

Culture Shock in the Digital World

By: Robin Pascoe

“What’s the most positive thing you can say about living abroad?”

New technologies have had a major impact on the way the traditional stages of culture shock play out. Technology can, in fact, delay the process of working through these stages in order to come out the other side.

In the early stages of your transition, the Internet and cell phones can be a lifesaver for parents. An American spouse living in Korea with young children told me she was grateful when, soon after arrival, her new caregiver, using her own cell phone, connected her with a local play group. A local chat room helped this spouse discover the next meeting of a women’s club as well as find information on much-needed goods and services. When used locally, digital connections can be immensely helpful.

When the messaging goes global, though, a false sense of connection is enhanced. This can be especially true for children who are text messaging or chatting online with friends back home. Adults, too, with family and old friends just an easy click away, may falsely feel rooted in communities that are not nearby.

These types of connections—as comforting as they may be—are nevertheless virtual. They are not happening in real time in a family’s new real world. A lot of e-mail is done while wearing a bathrobe. Would anyone go out to meet new people wearing their pajamas? Distracting yourself by sitting at a computer “talking” with a friend thousands of miles away may fill the day, but it can create a dreamlike state that won’t help you settle into your new locale.

One longtime French expat spouse, a veteran of multiple overseas moves, wrote to me from Indonesia that while her family enjoys the expat network they have built and maintained via the Internet, she believes cautionary words about e-mail should be offered to any family moving abroad. “E-mail contact probably has some bad sides to it,” she wrote. “The contact is great, but it can postpone the time when we actually feel settled. E-mail contact can be artificial and move us away from settling down where we are actually living.”

Barbara Schaetti agrees. In her work as a transition coach for expatriate families, she has seen the Internet become a hindrance rather than a facilitator when people rely on absent friends and family to the exclusion of peers in the new locale. It is the crisis stage of culture shock that has the biggest potential to be affected, Schaetti says.

“During the honeymoon phase, you’re out in your new location checking things out, seeing all the commonalities. Your reports home are likely to be relatively happy ones, and you’re not as likely to be glued to the computer waiting for a response as if you’re feeling miserable and miserably misunderstood. But when people are in the crisis or flight stages, they’re less likely to leap away from their computer, given the illusory appeal it offers of home community connection. Cultural learning won’t happen, and they could get stuck in the crisis stage of culture shock. And without cultural learning,” asks Schaetti, “why bother to have packed up your house and family in the first place? If there’s no gain, it sure isn’t worth the pain!”

Children raised on text messaging, instant messaging, and cell phones may have a hard time breaking the digital umbilical chord with home or their last posting. As parents, you naturally want your children to breeze happily through the early days of relocation. If communicating with friends back home pacifies them, it's hard to take that away. But a friend over the computer or a cell phone is not a friend in the here and now.

A fellow Canadian spouse, a veteran of multiple moves around the world, thinks e-mail is "both a godsend and a curse, allowing the family to stay in touch with their friends but definitely hampering the settling-in process." She recounted a particularly difficult time with her then fifteen-year-old daughter, who fell in love four weeks before the family was moving halfway around the world.

"She carried the virtual relationship on for months, making both herself and the rest of the family miserable," this spouse remembers. "As mothers, we sometimes have to resort to extremes, and having access to her e-mails, I was able to at least figure out that this fellow was not a good influence and that her histrionics over him were mainly for effect. Even so, our sensitive child once again pushed us to the limits. This would have been the case regardless of a move or not, but it's more difficult to find support when you are in unfamiliar territory and your husband is out of town most of the time."

Take care to see that your children balance the old and the new. Don't let their technological toys prevent them from working through the stages of culture shock and, ultimately, from integrating into their new surroundings.

Remember: cross-cultural experiences, growth, and the making of new friends simply won't happen in a cyber bubble. "The more that bubble segregates you from your new cultural environment, the less meaningful ultimately your sojourn will be. It may feel safer at the time, but there's nothing like regrets for missed opportunities upon repatriation," advises Barbara Schaetti.

And those missed opportunities may have long-term ramifications. "There will be all the grief and anger at what was given up (family, friends, career, known world) without any of the appreciation for what was gained, because what was there to be gained was missed altogether or not maximized as it could have been."

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