

Transitioning Children Abroad

By Hilly van Swol-Ulbrich



Because the average age of expatriates is between 25 and 45 years old, a substantial percentage of these expatriates bring their children with them on their foreign assignments. Few multinational corporations have a policy in place to respond to the needs of these children. This does not reflect how companies would prefer to act, more likely it reveals the fact that many corporations do not have access to the proper resources to address these needs.

"My bad conscious has been nagging me for years," says an HR director based in Frankfurt, Germany. "We would prefer to empower our expat parents by giving them the necessary support and advice on the upcoming international move."

Children moving with their families are confronted with many questions about what to take with them, what to leave behind, what to expect, how to say good-bye to friends, and how to cope in the new environment. These questions apply in any domestic move; however, when the parents consider a move to another country, the dimensions grow to such an extent that proper preparation and support become indispensable.

Everything Changes

Separation from friends and family by large geographical distances and time zones and being confronted by a new language and culture often result in acute stress for all the family members, including the children. Naturally, the personality and the developmental stage will vary from one child to another. Their individual needs, preferences, openness, stress resistance, and coping skills will differ. But there are challenges to be met by even the most flexible of children.

Let us not forget that a move involves more than just changing schools; there are new systems in place and other learning styles. On top of that comes the total loss of reference for the child and the loss of friends. When moving abroad, this is topped by the challenges of learning a foreign language, a new cultural environment, and moving into a dwelling that is not yet a home. During a period when the child is searching for his or her own identity, it is not uncommon to see the child react in his or her own individual way to these multiple changes.

What to Watch For

Children express unresolved grief with anger, a sense of helplessness, and plain resentment. Another observed behavior is an extreme passive attitude toward the move and the new cultural environment. Some children, driven by fear of remaining an outsider, urgently want to "put themselves on the map," and end up being perceived as difficult or even hyperactive.

Children may feel hesitant to discuss their struggles with their parents, either out of concern over adding another problem onto the shoulders of their parents who are juggling many issues as it is, or because of initial denial of potential problems expressed by the parents prior to the move.

Programs for Expatriate Children

Intercultural training addresses some of these aspects, but tends to be designed for adults, not only in methodology, but also through a focus on the business culture and daily life issues in the host country. Corporations that have "sustainability" in mind with their expatriate mobility policies typically offer training for the "mini" expatriates. These programs go beyond allowing the children to sit in on the parents' day, by offering an age-appropriate designed program that is facilitated at the home or at a hotel.

The program typically fits children between the ages of six to 11, pre-teens, and teens. The program must be adapted to meet their age-specific needs and learning styles as well. The limited life experience of the children makes it harder to understand abstract notions of change management and cultural differences. The facilitator can put move-related concerns into perspective with concrete examples, tangible facts, and appropriate actions.

Case Study: From Germany to New York

Although this German family was offered destination services, and the spouse and children received private language instruction, the move from Dresden, Germany, to upstate New York caused the family considerable problems. Their pre-teen daughter was reluctant to move and preferred to stay behind with the grandparents.

In the beginning of training, the girl mentioned that she loved horses. While preparing for the program, the trainer found a horse farm with stables in the town where the family was going to live, introduced the child to books and magazines through the town's library Internet portal, and identified great online translator. This concrete approach, made "life over there" more tangible; the girl not only felt more in control through self-help, which boosted her confidence, but it unleashed her action planning and problem-solving skills.

Apart from the above mentioned hands-on example, the training should provide country-specific information, strive to raise cultural awareness, examine stereotypes, and explore the adaptation cycle.

A children's transition program should have a coaching style designed to encourage the children to become actively involved and promote personal reflection. The ultimate aim is to have the participant gain a sense of mastery that helps to ease the transition period. This is achieved by a methodology mix that can include many interactive elements, such as role plays, assignments, and multimedia and Internet projects.

Using art as a carrier of expression helps with self reflection, but also to project their associations about the upcoming move.

With parents' and company consent, it is recommended to include outdoor activities, such as a topic-related treasure hunt, or a luncheon in a typical local restaurant, if the training is being conducted in the host country.

The Four Phases

One effective program follows four phases:

1. Phase one looks at the identity of the children and how they define themselves.
2. Phase two addresses on preparations, saying goodbye, and making new friends.
3. Phase three focuses on dealing with change, diversity, and culture shock.
4. Phase four concerns repatriation or onward journey.

Most often, one of the parents stays in the sessions for the first 30 minutes to make sure the child is comfortable. A toy figure (or other object) that assumes the role of an alter ego is a

very effective "interpreter" during the initial communication between trainer and child. Other children who have moved abroad are valuable resources and are accepted authorities in the eyes of the children; here a trainer can be the liaison between the children.

The personal interaction between trainer and the children is a constant factor during the whole program. Another important element of the program is a debriefing, where a synopsis of the program, observations, and recommendations are discussed in a feedback session with the parents. The children's program brings new directions to the internal communication structures of the family and allows the child to focus on designing and implementing his or her own personal action plan to master this unique period.

When choosing a move preparation services provider, seek one who can offer the training on location, as most often problems arise after the move that require action in the host country.

Clearly, offering training for expatriate children may not be feasible for all corporations, so HR managers may want to consider the "help you help yourself" option by offering the parents tools, such as books or videotapes. For mobile children, the Internet has become an important tool for children wishing to staying in touch, search for relevant information, and sharing experiences. Web sites that offer country-specific fun activities for children and information for parents can be found easily.

Employers wishing to increase the likelihood of a successful expatriate assignment cannot over estimate the importance of family adjustment. Increasingly programs are available that equip employers to meet the needs of children accompanying their parents on assignment. By tapping into resources ranging from readily available self-help resources to structured professional training programs, HR practitioners can contribute to their organizations' global success by providing expatriate families with the support they need to adjust well while on expatriate assignment.



Hilly van Swol-Ulbrich is managing partner at CONSULTus Germany, Hofheim am Taunus, Germany. She can be reached at e-mail seminars@CONSULTus.net.

Worldwide ERC®'s mission is to provide leadership, advocacy, education and networking to global workforce mobility professionals and stakeholders through specialized training, credentialing, meeting events and information exchange.

Copyright© 2004, The Employee Relocation Council/Worldwide ERC®. All rights reserved.

Worldwide ERC® Headquarters
1717 Pennsylvania Ave. NW, Suite 800
Washington, DC 20006
202.857.0857
Fax - 202.659.8631
webmaster@erc.org

Worldwide ERC® European Bureau
287 Avenue Louise,
2nd Floor
B E -1050 Brussels, Belgium
Direct +32 2.643.2042
Fax +32 2.645.2671
ERCEurope@erc.org