

# Healthy Transitions

## Supporting children during a big move



### **The transition from one country to another**

Expatriation starts the day we make the decision to move to a new country. As adults, we start to make plans without the people we are living with, and we detach ourselves from them. Children and young adults can react to the news in a variety of ways. They need time to process the information that they will be leaving their school, friends and home. The older the child is, the more time he/she needs to prepare himself mentally for the move.

### **The Transition Process**

Transition is a normal life event; people experience transitions such as birth, adolescence, marriage, retirement, death and many more changes. In international moves, it is not the person who changes, but the entire life environment. Also, unlike other transitions in life that come with rituals, there are often no rituals for the grief experienced by expats.

### **Emotions**

Everyone involved usually has a large range of positive and negative feelings about moving. It can be difficult for parents when children express anger or extreme sadness. A natural tendency may be to tell them what they should be feeling or to try and change what they are feeling. However it is normal and healthy to have and express these feelings. All feelings are acceptable. What matters is what is done with these feelings. Encourage everyone in your family to express and accept their emotions, as it will help the transition process. They are a natural part of leaving a familiar and loved place behind.



A transition is divided in different stages. Here are the stages people experience when going through an international move

Involvement	The comfortable place that we achieve when we have been in a place for a while.
Leaving and Separation	Accepting that the family will be saying goodbye to the familiar. Looking at the transition realistically and optimistically – ‘How can you face your approaching losses squarely while still looking forward with hope?’ ANSWER: proper closure. Each member of the family will grieve their present life and go through normal stages of euphoria, denial, anger and sadness. Grief: You will mourn the loss of people, things, and familiarity left behind. Do not stuff these feelings away – even if you need to shelve them now and again to make it through the day, be sure to come back to them and pay proper respect – otherwise they will come out negatively in future relationships. Create rituals to consciously acknowledge and mourn your family losses. Proper mourning requires permission, people, and process time.
Transition chaos and culture shock	Transition starts some weeks/months before moving and may remain for several weeks/months after arriving. It is characterized by feeling unconnected and confused. This is a chaotic time. It is a normal, healthy and a temporary stage we all experience when entering a new culture. It can also happen when returning to a home culture and be more stressful because it can be unexpected. The mix of emotions is the characteristic of this ‘chaotic’ stage.
Entering Adaptation Settling	This stage starts the moment we realize and accept that we are living in a totally different environment. In order to adapt to this new environment, we have to learn and to change our self. We adapt in learning about the country, people, language, traditions, music, believes... and in looking for our personal place (You begin to ask yourself: how can I belong here?).Don’t wait for the community to reach out to you – proactively help yourself and your children to establish yourselves in the new communities. Find mentors who can <b>positively</b> introduce you and your children to the new culture.
Re-involvement	You are settled in your new surrounding; accept people and places for who and what they are. This doesn’t mean that you will necessarily like everything you find, but you can start to see <i>why</i> people do what they do, rather than only <i>what</i> they do. You begin to have a sense of intimacy and a feeling that your presence matters to this group. You begin to focus on the present rather than hoping for the future or constantly reminiscing about the past.

**What parents can do to help to ensure a successful separation and adaptation.**

Your child may have misunderstandings, fears and/or anger about moving out and moving in. It is important that you discuss what will be happening with your child and respond to his/her questions and anxiety in a patient and nurturing manner. A move means the loss of a

familiar home, familiar school, and perhaps a familiar culture and language. Your child will lose established social networks of peers, relatives, and teachers. As a result, your child's sense of security may be diminished by fears of the unknown. He/she may also feel unbalanced in an environment he doesn't have the clues to understand in the regular practical life.

Young children are often unable to express their concerns with others. Their major concerns center around their sense of well-being: What is happening to me? Who will take care of me? How will I cope with all of the new things going on around me? When you show patience and support for your child's concerns, he/she will be better able to adapt to the new environment. The main need of the children is to be listened to, and to do so, adults need to stop talking and advising them. At a time of a move, children need to feel they belong to somewhere and their family is their first place of belonging.

