

Relocating pre-schoolers

Bringing the kids when you shift around the world can present additional problems and worries amid the pressures of packing and moving house. In her regular column, Cultural Clues, Hilly van Swol-Ulbrich answers a letter from a reader in Canada about how to prepare a four-year old for another upheaval: life in Germany.

Jennifer wrote:

I have lived overseas for 19 years, working in the international school system as a music teacher. My daughter spent year one and two of her life in Singapore, then we moved 'home' for this year. She is almost four now. We are heading to Germany in August where she'll be attending pre-K (pre-Kindergarten) each day, at the same school where I'll be teaching.

I am wondering if you have any info/comments/suggestions/references regarding preschoolers and relocating.

She is a terrific traveller, but I notice signs lately of her own concerns: "I don't want to go to a new school. I like my little pre-school here! I like Calgary! I don't want to go to Germany."

I know some of this is 'drama', but I am listening and wondering how to address her concerns in the whirlwind of packing, moving, and relocating.

Dear Jennifer,

As we busy ourselves with paperwork, phone calls, visits from moving professionals and packing, little time is left for approaching the move from the perspective of the children.

Up until now, your daughter was too young to really express her side, and for this reason we believe our very young ones to be fairly resilient. Obviously, at four years old, she has found her comfort zone in Calgary with her little pre-school circle of friends, family, etc.

I am sure I am telling you things you already know, so see it as validation that you are doing the right things.

1. Try not to push the issue in one go, but rather go for steady repetition.
2. "Accidentally" leave pictures lying about showing the host country. This can be touristy stuff, showing landscapes, people, special sites, castles, etc. She will see them as she passes by and might get curious.
3. You know her interests (maybe ponies or rabbits)... make sure she knows that these interests can be continued, locate a "Streichelzoo" (petting zoo) in your new area, by surfing the net or by posting a message in the family forum.
4. Find her a school friend in Germany before she goes, maybe by asking the admission officer who else is new in her "grade" and ask for the contact details. Sending a picture in advance will help both sides.

5. As a music teacher, you may have access to typical children's songs from Germany.
6. Also you may want to invite all her friends and have a "sending off to Germany party", including fun and games such as a competition for the best colouring of German scenes as well as serving little Frankfurters.
7. Contact the German Canadian club in Canada and seek out a German family in Calgary with kids of the same age who can act as a cultural informer and once you are over here do the same.

Although we have enough on our plate, it does pay off to give the children a platform to express their concerns and emotions. At the same time it sensitises the parents to be ready for some unexpected hurdles before and after the move.

To finish with an Irish proverb: Bricks and mortar make a house but the laughter of children makes a home.

I look forward to your questions.

Hilly van Swol-Ulbrich is managing partner of CONSULTus. Her website is 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.