you may want to introduce a breakfast routine where all items on the table are addressed in the new language only. Pass me the Milch, Wurst, Brot oder Käse, bitte.

Before your son thinks this is too cheesy, screen the Juma site (<http://www.juma.de>) — it is all about what is up-and-coming trends, getting to know other kids as E-pals and how to learn the new language. It's contemporary and fast paced.

On another (musical) note, I suggest watching VIVA Music TV (<http://www.viva.tv>) — the VJs and programmes are broadcast in German but they carry all the current (therefore also English-language) music clips. This will help your son to learn both the language and to get a feel for what the German youth scene is like, which is an important element for adapting to a new culture for a pre teen.

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*Daniel, who is a multi-faceted artist (musician, actor and dancer), asked for advice on moving to Germany.*

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Dear Daniel,

Not knowing your age, you may want to find out whether there is an exchange program for art students, but whatever you do, go to Berlin first. This is the place for the fine and the not so fine arts.

Berlin is where the hustle and the bustle of creativity takes place. Here you will find the Greenwich Village type of ambience with low-budget (low-comfort) housing to go with it. For closer contact to musical productions you may prefer Hamburg. If you are more television oriented you will see there are several hubs in Germany: low budget soaps by the TV studios around Cologne and the budget productions by the TV studios in Berlin and Munich.

Whatever you do, learn to speak (or sing) German. But do not lose your accent as this is seen as a positive trademark.

Dear Readers, "if you can not say it — than sing it ", is a German saying that I hope you will make yours. It tells us about the German love for music, the wish to communicate and to be creative in how we meet our challenges.

I look forward to your questions.

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*Hilly van Swol-Ulbrich is managing partner of CONSULTus. Her website is [WWW.Consultus.net](http://WWW.Consultus.net). She reserves the right to decide which questions she considers relevant for her column. She will, however, not answer any questions dealing with tax or legal matters.*

*For more information about Hilly, read [Across cultural barriers](#)*