

Relocating Children

The highs and lows of relocation: American expatriates share their experiences

By Fergus Rose

Relocating to a new country can be an exciting but stressful experience, not only for the relocating employee, but also for their family. The success of an international relocation is closely linked to the happiness of the employees it assigns overseas who in turn, if they are parents, place great store on the happiness of their children.

A report published in April 2009 explores relocation concerns, factors which help movers settle, plus hints and tips for those considering an overseas move. It presents the findings of new research conducted amongst 800 international school students, aged between 10 and 18, and their parents.

Nearly half of the respondents were North American, and so the results give a fascinating insight into the concerns of American expatriates before, during and after the relocation process.

BEFORE MAKING THE RELOCATION:

At the time of departure, the report found that the top three concerns cited by students were:

- leaving friends behind (78 per cent)
- not making new friends (55 per cent)
- finding a school that they liked (25 per cent).

Additionally, 11 per cent of student respondents were worried about speaking English.

For their parents, the top three initial concerns focused on the well-being of their family:

- their children's happiness (62 per cent)
- finding a good school for their children (56 per cent)
- leaving extended family behind (37 per cent).

Other concerns included adapting to a new lifestyle or culture, (18 per cent), and, somewhat differently, driving on the left-hand side of the road, (8 per cent).

POST-RELOCATION EXPERIENCES

Despite being the most prominent initial concerns, the study reveals that fears about friendships and adjusting to a new life proved the easiest concerns to address for most respondents post-relocation to the UK. Over a third of student respondents, 34 per cent, said that 'not making new friends' was the single easiest issue to deal with. Parents also found that some of their biggest concerns were the easiest to address with 29 per cent citing 'finding a new school' as the easiest issue to deal with.

For students however, whilst making new friends did not prove to be a major issue, leaving friends behind was identified as the most difficult thing to deal with post relocation, with 45 per cent citing this factor.

The most difficult issues for parents following relocation were worries over their children's happiness, 13 per cent; and leaving their extended family behind, 12 per cent.

FACTORS THAT EASED THE TRANSITION

There were several factors that helped students find their feet:

- making new friends (cited by 95 per cent)
- going to a good school (89 per cent)
- keeping in touch with old friends and family (82 per cent).

For parents, the most helpful factors were:

- knowing the children are happy and settled (cited by 82 per cent)
- contact with old friends and family (76 per cent)
- making new friends from the home country or nationality (73 per cent).

Despite the obvious stress and concern asso-

ciated with relocating for both parents and students, it was largely considered to be a positive experience, with 70 per cent of students and 75 per cent of parents reporting this to be the case and, interestingly, parents coming from North America found their relocation more positive than those coming from Europe.

TOP TIPS

Nearly all respondents were keen to share their relocation experiences and relay tips to others. From around a quarter of students came the overriding message 'Don't worry, don't be scared – there's nothing to be scared about', while 23 per cent said 'You should make friends quickly; and 15 per cent advised 'Be positive, have confidence'.

Advice from parents however was more practical urging newcomers to 'Get involved with or join groups', 'Be open to new things and don't try to make it like home', 'Enjoy the country and culture' and 'Do your homework in advance'.

Karen Lawrie, a parent who relocated to the UK from America, with her husband and three children in August 2007, comments on her family's experience:

"My husband works in the military and we have to move around quite frequently, so the relocation services offered by a school are particularly important to us.

All three of our children have made friends and settled quickly and their school has also been supportive of me as a parent, providing me with good friendship networks to meet new people when we first moved to England."

There is no doubt that an international move brings with it many challenges, but for most families it is a life-affirming experience where new friends are made, fresh skills acquired and rich cultural experiences enjoyed. ■

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