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## How children view moving abroad



Parents (and HR) can easily dismiss an expat child's concerns about the relocation process. But these "mini expats" experience a transition that should not be overlooked. Author Hilly van Swol-Ulbrich explains.

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Live vacancies



This is the time of year -- migrating season -- when families ask, "Do we want to take on this assignment?"

Whatever their circumstances, families need to carefully consider such a major step in their lives. In times of geopolitical unrest and crisis, many corporations have had to evacuate their expat families. Many of these families are not willing to accept another posting, while other potential candidates are reluctant to accept an offer.

The phenomenon of the "cold-feet expatriate" has been slow in the making. For years, expatriate management has simply focused on reducing costs while familiar issues, such as repatriation and dual careers, remained unresolved.

The international HR manager needs to find ways to meet the changing needs of their expatriate workforce. The duration of a typical assignment has been reduced, for the most part, to no more than two years per posting. The rate of multiple short-term assignments has risen dramatically. And here comes the problem: 45 percent of the expatriate population has children who are between 5 and 12 years old.

Whereas in the past everyone banked on the mythical flexibility of the children, a new awareness has arisen. More parents -- and corporations -- recognise that children's needs and viewpoints have to be incorporated in the planning.

Families often find that time runs out just before the big moving day. With the immediate needs for boxes to be packed and goodbyes to be made, there is little time left to search for adequate ways to prepare the children.

HR Managers seeking sustainability in their expatriate policies are no longer shying away from the taboo zone of expatriate children. Indeed, they have found that paying attention to the little ones has proven to be an overdue

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"extending of the hand" after years of rationalisation.

### So what are we looking at?

Expatriate children, or "mini expats" often find themselves in a transitional whirlwind that can leave them confused and frustrated with the uncertainties ahead.

### More resources for expat parents/children

[www.expats-moms.com](http://www.expats-moms.com)  
[www.expats-expert.com](http://www.expats-expert.com)



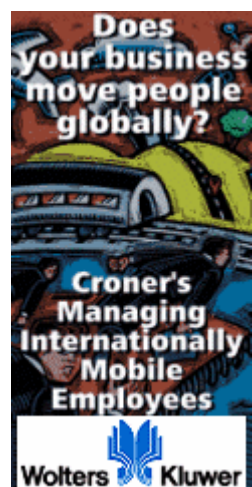
Parents, who tend to project their hopes and aspirations on the children, most often deny the child's concerns. Not wanting to alarm them, parents can gloss over these issues without making it any easier for their children to understand and cope with them:



"Yes, you will have to learn a new language, but you will be fine" "Sure, you will go to a new school, but you will make friends" "No, we cannot take the dog — but Benny will be happy with this new family" "Changes? - There'll be lots, but don't worry about them!"

### Multiple changes

Of course personality and the developmental stage will vary from child to child. Each has his own individual needs, preferences, openness and coping skills, but even the most flexible children still have their challenges.



Let's not forget that a move involves more than just changing schools. There are new systems in place, other learning styles. On top of all this comes the total loss of reference for the child, the loss of all that is familiar, and the loss of friends.

When moving abroad, this is surpassed by the challenges of dealing with a foreign language, a new cultural environment and a house which is not yet a home, and all in a period where the child is still searching for his own identity.



It is therefore not uncommon to see each child react in his own way to these multiple changes.



**Pan-European Relocations**

### The implications

Anger, a sense of helplessness and plain resentment are expressions of the unresolved grief of children. Another observed behaviour is an extremely passive attitude towards the move and the new cultural environment.

Other children, driven by the fear of remaining an outsider,

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urgently want to "put themselves on the map" and end up being qualified as a difficult child, or even hyperactive.

Children may feel hesitant to discuss their struggles with their parents. Maybe they are concerned their issues will just be yet another problem on the shoulders of the parents.

After all a child will have noticed his parents are juggling many relocation issues as it is. Sometimes this hesitancy stems from his initial denial of his own potential problems prior to the move.

### **Instruments**

Whereas some corporations offer "kids-in-transition" training as part of the relocation package, private individuals with no backing may prefer to turn to special publications for expatriate children.

Staying in touch, searching for relevant information and sharing experience are universal needs. For mobile children, the Internet has become an important tool to do just that. The website: [www.Ori-and-Ricki.net](http://www.Ori-and-Ricki.net) is specially designed for expat kids.

Empower the expat kids and you empower the expat family.

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*Hilly van Swol-Ulbrich is managing partner of Consultus and author of When Abroad - Do as the Local Children Do, Ori's Guide for Young Expats.*

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