

Moving With Children

Can Be an Opportunity Rather Than a Burden

BY ELIZABETH PERELSTEIN

As all relocation professionals understand, parents sometimes become anxious when they are asked to move their children. Whether their children are having a positive or a negative experience in school, parents just want to protect their children from change. A major transition can involve feelings of loneliness, alienation, and a host of other negative emotions, and parents see it as their role to protect their children by eliminating these experiences. Perelstein offers the perspective that moving with your children can be an exciting and uplifting time, depending on how you look at it, and how well you plan and manage the move.

Perhaps relocation professionals can help parents realize that it is possible to separate themselves from the negative feelings they experienced when they move as children, in order to help their offspring grow. Moving children from one school to another, from one city to another, and even from one country to another can provide a wonderful opportunity for teaching children skills and strategies that will be useful later in life. In the article “ATCKs Maintain Global Dimensions Throughout Their Lives,” on the TCK World website (www.tckworld.com), authors Ann Baker Cottrell and Ruth Hill Useem write, “one of the most notable characteristics of ATCKs [adult trans-culture kids] is their high achievement.”

The Advantages of Moving Children

Although it means changing schools—which certainly is difficult when a child is happy, and equally painful when he or she has struggled to fit in—relocation professionals can assist parents by helping them understand that they have more information about their children when making the second school decision than they did the first time around. For one, the children are older and have more experience than they did when they started at their current school. Parents can evaluate what is working well and what is not, and focus on making a better match than they did originally.

Often, the initial school decision is a function of the parents’ values. Status, facilities, a traditional or progressive environment, or where friends sent their children, may have been the initial criteria. Unless children

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reveal themselves in significant ways, and unless parents are unusually attuned, they can seldom anticipate how their children will learn. Therefore, it is appropriate that their preferences influence the first school selection. However, sometimes the child's learning style does not match the preferences of the parents. In the case of a stable family, only extreme circumstances would prompt parents to move a child. When the mismatch is less dramatic, the child generally is left in a school where he or she manages, but may not thrive.

Relocating can be helpful to children because it forces parents to re-

evaluate their original school decision in view of the person that their child is emerging to be. When parents have the ability to look beyond their own needs, moving is an opportunity to question whether the child has been well-served in his current school, and whether the teaching method has matched the child's learning style. Another important question that parents should ask before changing their child's school is whether the pace and level have been appropriate, too difficult, or too easy. They should be encouraged to make adjustments based on the fit.

Families who have struggled with the decision of an appropriate age/grade placement, particularly when children's birthdates fall near the cut-off dates for entry into the next grade, have another chance when moving. Often, after watching their offspring in school for a few years, parents have second thoughts about the choices they have made, and an overseas move is the perfect opportunity to hold a child back, or advance

him or her, if the parents have serious regrets about their original decision. Changing grades when moving overseas does not need to be a personal statement. In explaining the decision to a child, it can be framed as a function of a different curriculum, availability of places, or simply a better fit.

International Schools Vs. Alternatives

When families move overseas with their children, they have a range of educational options to choose from, but these fall into three basic categories: home curriculum, host country curriculum, or international curriculum. In many countries, there will

be schools that are either run by the governments of the families' home countries, or follow the families' home curricula. Choosing a national school does not mean that moving children overseas, and then back home, will be seamless, because there are still curricular and social adjustments on both ends. For example, there is no national American curriculum, so American schools in various countries offer dif-

ferent versions of what educators believe is the best practice.

Alternatively, families may choose to send their children to schools native to the host country, particularly if learning a new language is not an issue. While the adjustment may be more difficult in local schools, the children more fully experience the culture of the country in which they are living and, for many families, this makes the move worthwhile. Even when a new language must be learned, some parents feel that the opportunity to become proficient in a foreign language outweighs the transitional difficulties experienced by their children.

There are also international schools,

schools that cater specifically to expatriates who come for short periods of time and then move on. The number of international schools, many of which teach the international baccalaureate (IB) curriculum developed in 1968 by the International Baccalaureate Organization in Geneva, Switzerland, is increasing rapidly. The IB curriculum, divided into the primary years, middle years, and degree programs, makes it possible for a family to move from one country to another every few years while continuing to provide their children with a standardized education everywhere they go. Nevertheless, this program of study is more process-oriented and less content-oriented, and moving to an IB school in a new country may still require that a child learn a different language or study different material.

In addition to curriculum considerations, international schools specialize in recognizing the symptoms of adjustment difficulties, quickly involving parents in becoming part of the community, and teaching children how to say good-bye well. The transience of the student body makes it possible to obtain places in international schools, even on short notice. On the other hand, some parents feel that the transience, and the ensuing need to continuously make new friends, is a negative aspect of the international school environment.

Benefits for Teenagers

Relocation professionals may encounter great parental opposition concerning moving their adolescent children. I believe changing schools is fundamentally good for most teens. An overseas move gives them an opportunity to reinvent themselves among peers who have no expectations of them. Without the pressure of a forced relocation, only the bravest teenagers will voluntarily take the plunge. At this stage, they will give parents the most difficulty about leaving their friends, and are capable of mustering convincing and provocative arguments. Nevertheless, teenagers stand to gain a great deal from being in contact with a new peer group during their struggle for

"Drop me anywhere on this planet and I can find a friend, food, clothing, and shelter. For deep within me resides all the necessities for being human," writes Ken Chiancone, on the website www.transitiondynamics.com.

As relocation providers, you will encounter many parents resistant to moving children of all ages. In fact, family reasons—including reluctance to disrupt the education of children—are the major reasons that employees decline international assignments. If you are familiar with some of the benefits associated with moving children of any age, you may be able to alleviate some of the fears you have.

identity. Often, teens do not take risks when they are in the same social circle in which they have grown up. They are more inclined to try new things when they do not know anyone, or are not known by other kids. If adolescents have become part of the wrong crowd, or are not living up to their academic potential, they can become friends with more intellectual students, experiment with new sports, with music, drama, or a whole host of activities that they never would have tried at home because of insecurity.

Perhaps more valuable than any other aspect of a forced school change is the preparation children will receive for entering the society in which they will ultimately graduate. Parents who have doubts about the wisdom of displacing their children need only ask themselves, "will theirs be a static world, in which they will stay in their original jobs or first company for the duration of their careers? Or, will their world be one of uncertainty and necessary change, one in which their skills may become obsolete, and in which

they will encounter job changes, and perhaps overseas relocations themselves?"

If the latter is the case, parents should be happy to provide an education that develops in their children the tools they will need to succeed later in life. According to Useem and Cottrell, "most [TCKs] (56 percent) have incorporated an international dimension in some occupational role." What better way to prepare them than to allow them to experience their first transitions while they are still safe within their parents' embrace? When children move abroad with their family, parents can talk with them about their feelings, tell them those feelings are normal, and give them strategies for solving the problems they encounter.

Children who have been educated as expatriates do not have to learn these techniques for the first time when they are on their own in college, or during their internationally mobile careers.

If parents adopt genuine enthusi-

asm for the change they are about to embark on, they can truly enrich their children's worlds by supporting them through the rough stages ahead. Expatriate children are known to be more self-assured, more adaptable, as well as more open-minded than children who have lived in one place all their lives. No one says this more convincingly than Third Culture Kids (TCK) who have lived the expatriate life and grown into adulthood.

"Being a TCK has given me a view of the world as my home and a confidence in facing new situations and people, particularly of other countries and cultures," writes one third-culture kid in the book, "Third Culture Kids," by David Pollack and Ruth Van Reken. ❧



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