Your pre-teen or teen may express some very strong emotions about the up-coming move. It is important to acknowledge and discuss them as openly and patiently as possible. A move means the loss of a familiar home, familiar school, and perhaps a familiar culture and language. More importantly, for many, they will be leaving behind and losing their friends. It is important for the adults to listen and support rather than attempt to fix or change.

#### **The Importance of Proper Closure.**



As you plan to say goodbye to people and places, imagine building a raft. RAFT:

- **R.** reconciliation – the need to forgive and to be forgiven. Children should reconcile any open wounds/issues with friends other relatives they will be leaving behind. Bitterness is never healthy for anyone and old problems can interfere with forming new relationships.
- **A.** affirmation – acknowledgement that each person in the relationship matters – encourage your children to let their friends know how they respect and appreciate them.

- **F. farewells** – schedule time for the farewells during the last few weeks and days. People, places, pets, possessions. Consider collecting ‘sacred objects’ to carry with you to your new home that will help connect one part of the ‘journey’ to the next. During these farewell times, a lot of emotion might be expressed, which is totally normal. Last days and sleepovers are often filled with tears. Welcome them without trying to stop them; sadness is the emotion of love and it needs to be expressed.
- **T. think destination** – think realistically and plan for the positives and negatives you can expect to find in your new home. Look at external and internal resources for coping with problems. Talk about these things with your family.

You may not have done such a closure with your family before the move (there are a lot of situations when it is difficult to do). Human nature is flexible and you always can come back to a point. For example, reconciliation or affirmation can be done through a letter, Internet or a visit some months later.

### **Developmental Levels**

Preparation and rehearsal for the move are essential to success. Talk about the upcoming move with each member of the family individually as well as together in family meetings. Children under 4 or 5 need less talk and more ‘role play,’ using favorite dolls and/or stuffed animals to play out the leaving and arrival in a new home. Children between 5 and 10/11 can use a combination of play and talk, while children over 11 can handle the ambiguities on a more verbal level.

### **Build coherence and continuity**

Expatriate children need coherence and continuity to build their identity through international moves. They are not rooted in place but in people and in their family. People of their present and past life are their life references.

- During the entire process, maintain consistent routines as far as possible and try to cultivate a flexible approach to deal with unexpected events. Routines build family cohesion, security and coherence in a time of changes.
- Sacred Objects – meaningful things that you can carry with you from one place to the next (teddy bear, favorite book, etc...) Sacred objects are reminders that there are stable things in one’s life amidst the general chaos. Go around the house with your child and ask him/her what are the important objects he/she wants to take to the new place. You might be surprised about the answer.

- Pictures – photographs of family, friends, home, pets... An album of photographs representing significant highlights of your past life and location gives you a safe place to visit when you need a few reflective moments in the middle of chaos. Pictures also help people in the new home know more of your history.
- Keep ties, keep ties, keep ties with friends, teachers, and family members. Third Culture Kids are rooted in people rather than in places!



### Culture Shock

Culture Shock is a normal healthy psychological reaction to the stress of living in a culture different from one's own. At a certain point we all go through it, even though at different intensity and timing. When arriving in a new place, we realize what we have lost: familiar places and people, contact and support groups, cultural and linguistic references. It is totally normal to feel inadequate, incompetent and insecure... for a time.

Children, as adults, need time to build a new sense of security and belonging.

During the culture shock, we go through different stages. Knowing them helps parents to understand their child's behavior (and their own), as at each stage correspond a feeling.

- During the "**honey moon**' or '**fun stage**' period, everything seems great in the new country. The child is excited about all the new things he discovers.
- Then comes a time when he starts to realize that things are not like in the previous home. He feels uncomfortable and wants to **fly away (flight stage)**. The child is confused, afraid and feels lost in the new environment. He/she may have regression-like behavior (act like a baby) or stay abnormally calm and silent. At that stage, the child needs to build a new sense of security, understand his new environment and feel connected with it. A lot of children, after some weeks, find their place in their new world and are back to comfortable life, but some of them may go into a deeper culture shock.
- Some children experience an international move as a big earthquake. During this **fight stage** of the culture shock, they may express anxiety and anger towards themselves or others. They need to express their feelings (in a secure and acceptable way) and to feel understood. They need to understand the new environment and have some control on their own life. They will find security through firm and respectful parental limits and they will build a new ownership through empowerment.

