

Sustainable International

How to Help Families Meet the

As the average age of expats is between 25 and 45 years, a substantial percentage of these expats bring their family and children along on their foreign assignments. However, only a small number of corporations have a policy in place to respond to the needs of these children.

This does not reflect the preferred modus operandi of many HR managers, it sooner mirrors the fact that many corporations do not have access to the proper resources to address these needs. “My bad conscience has been nagging me for years,” says a Hague-based HR director. “We would prefer to empower our expat parents by giving them the necessary support and advice on the upcoming international move.”

CHANGING CHARACTER OF ASSIGNMENTS

With the changing character of the assignments, whereby the duration is shorter than it was five years ago thus resulting in an increased pace in successive moves, we need to consider the effect on the children. Also geopolitical tensions have resulted in families being more concerned. Among families that have been evacuated out of their host country, the resistance to another assignment is understandably very high.

QUESTIONS

In all scenarios, the children are confronted with many questions, such as: “What can I take with me?” “What do I need to leave behind?” “What can I expect?” “How do I say goodbye to my friends?” “Will they stay in touch?” and “Will I be alone in the new environment?” These

questions arise in any domestic move, but when the parents are considering a move to another country, the dimensions grow to such an extent that proper preparation and support becomes indispensable.

MULTIPLE CHANGES

Being separated by large geographical distances and time zones from friends and family, and being confronted by a new language and culture, most 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 is a challenge to be met by even the most flexible of children.

Let's not forget: a move involves more than just a changing of schools. There are new systems in place, other learning styles, etc. On top of this comes the total loss of reference for the child and the loss of friends. When moving abroad, this is further complicated by the challenges of a foreign language, a new cultural environment, a house which is not yet a home, in a period where the child is still searching its own identity, and, needless to say, every child will react in its own individual way to these multiple changes.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Anger, a sense of helplessness and plain resentment can be expressions of unresolved grief for the children. Another observed behavior is an extreme passive attitude towards the move and the new cultural environ-

ment. Other children, driven by fear of remaining an outsider, urgently want to “put themselves on the map” and end up being qualified as a difficult child, or even hyperactive.

At the same time, children may feel hesitant to discuss their struggles with their parents out of concern that they might be heaping another problem to their parents' shoulders there where they can see the parent(s) are juggling many relocation issues as it is or, possibly, due to the initial denial of potential problems by the parents prior to the move.

PROGRAMS FOR EXPAT KIDS

Intercultural trainings do address some of these aspects but are geared towards the adults, not only in methodology but also in content, through their focus on the business culture and daily life issues in the host country. However, corporations that aim to achieve “sustainability” with their expat policies should offer training for the mini expats. These programs should amount to more than simply allowing the children to sit in on the parents' day; they should offer an age-appropriate program that is facilitated at the home or at a hotel and is available both to individual relocating families and/or groups of children who are part of a group move.

When choosing a provider, make sure that training on location, i.e. abroad, is offered as an option, as most often problems arise also *after* the move, requiring action in the host country.

AGE ISSUES

The programs should be designed for

Mobility and Expat Kids

Challenge of Moving Abroad

ages 6 to 11; for the pre-teens and teens the program must be adapted to meet their age-specific needs and learning styles. The “limited life experience” on the part of the children makes it harder for them to understand abstract notions such as change management and cultural differences. The facilitator should therefore be able to put things into perspective by using concrete examples, tangible facts and by suggesting appropriate actions.

AN EXAMPLE

Although a German family that was relocating from Dresden to Upstate New York was offered “destination services” and the spouse and children got private language tuition, this impending move caused the parents considerable problems. Their pre-teen daughter was reluctant to move and had expressed a preference to stay behind with the grandparents.

During the intake it was mentioned that she loved horses. While preparing for the program, the trainer found a horse farm with stables in the town they were going to live, introduced the child to typical books through the town’s library Internet portal, found some back issues of *Young Miss* and arranged a great online translator. This very 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 also helped unleash her action planning and problem solving skills. And what’s more, it proved to the mother that the Internet is a useful instrument after all.

OTHER ASPECTS

Apart from the abovementioned hands-on approach example, the training program for kids should provide country-specific information, strive to raise cultural awareness, look at stereotypes, and explore the adaptation cycle.

A Kids in Transition-program should also have a coaching style designed to encourage the children to become actively involved and designed to promote personal reflection. The ultimate aim is to have the participant gain a sense of control, which will help ease the transition period. This is achieved by a methodology mix that can include many interactive elements, such as role play, assignments and multimedia and Internet projects.

Using art as an instrument of expression helps with the self-reflection but also helps children project their views of the host culture.

Furthermore, providing parents consent and company policies have been consulted, the program could include (secured) outdoor activities, i.e. a topic-related treasure hunt, or a luncheon in a typical local restaurant if the training is facilitated in the host country.

FOUR PHASES

The recommended build-up of a Kids in Transition-program follows the Four Phases-model.

- **Phase 1:** looking at the identity of the child, how it defines itself
- **Phase 2:** zooming in on preparations, saying goodbye, making new friends
- **Phase 3:** focusing on dealing with change, diversity and culture shock

- **Phase 4:** preparing for repatriation or onward journey.

PERSONAL INTERACTION

Most often, one of the parents stays for the first 30 minutes to make sure the child is comfortable. A toy figure (see other tools) that takes on 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, which usually lasts a full day.

An important element of the program is the debriefing part, where a synopsis of the program, as well as observations and recommendations, are discussed in a feedback session with the parents. The kids’ program can bring new impulses to the internal communication structures of the family and allows the child to focus on designing and implementing its own personal action plan in order to control this unique period in its life.

IDENTIFICATION & LEARNING TOOLS

As offering training to expat kids may not be feasible for all corporations, HR managers may want to consider the “help you to help yourself”-option by offering the parents tools such as the recently published book *When Abroad Do As the Local Children Do, Ori’s Guide for Young Expats*, (XPat Media ISBN: 90-5594 262 6) which is welcomed by parents, counselors and teachers alike for its user-

friendly process orientation. The child-focused design serves as a communication tool, facilitating the exploration of the entire move. The generic format invites the child to research the specifics of their local culture. The central figure of the book - "Ori" (a migrating bird, what else?!) - also comes as a cuddly companion who helps the child through the first transitions phases in the new country.

VIRTUAL COMMUNITY

Staying in touch, searching relevant information, and sharing experience are universal needs. For mobile children, the Internet has become an important tool to do just that. The (non-commercial) website www.Ori-and-Ricki.net has been specifically designed for Expat Kids. One of the

sections shows project work by pupils of the different international schools on location.

Another interesting feature is where kids post their contributions on 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 easy identification figures but are accessible by e-mail, so that kids can ask questions, share their resources or submit their contributions.

GIVING THE CHILDREN A VOICE

How the employee and the spouse experience an international relocation is well-documented. Parents, however, will want to know what issues are important for their chil-

dren and will want to encourage them to express their feelings, thereby addressing the relocation from their perspective. A child-friendly structured survey form has been designed for just this purpose and is available free of charge under <http://www.consultus.net/expatkids/welcome.htm>.

Join the growing community of parents, schools, international corporations, service providers, relocation and moving companies that have provided a nesting place for the little migrating birds. ■

For more information contact: Hilly van Swol at Seminars@Consultus.net

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