

Coming in from the cold

Hilly van Swol-Ulbrich suggests ways of easing the transition process for expat children

Families often find that time quickly runs out right before the big moving day. With boxes to be packed and good-byes to be made, parents have little energy left for their children. The younger members of the family often find themselves in a transitional whirlwind that can leave them confused and apprehensive of the uncertainties ahead.

Parents, projecting their hopes and aspirations on the children, often deny the concerns felt by the child. "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 can't take the dog – but Benny will be happy with this new family" – "Changes? – Many, but don't fret!". Not wanting to alarm, it is easy to gloss over issues without making them more understandable for a child. This leaves some children without the proper support during this indispensable crucial phase.

Changing character of work assignments

The nature of work assignments is changing; the duration of postings is becoming shorter, resulting in an increased pace in successive moves. It is very important to consider the effect of this trend on the children. Geo-political tensions have also resulted in families becoming more concerned – among families that have been evacuated from their host country, resistance to accepting other assignments is understandably very high.

Multiple change

Naturally individual needs, preferences, openness and stress-resistance will differ according to age and personality, but there is a challenge to be met even by the most flexible of children. For a move involves more than just changing schools: there are new systems in place, other learning styles and the total loss of reference for the child and the loss of friends. To be separated by large geographical distances and sometimes time zones from extended family members, such as grandparents, cuts deeper than many parents may at first realise.

When moving abroad this is topped by the challenges presented by a foreign language, a new cultural environment and a house which is not yet a home – all at a time when a child is still devel-

oping his or her own identity. Children will react in very different ways to these multiple changes.

What defines the transition process?

Differentiate between relocation issues and the transition phase.

- ❖ The **relocation** phase is dominated by logistics, hardware, fact-finding, getting answers to the many 'how, what, when, where' questions. Although stressful, it is easily managed as the issues are more straightforward.
- ❖ The challenge of the **transition** phase lies in realising you have entered it, so it is much more hidden. It surfaces in a more emotional way and is characterized by the many 'why' questions it brings up. This is a period of learning new coping skills.

What to look out for – the implications

Where families have more than one child, one may very well thrive and not display any symptoms at all, whereas the other child may show its discomfort.

Most parents agree that regression (*ie* bed wetting, clinginess) is the most often noticed reaction. Sleeping disorders are frequent but there are more signs to look out for: anger, a sense of helplessness or plain resentment are expressions of unresolved grief in children. When not addressed these often turn to aggression, directed both within and outside of the family. Another observed behaviour is an extremely passive attitude towards the move and the new cultural environment.

Other children, driven by fear of remaining an outsider, urgently want to 'put themselves on the map' and end up being qualified as 'difficult', or even hyper-active.

Children may feel hesitant to discuss their struggles with their parents for several reasons:

- ❖ out of concern – a wish to avoid adding another problem to the shoulders of a parent they observe as already stressed and juggling with relocation issues;
- ❖ due to the initial denial of potential problems prior to the move.

The parents' attitude will resonate within the children; their fine tuned radar will pick up your signals and will return these through an amplifier, both the positive and the negative vibrations.

For a child to derive maximum benefit from an international relocation experience requires planning for their academic future as well nurturing their emotional needs. Another aspect is the forming of the children's cultural identity which part is discussed during a transition training with the parents.

Kids in transition – what is on offer?

There are services on offer that help to facilitate a successful transition. A growing number of corporations offer a 'Kids in Transition' programme to their mini expat population.

CONSULTus, an intercultural training company, encourages the children to become actively involved and promotes personal reflection. Their aim is to have the child gain a sense of mastery and control which helps to ease the transition period. This is achieved by a methodology that includes art work, projects, activities, role plays and multimedia tools. The curriculum of the training follows the four phases of the assignment:

- ❖ Phase one looks at the identity of the child, how they define themselves;
- ❖ Phase two zooms in on preparations, saying goodbye, making new friends;
- ❖ Phase three focuses on dealing with change, diversity and culture shock;
- ❖ Phase four is about repatriation or onward journey.

But not every family may have access to such a program – a recently-published book that builds upon the long-standing experience of working with 'migrating children' is another useful resource for families on the move. *When Abroad - do as the local children do, Ori's guide for young expats*, (Xpat Media ISBN:90-5594 262 6) provides parents with a communication tool, facilitating useful conversations to explore the exciting and frightening aspects of a move.



Staying in touch, searching relevant information, 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 is specially designed for expat kids. An interesting feature is the 'Behind the Rainbow' section where young students write about their experiences abroad. Other areas cover country-specific information, great links, recommended books, etc.

Ori, the migrating bird, together with his newly-found friend Ricki, host this website. They not only make easily identifiable figures but also are accessible by e-mail, so kids can ask questions, share their resources or submit their contributions. Ori's logbook project has Ori visiting elementary schools worldwide where he is welcomed, shown the sights, and gathers country-specific information: dos and don'ts and what makes their host country special.

Parents should aim to use their own natural empathy with their children, together with some of the many resources available, to find ways to ease the transition for their children; to provide opportunities to create new points of reference and identification with the host culture. Above all, it is important that children are encouraged to share their anxieties and ask the many 'why' questions.

Hilly van Swol-Ulbrich works for CONSULTus Expatriate, Briefings and Intercultural Seminars, GmbH, Hofheim am Taunus, Germany. Image courtesy of CONSULTus.