

# Going Home

## The Child's Perspective

Children and adolescents may react in a variety of ways to the news and process of repatriation. Many factors can affect this reaction- age/developmental stage, how connected they are to their home country, and other situational factors. Adjustment can take time, and it may be similar to the grief process- everyone grieves in their own way. No matter how eager someone might be to move there will be places, things, and people they will miss. I'll discuss some common feelings and thoughts expressed by children and adolescents in each age group and how parents can support.

### **Infant or Toddler**

Generally, infants and toddlers make the transition quite well. They may, however, pick up on your anxiety and stress level, and seem particularly fussy and demanding in the few weeks before and immediately after your move. Your time and attention are especially important now. Be sure to keep any security objects such as a favorite teddy bear or blanket close by. Keep your routine as normal as possible.

### **Primary**

Children in this age group may have been born or raised outside of their "home" country and may have no memories or ties to this country. This age group may be resilient to change, but they may also struggle. If they are very attached to their current school and friends, they will worry about leaving. They will also worry about their new school and making new friends. They may regress in areas such as bedwetting or crying or "clinging" to one or both parents. They might also be excited about the family move and may benefit from being involved in the planning process. If it is possible to take the student on a tour of their new school or have a taster day, this might help with the adjustment. If that isn't possible, you can try to find pictures of the new school and new house online to show them. You may also be able to find books about moving and read those with the younger ones to facilitate an open discussion of their emotions about the move. Parents can help smaller children to gain closure on their experience by visiting favorite places and friends or having a going-away party. Once in the new culture, parents can make the new home as "familiar" as possible, and allow children freedom to make home their "own."

### **Middle School**

This age group is going through profound and challenging changes- their bodies, brain chemistry, identity, etc. They are very concerned with their social world and how they relate to their peers. Children this age have told me that they worry that they may speak about their overseas experiences and no one will want to listen, or worse, other children may think they are lying. They may not be as familiar with the culture of their new home- music, fashion, slang, etc. and may worry about how to fit in with their peers.

## Teens

Teens may struggle the most with this move. They may already be dealing with their own mental and emotional stress regarding school, their social life, relationships, body image/self-esteem, identity, questioning of future career, lack of control, etc. This experience will highlight to them that they do not have control over their environment and may cause anger, resentment, and withdrawal. Parents can help teens by paying sincere attention to their feelings. Try to explore and accept your teen's feelings without getting defensive or lecturing. If a teen can express feelings openly and work through the "sense of loss" with parental support, he or she will be much less likely to express anger and depression in a harmful manner. Parents can help their teenage children to get involved in the new home environment, encouraging and facilitating in extra-curricular activities, sports, and youth organizations.

### Top Tips

1. **Being present** – physically, mentally, emotionally – is one of the best things you can do. We all need to be heard and comforted by a warm and understanding person. It might be difficult for you to hear the pain of your children, but your attention will be a major source of comfort for them. Let children know that it's okay and normal to feel these feelings. Be mindful of verbal and nonverbal communication.
2. **Self-care**-You might be going through your own adjustment process as well, so it is important that you take care of yourself.
3. In the midst of change, there is a strong need for **continuity**. What will be the same? For example: family meals, chores, traditions, etc.
4. **Encourage them to talk to their friends back in the host country.** Keep communication open with their old friends via Skype, email, and phone. If your child feels that they can talk to their friends when they wish they will be less likely to spend time dwelling on what they are missing. Work with your child to schedule a good time to communicate with their old friends so that they do not stay up late to talk.
5. **Tell them to keep a diary or journal.** Encourage your children to talk about and write about their feelings. It is cathartic to write it out, and it helps them organize their complex emotions. They might share this with you, and if you are able to identify how they are feeling you will be better placed to offer advice and tackle negative emotions.

## **How to spot that your child is having difficulties repatriating**

Look for the following symptoms and behaviors:

- Your child feels frustrated that they can no longer do the things they did in their host country.
- Your child maintains close ties with their friends in their host country but doesn't seem to be able to make new friends or reignite old friendships back home.
- Your child becomes quiet/withdrawn and no longer gets involved in some of the school activities that they have typically loved.
- Your child is more sad or anxious than before.

You can check in with your child to see if they are willing to open up and discuss their feelings with you. It would be beneficial to seek professional counseling if the emotions are extremely strong or if there are other factors also affecting your child/adolescent's mental or emotional wellbeing.

As parents, the most important thing you can do is to love your children and make sure they know you love them. As expatriate families quickly learn, family members are the single most important source of support, strength, identity and security.

### **More Tips**

- prepare for the move by doing research on homes, neighborhoods and educational opportunities as a family;
- anticipate that before, during and after the move your children may seem hesitant or frustrated;
- talk to other people who have gone through this experience;
- help your kids manage their expectations about life in the new country by setting realistic expectations about friendships, home and school.

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