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Honey, We're Moving Again: A Child's View of the Expat Life

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When I was a child, I wanted nothing more than to travel the world. I grew up in one place and I always envied the kids who came and went because their parents were in transferable jobs. How lucky they were, I thought, to be living in so many different places and going to so many different schools.

Now, having children of my own, I am not so sure that's a good thing. Over the past couple of years, my family has moved around the world quite a bit, spending relatively short periods of time in different countries. My husband's work has taken us across continents, and I have been able to arrange for mine to follow suit.

I have told myself this is okay because my children are still small (they are six and three). Yet I can see that the constant upheavals, the getting attached to people and places, cultures and lifestyles, schools and friends, is taking its toll on them. They have definitely been affected in a not-so-positive way by the expat life, even if this has certainly brought with it some rewards.

A quick web search reveals a plethora of links to resources that provide pointers on the effects of transcontinental moves on children, which not only provide help on how to assist children in coping with these, but also on how parents can better understand what their children are going through. There are scholarly papers on the subject (I found, by way of example, one entitled "Determinants of effective coping with cultural transition among expatriate children and adolescents," which was published just last month in the *Journal of Anxiety, Stress and Coping*) as well as specialized companies such as Leuven, Belgium-based, which Yeo Management provides intercultural management services (in a customized manner, if required) and coaching to help expatriates deal with the impact of moves on their families.

I also found online an extremely informative paper entitled *What Expatriate Children Never Tell Their Parents*, written by Ellen Van Bochaute, consultant in expatriate management and a partner in YEO Management. She writes that children, as "followers" in a move they don't necessarily want, find it very hard to argue about the matter, and

internalize the feelings they cannot articulate, which in turn leads to certain behavioral changes. I can definitely see these in my six year-old son, who is unsettled and cranky, irritable and easily bored.

While it is hard for working parents to take the time out to be with their children after the move, research shows it is crucial to do so, since children really have no recourse other than their parents. Parents need to be positive (indeed, the move might not always be that easy on us either), ensure the channels of communication between them and their children remain open, so that the latter can express themselves and say how they feel.

Ms. Van Bochaute also recommends maintaining connectivity to the familiar (setting up the computer as soon as possible, for instance, in order to e-mail friends and family left behind).

Because of the nature of my husband's work, my children and I are going to have to continue to move for the foreseeable future. I am going to do my utmost, though, to make sure the coming transitions are as smooth as possible for them, listen to them and organize my work in such a way to really be there for them. – *Savita Iyer*