Culture shock is a chaotic experience. Most children express mixed feelings during that period of time: sadness from the grieving process, excitement about new things, fear of the unpredictable and anger from the hopelessness. They need to know that their reactions are

just normal, even though uncomfortable. Some children behave well at school while misbehaving at home – or vice versa.

Children are processing their adaptation; they need to feel loved and part of the family and most of all, they need time... like the adults! Depending on the age, a child could need 2 to 6 months to build a new sense of belonging.

### **Third Culture Kids**

“A Third Culture Kid (TCK) is a person who has spent a significant part of his/her developmental years outside the parents’ culture.” (John & Ruth Hill Useem)

For more than 40 years, counselors, psychotherapist and sociologist have helped and studied Third Culture Kids. TCK build their identity through international moves; they learn early in their life how to cope with life transitions. They also develop multicultural competences like languages, communication skills and capacity of analyzing facts from different point of views. The TCK’s are Citizens of the World and therefore will comfortably fit into the new global world.

### **A Note about Additional Language Acquisition**

Will your child continue to learn English as an additional language? Will your child be switching from English to a new language? If so, this transition will present larger challenges than if your child is already proficient in the language used in your new country/school. This, however, is not something to fear as there is a lot known about additional language acquisition, including ways that families can support children throughout this process. Before your move, begin to talk with your child about learning English/another language; what are his/her fears? Share your own stories of learning an additional language, including the times you experienced difficulties and success.

Additionally, make sure to bring books written in your child’s first language. While learning English/another language in school it is very important that your child continue to develop his/her primary language. Reading books together is a wonderful activity as it provides intimate time for parents and children. If, while enjoying literacy with your child, you have books that reflect your child’s cultural and linguistic heritage you will actually assist in their new language development while simultaneously providing a link to your home culture. It will be much easier to gain access to these books in your home country, so plan to bring them when you move or acquire new ones during your home visit over the holiday.

If your child is arriving in AISB and is new to English, he might feel frustrated not been able to communicate his thoughts, desires and feelings with students and teachers. This frustration might be expressed during school time and the teacher would have to face some agitation.

Some children control their behavior at school but come back home very tired and you might observe a change in their behavior. Fear from the unknown and anger from the frustration need to be expressed. Provide to your child a safe and comprehensive environment where these emotions can be expressed in an acceptable and respectful way. The counseling team is here to help you and your child in this transition.

### **Activities to do with your children**

- As things become more hectic, spend more time, not less, with each child; listen to concerns, reassure doubts when appropriate and help the child to express feelings. Keep up family traditions and rituals and involve children in creating new rituals for the family.
- Keep an eye on everyone's stress levels and plan for breaks. **Remember to take care of yourselves so that you can care for others.**
- Talk about your moving plans with your child.
  - Provide your child with some control over events.
  - Provide positive emotional support for your child.
  - Provide your child with consistency.
  - Explore your new community together.
  - Ask for assistance.
- Make a "Countdown to Moving Day" calendar. Mark important dates and duties.
- Talk with your child, sharing with them as much as you can about your new home, neighborhood, school, and community. Gather relevant information from the internet, from the new school, etc.
- Read stories with your child. There are several children's books that have a "moving" theme; some are listed later in this document. Talk about what you read and encourage your child to share any concerns he/she may have.
- Focus on the positive aspects of the upcoming move and of the new culture and community.
- Don't discard your child's possessions, even if not everything can come along. Your child has enough loss without worrying about their things. Let them choose which of his/her possessions will be moved. Put the others away in a safe place.
- Have your child help with packing and unpacking.
- Let your child have some control over how his/her new room is decorated.
- During the move and adjustment period, encourage your child to talk about his/her feelings and concerns.
- Throughout the transition, let your child know that you understand his/her feelings and that you will be there for support.

