

Relocating with Children

By Vinti Mittal

This is one of the two times of year when families typically relocate, which can be a highly distressing event, particularly across continents. Some of the challenges may be purely organizational and practical, such as looking for a new home, new schools or transporting belongings. Another challenging aspect of moving is the emotional impact: saying good-bye to friends and families, dealing with the unknowns along with anxieties, resentment and anger for having to leave behind the known for the unknown.

Families relocating with children are additionally taxed given the concerns about their adjustment. Research shows that children react differently to transition. Young children may worry about being separated from parents whereas teens may be concerned about new routines, social scenarios and fitting in with the crowd. At times, Expat Child Syndrome (ECS), an emotional stress caused by frustration from multiple foreign moves, can be seen in teens, impacting some more than the others.

Some tips to facilitate the transition:

1. Keep them informed and involved.

There is nothing scarier for a child than not knowing details about the move. Share the plan and encourage discussions, while providing opportunities for all to express their feelings and concerns.

2. Introduce them to the host country.

Help familiarize children to the new country by looking for information online. Honest, matter-of-fact information is always helpful. Over-selling can raise expectations, leaving room for disappointment.

3. Choose a school for your child.

The child's input in choosing the school is important. Before deciding, ensure they have the required information about the school.

4. Involve them in house hunting.

Include the children in the process of selecting a new home. If they can't accompany you, bring back pictures and information for their feedback. Remember, it's their home, too.

5. Organize a goodbye party.

One of the most difficult parts of moving is saying goodbye. Hosting a "See You Soon" party will emphasize that separation is not permanent. Ensure everyone exchanges contact information to keep in touch.

6. Prioritize setting up their room.

At the destination, set up the children's rooms first. Having their belongings and familiar routines in place helps expedite feeling settled.

7. Explore the new place.

Once in the new country, explore whatever the new place has to offer with friends and family. It is also important that children start connecting with peers to develop their new social circle.

8. Make the move an enjoyable experience.

Children often model adults, taking clues about how they feel about the move. Displaying a positive attitude towards the relocation enables the child to feel safe and more confident about it.

9. Stay emotionally attuned.

Keep attuned to your children's needs and feelings. From time-to-time, reassure and connect emotionally with them, encouraging them to accept and embrace these uncomfortable emotions. Also, ensure they are settling well in school.

10. Stress the positives

Although relocating may present many challenges, it also brings in a lot of opportunities. Talk about new things they can do that they couldn't do before.



Learning to let go of the past and staying fully in the present is paramount to such an important transition for the whole family. It's important to make the most of the new opportunities. Celebrate the things you can do now that you couldn't do before and try not to focus on what you've left behind.

Photo by Barney Moss

For more information about how to help your children adjust, come to the upcoming AAS Repatriation Talk on March 9.