

# WHAT EXPATRIATE CHILDREN NEVER TELL THEIR PARENTS...

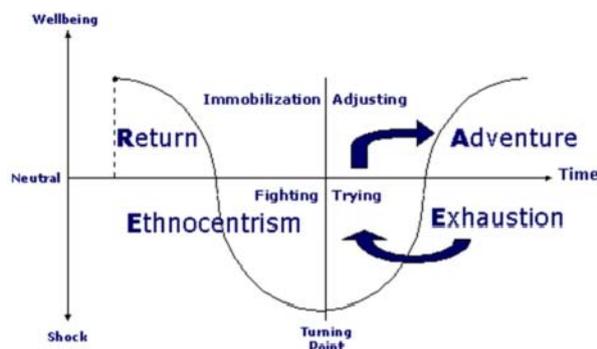
*The difference between children and adults is whether they look backwards or forwards.*

Most expatriate parents, often with the best of intentions, have the wrong approach when it comes to communicating to their children about moving abroad and the impact their new lifestyle will have on them. Although children are the most important people in a parent's life, they are hardly ever involved in the initial decision-making process of moving. We all assume that children do not suffer very much from a transition, that they learn a new language quickly, that they make friends easily and that they often embrace their new surroundings far faster than their parents. Moreover, it is easy to conclude that they will not be confronted with the adult distress of culture shock and the long, slow process of acculturation. "Children are more flexible", we tend to think. What's the point of involving them, from the start, in a long and very difficult process of decision-making?

What parents often forget is that they play a very significant role in their children's lives, but that their friends and their surroundings are just, if not more, important. Most of the time children hear about the move out of the blue. But how do they react? What can they do when they learn about it? Research shows us that children find it very hard to argue about the matter. Often they internalize their feelings about the move because of several reasons; lack of verbal skills, afraid to destroy a dream, afraid to thwart the process, afraid to be misunderstood. Children are not able to come up with a decisive argument that will change their parent's thoughts.

In truth, an international move impacts children in unique and vastly different ways than their adult counterparts. I call them the 'followers' because they will follow their family members abroad even though they did not choose to go. This very fact makes their situation very different from their parents'.

The classical models of culture shock such as the W-curve are linear, do not take a premature return into account, and assume that everybody goes through the same stage. Based on years of experience and further research, we developed a new model which takes several additional factors into account.



Talking about culture shock is talking about coping with a great amount of changes. Expatriates; adults, children, families, singles and couples, need to adapt to a lot of changes in a short period of time. The way each of them copes with it is different. The biggest difference between adults and children, or often also between the expatriate and the partner, is the fact that one chose it and the other didn't.

As an adult, who has chosen expatriation, you enter the model in the adventure stage, which is marked by excited anticipation. The little misfortunes you already encountered are still reasonably acceptable because of the excitement about the expatriation and the numerous positive first impressions. It gives you the hope and sometimes the illusion that everything will work itself out.

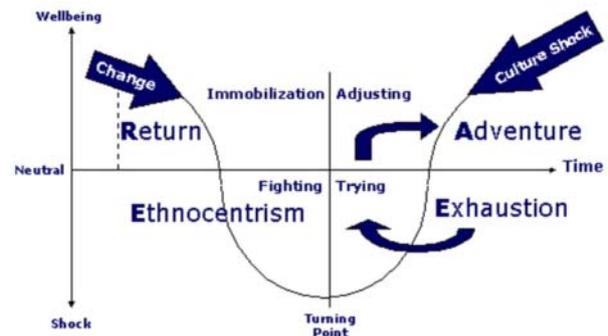
After a while you notice that confronting different ways of doing things, which was earlier seen as surprising and interesting, is now an obstruction. Things are not that easy as you had expected and coping with all the small changes is exhausting you.