- Don't minimize or dismiss your child's fears; instead acknowledge and validate his/her concerns. Saying goodbye is an important part of this process and feelings of sadness or fear are natural.
- Show patience and understanding as you give your child time to adjust to the new surroundings.
- Encourage your child to stay in contact with their old friends by writing letters or emails and sending photos. Make sure to collect addresses before you leave.
- In all of your actions, reflect on your child's need for a sense of belonging; their need to feel secure in knowing that they are a part of your family and also how they will fit into the picture during and after the transition.
- As much as possible, keep your child's routine. Continue to observe family rituals and celebrations.
- Make sure to bring along favorite books, clothing, and toys. Especially important are books written in your child's primary language, as they may be more difficult to find in your new home.
- If your child participated in clubs or hobbies encourage them to continue with these interests in your new home.
- Once you arrive in your new home, take care to spend time with your children. Limit the time that you leave them at home with a sitter/domestic staff.
- Meet your neighbors and explore the town together with your child. Visit museums, historical sites, festivals, and other interesting spots.
- Learn about your new culture with your child. Consider learning the language together or have your child teach you what he/she is learning in school.
- Visit the new school together before the first day of school. Take a tour and meet school staff.
- After school activities are a good way to meet new people for children and parents. Encourage your child to choose at least one of them.
- If your child is experiencing a poor adjustment to the move, contact your child's teacher or the school counselor.
- Read about the typical stressors that you and your child may face. You will find several books in the bibliography below.
- Make contacts with other parents who have recently moved or who have moved frequently. They may be able to listen and lend advice.

**Perhaps most importantly, as the parent, make every attempt to model a positive attitude about the move.** Children look to their parents to assess a new situation. If parents show their children that they are enjoying and coping with the new situation (even though there might be some difficult moments) then the children are more likely to make a successful transition.



## Communicate and Discuss Questions about Moving

Allow your child to ask questions. You may also have questions you would want to ask your child in order to help them through the moving process. Below are suggestions for appropriate questions.

- What's on your mind? – Moving means a lot of changes. Sometimes we worry about things that will be new or different. Do you have some worries? Write them down or draw them in pictures. Do you think that your family members have worries too? Why don't you ask them? And you can talk to them about your worries.
- Are you excited about moving? – What are you looking forward to in your new country: a new house? New friends? A beach or the mountains? Write or draw what you are looking forward to. **Talk with your family about your ideas. Find out what everyone else is excited about too.**
- What things might be different in your new country? – Have you been there before? Do you have friends who have lived there before? What things have you seen in pictures? Different clothes, languages, food...? **Talk or Draw about some of the things you think will be different in your new country.**
- What people and pets will you leave behind? – Will everyone in your family be moving? When we move, sometimes we must leave people or pets behind. Leaving those we love is the hardest of all. Maybe you have an older sister or brother who will stay or be leaving for university. Your ayah/nanny will most likely be staying here. One of your parents may not be moving. Maybe you will need to leave your pet behind. **Write/draw the people and pets that will not be going with you. How does this make you feel? This is something you need to talk about.**
- Friends to say goodbye to and keep in touch with. – Who are your special friends? Are they classmates, neighbors, teachers, coaches, relatives? **Take pictures or draw pictures of these people for a memory book. Be sure to get their addresses or email so that you can keep in touch. If you know your new address or email, give them to your friends. Send a postcard to your friends when you get to your new home.**
- What places will you leave behind? – Your house or apartment, park, library, school, place of worship...what others? Make a list or draw them. Leaving the place you have lived can be sad. Maybe you have been living there for a long time. What does your room look like? Take a picture so that you will remember. What parts do you like best about your house or apartment? What are you glad to leave behind? **Buy a map of your city. Mark on it your favorite places and take the map with you to your new country. Make a time capsule – a little treasure of some special things – and bury it in the corner of your yard or some other secret place. What else can you think of?**

