

Repatriating Global Nomads

By: Robin Pascoe

Whenever I'm making plans to speak about repatriation to parents at international schools, I know the topic will be a hard sell. Many expats are positively repatriation-phobic; they are not going to think about it ever, if they can avoid it. The feedback from organizers reflects another common attitude: if they are not repatriating in the next few months, many parents don't see the need to come and hear my talk.

They couldn't be more wrong—a point they would learn if they came out to listen! Parents need to be aware of the repatriation challenges that lie ahead for their global nomads throughout the overseas experience.

Preparations for the day your children will return "home" should not be left to the last minute. Life skills acquired along the way can ease a child's transition not only to the culture stamped on his passport but also to a future life as a productive and happy adult, ready to assume his place in the world. What's more, everyone in your expat community is affected by repatriation, even if yours doesn't happen to be the family moving.

Why?

Because you can be sure that one of your children's best friends or favourite teachers is moving. That's the reality of expatriate life. Someone is always moving on. As moving season creeps up each year, you will look around your dinner table to see children of all ages wearing long faces. If your kids are the ones about to move, they may be wondering why their friends suddenly seem to be withdrawing from them. A period of disengagement is common as children protect themselves by stepping back from someone close to them who is leaving.

Teenagers have been known to break off their relationships months before the school year ends if one or the other in the couple learns they will be leaving. Young girls start weeping in advance over a cherished friend who is moving, worrying they will never see each other again....

Most expatriate adults have learned to accept the springtime moving period as a natural part of the expatriate life cycle, much like a change of season. It simply marks the inevitable passage of time.

In the transient expatriate world, though, time easily slips into hyper drive. During a two-year time period, a family can arrive in a place unknown, quickly make friends, make better friends with people who become close friends, then see those close friends become friends living somewhere else in the world—all in the blink of an eye.

Transition is not a notion easily grasped by children, who live in the here and now. Kids don't understand life cycles. After all, they have had so few. In the time before their own move or that of their best friends, they may be sad, angry, depressed, relieved (if they have hated where you live), or excited. Sometimes, they'll experience all of these emotions at once.

Nor do children understand that things usually work out in the long term. Patience is not a virtue common to them. So this is where you, the parent, come in. You must help your children manage the expectations and fears that are part of the transition to their "passport" culture. As Dave Pollock and

Ruth Van Reken point out in Third Culture Kids, for a great number of TCKs the re-entry process more closely resembles an entry. That means a brand-new job is just beginning for you, the parent. At the same time, you are managing your own feelings about moving home.

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