In a third stage it is becoming more difficult to build up relationships with the locals. Since you do not see them as "equal" you search your fellows. This will make the acculturation difficult. You are sick of trying, you've done your best but now it's not fun anymore. At this moment culture shock is serious; sleep deprivation, mood swings and depressions are not rare in this phase. The locals get blamed for everything and the only viable remedy you see is the return home.

Those who do not get weighed down with culture shock learn to adapt faster. The phase of acceptance towards your own values and norms has replaced ethnocentrism or the third stage. Humor towards extremes of both cultures sets the scene for understanding and adjustment.

*"I'm sick of listening to my parent's discussions about how we would live and adapt in Paris. It makes me feel sad and very angry. I just don't understand why we have to leave L.A. in the first place."*

In our seminars we show this model and ask the participants if they think they go through the same stage? The answer is no for some, yes for others. There is a major difference between those who have chosen expatriation and those who haven't. Children will



start on the other side of the model. They will go through the normal change process. They are shocked when they hear about the move and want to stay home. Even weeks after they have arrived in the new country they do not want to be there and dislike everything. They are fighting against the change. After a while, they realize that there is nothing they can do and are willing to try. Nevertheless, they keep looking back. Only when their feelings start to become positive, step by step, about the whole transition they will adapt and find themselves in the adventure stage.

The disconnection between children and their parents stems from the feeling that their parents don't understand a thing. This is related to fact that parents look forward during the whole process. How are we going to organize everything? How will our life be over there? How do we find the bus timetable? How do we find an electrician? How will we ever find such nice curtains again? Even after they are totally settled, they keep looking ahead.

Children, on the other hand, look backwards. Their problem is not arriving in Paris, their problem is leaving L.A. And their worry is not how, but why.

*"They just don't understand ... , we left right before the school holiday started in order to get everything ready in the new country. I had hoped so much that I could at least spend some time with my friends before I moved to the other side of the world."*

There are many tips and tricks on how to help children cope with changes, but a lot depends on your child and the situation. Raising happy and well-adjusted children is always a challenge, no matter where you live. However, when parenting issues are magnified because traditional support is absent, this challenge is even greater. Besides being flexible, maintaining routine, good communication, making life exciting and staying in contact with home, we have learned that it is better to involve children as soon as possible in the decision-making process. Let them hear your arguments and let them state their opinion. They are very important family members and they want to be treated that way as well.

*"Dads have to work more. You've got the feeling that you're losing your parents"*

If you look at the culture shock model, keep in mind that children need time to adapt to differences and try to support them in conquering culture shock. Very obvious symptoms of culture shock are boredom, homesickness, irritability, minimum productivity and a sense of loss.

*"Communication with home is not always easy because they start thinking you are a multimillionaire, that you're stuck-up, ..."*

Before you leave or shortly after you have arrived, make sure that you find out and try to answer all your children's concerns. Promise them that they will be able to call home often, pack their favorite books, stuffed animals or photos, make it a priority to install the computer immediately after you have arrived. The idea is to take away their major concerns.

Often parents are so busy with everything else that these worries are the last things on their minds. But this 'teddy bear effect' is very important to them and is significant for the rest of their acculturation process.

They need to know that they are able to play their favorite tape or that there will be a phone connected to call their grandma.

After this first stage, emphasizing with the concerns of your kids stays very important. The relation between you and your children needs to stay positive so that they can feel safe and can tell you what's on their mind.

*"You are left behind with all the issues yourself"*

When they are ready to try to fit in and accept the fact that they are here now for a while, let them explore. Give them the freedom to explore, but don't force them or sell it to them.

If you went swimming with them, don't ask them leading feedback questions. "Wasn't it great and didn't we have a lot of fun today?" Support them but don't try to convince them.

*"I'm glad that neighbors are helping my mom because now I don't have to put up with it"*

A last, but probably one of the most important rules is not to deny culture shock yourself. Children will notice when you hide your own difficulties and will perceive that you are being deceitful. Culture shock affects everyone. It does not strike you after one single event, it is not selective and it affects the whole family. Be aware of it and be the best coach you can for your children!

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