- How do you feel about leaving your school? – Have you talked with your teachers about leaving? That is a good thing to do. **You will probably miss some things about your school and be happy to leave others. Make a list. ‘What I’ll miss’ and ‘What I’m happy to leave’.**
- What things will you leave behind? – Your car, some toys, clothes that are too small or for the wrong climate, your sports teams, your music class, a favorite TV show. Probably only some of the things that you have will move with you. Some things may have to stay just because you have too much to pack. Kids, help your parents **decide which of your things will stay or go.** Making a list of things will help you decide. Remember what you like to do at school, at home, with friends. Be sure you include a few things you can do alone. Sometimes you have one or two things you just want to take with you because they are special. Be sure to tell your family how important they are to you.
- **Scrapbook** – You will be meeting new people who will ask you what it was like where you lived last. Collect some pictures of your town or city, your house or apartment, your favorite places, and your friends. Include a school paper or magazine, and a class picture, pictures of relatives, pets, and special things you will leave behind. Include picture postcards (historical and recreational) of the city and country. What else can you think of to include in your scrapbook?
- **Treasure box** – propose to your child to make a “treasure box” from a shoe box he/she will decorate and in which he/she will put all his small souvenirs (flag, picture, dry flower or leaf from the garden, small craft...)
- **Map-quest** – Where are you now? Where are you going? On a map mark these places. If your family moves a lot, keep this map and continue to mark the places where you visit and live.
- **Your new country.** – What do you already know about your new country? Where is it on the map? Have you read books or seen movies about your new home? Have you talked to someone from that country? Write or draw some pictures that show what you already know. What else can you learn about? Geography, history, foods, holidays, sports, other things..? How can you learn about these things? (use all of your senses).
  - Use your eyes to read books, magazines, tourist pamphlets, newspapers, information from your new school. Watch movies, TV specials and news programs, performances, plays, dancing.
  - Use your nose to smell new scents in a restaurant of that country, new foods and spices.
  - Use your mouth to taste new dishes common to your new country, different fruits or spices. Say some words in the new language. Sing songs for your new country. Ask questions.

- Use your ears to listen to music and to people talking about your new country. Listen to the sounds of the new language.
- Use your hands to touch different materials, like silk or jute, new fruits and vegetables. Write letters for information, write reports, draw pictures, make models, dance new dances, play new games.
- **Planning your trip.** – How will you travel? How long will it take? Talk to your family and write/draw your plans. Once you know more about your trip, you can decide what to take in your backpack and in your suitcase. Other things will go into boxes and will be shipped to your new home. It may take a while for the boxes to arrive, so make sure to take some favorite things with you in your luggage. What will you take with you? Think of things that don't take much space, are not heavy, you can play with quietly in your seat, will be fun, and will keep you busy if it is a long trip. Make a list of things...
- When arriving in your new place, you might not be able to move directly into your new house, and stay for some weeks in a temporary house. Be sure the children feel that the family provides a sense of home. **Continue family rituals and organize family fun times. Spend regularly 'special time' with your children (one adult with one child).**



#### **RESOURCES – Romania/ Bucharest websites**

<http://www.citycompass.ro/>

<http://www.inyourpocket.com/romania/bucharest>

<http://www.romania-insider.com/>

<http://www.expattarrivals.com/romania/moving-to-romania>

<http://www.internations.org/romania-expats>

<http://expatro.blogspot.ro/>

#### **RESOURCES – Books for parents**

- Pascoe, R. (1993). Culture Shock!: Successful living abroad: A parent's guide. Portland, OR. Graphic Arts Center Publishing Company. ISBN: 1-55868-425-5
- Pascoe, R. (2006) Raising Global Nomads: Parenting Abroad in an On-demand World. North Vancouver, BC. Expatriate Press Ltd. ISBN: 0-9686760-3-0
- Pollock, DC & Van Reken, RE. (2001). Third culture kids: The experience of growing up among worlds. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press. ISBN: 1-85788-295-4
- Storti, C. (2001). The art of crossing cultures [2nd Edition]. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press. ISBN: 1-85788-296-2

- Jehle-Caitcheon, N. (2003). Parenting Abroad. Putnam Valley, NY: Aletheia Publications. ISBN: 1929129033
- Hess, MB & Linderman, P. (2002). The expert expatriate: Your guide to successful relocation abroad – Moving, living, thriving. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press. ISBN: 1-885788-320-9
- Kalb, R & Welch, P. (1992). Moving your family overseas. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press. ISBN: 1-877864-14-5
- Olkowski, T. & Parker, L. Moving with Children
- Piet-Pelon, NJ & Hornby, B. Women's Guide to Overseas Living.

### RESOURCES – Books for children

- Blohm, JM. (1996). Where in the world are you going? Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press. ISBN: 1-877864-44-7
- van Swol-Ulbrich, H.& Kaltenhäuser, B. (2002). When abroad – do as the local children do. Ori's Guide for young expats. Xpat Media
- Viorst, Judith. (1995). Alexander, who's not (do you hear me? I mean not!) going to move. Aladdin Paperbacks: NY, NY. 0-689-82089-5
- Berenstain, S. (1981). The Berenstain Bears' moving day. New York: NY: Random House.
- Carlston, N. (1990). I'm not moving, Mamma! New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Levine, E. (1989). I hate English! New York, NY: Scholastic.
- Waber, B. (1991). Ira says good-bye. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin.
- Choi, Y. (2001). The Name Jar. New York, NY: Dell Dragonfly Books. Engel, D. Fishing
- Sharmat, M. Gila Monsters Meet You at the Airport
- O'Donnell, EL. Maggie Doesn't Want to Move Rogers, F. Moving
- Conrad, P. (1984). I Don't Live Here! New York, NY: E.P. Dutton.
- Seuss. Oh, The Places You'll Go. Spier, P. People

### WEBSITES

<http://interculturalpress.com/shop/index.html> – Intercultural Press – has many books about cross cultural relations, moving abroad, and home again.

<http://www.interchangeinstitute.org/> – The Interchange Institute – a not-for-profit research organization focused on the study of international relocation of individuals and families.

<http://www.expatica.com/hr.asp> – Expatica HR – intended as a site for European human resources managers with expatriate employees. This site has a lot of information that you may find useful: family and spouse support; cross-cultural training, social security; career management and financial benefits.

<http://www.ori-and-ricki.net/> – The Expat Kids Webpage – a site for expat kids. Join this community of young expats from around the world. Make new friends and find out about other countries and cultures. In German and English.

<http://www.interactionintl.org/bookschildrentck.asp> – Books to use with children about Third Culture Kid (TCK) and transition issues

<http://www.denizenmag.com> – online magazine dedicated to today's Third Culture Kids.

<http://www.worldweave.com/GN.html> – Global Nomads – a site exploring intercultural identity.

<http://blog.crossculturalkid.org/> – Ruth E. Van Reken is a second generation adult TCK and mother of 3ATCKs. She speaks nationally and internationally on issues related to global family living. She is co-founder of Families in Global Transition. In addition to other writing, Ruth is co-author of *Third Culture Kids: Growing Up Among Worlds*.

<http://figt.org/> – Founded by Ruth E. Van Reken, Families in Global Transition, Incorporated (FIGT) has been the global leader in cross cultural education and training to support the entire expat family for over 10 years. This organisation provides useful articles and resources as well as offering an annual conference.

<http://www.interactionintl.org/> – Interaction International

<http://tckid.com/> – TCKID is a non-profit community of over 21,000 members dedicated to help Third Culture Kids connect and find a sense of belonging.

<http://thirdculturekidlife.wordpress.com/tag/third-culture-kid-family/> – Articles about living as a Third Culture Kid

***Information provided here has been adapted from the following sources:***

*Blohm, JM. (1996). Where in the world are you going? Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press.*

*Frank, N. (1999). Sailing new seas: Helping students in grades 1-4 cope with moving. Warminster, MA: Marco Products, Inc.*

*Pollock, DC & Van Reken, RE. (2001). Third culture kids: The experience of growing up among worlds. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press.*

*Copeland, AP & Bennett, G. (2001). Understanding American Schools: The Answers to Newcomers' Most Frequently Asked Questions. Boston, MA: The Interchange Institute International School of Tanzania Elementary Counseling Department publications*