
ACCORDING TO MY PASSPORT,
I'M COMING HOME

by
Kay Branaman Eakin

TABLE OF CONTENTS

NOTES FROM THE AUTHOR	5
1 IF I'M HOME, WHY AM I FEELING SO LOUSY?	11
Special Impact on Teenagers	13
Third Culture Kids	17
The Effect on Friendships	23
The Importance of Establishing Independence	24
2 THE TEEN SCENE IN THE U.S.	29
The Importance of Clothing and Shopping	30
The Lack of an Adult Presence	31
What's the Social Scene	31
Alcohol and Drugs	34
Other Challenges	38
3 ENCOUNTERING DIFFERENCES AT SCHOOL	39
4 COMMENTS FROM TEENAGERS	49
Feeling Like a Foreigner - Not Fitting in	50
Not Being in Control	50
About Dating Patterns and Pressures	51
Nationalism vs. "World View"	53
Other Issues - Homosexuality, Gangs, and Racism	54
Advice from Those Who Have Made the Transition	57
5 WHAT ARE THE ISSUES FOR YOUNGER CHILDREN?	59
6 HELPING TO EASE THE TRANSITION	65
Developing Portable Skills	69
Tracking Your Children's Education	70
The Best Time to Bring Children Home	72
7 ORGANIZING THE TRANSITION HOME	75
Now That We're Leaving This Summer	76
Getting Some Information	76
Saying Goodbye	78
Decisions to Be Made	81
8 WHAT CAN WE DO ONCE WE GET HOME?	83
Celebrating the Family's Arrival	85
Practical Tips for Helping Your Teenager	86
Sticker Shock	87
Seeking Professional Help	90

9	COMING HOME TO COLLEGE	93
	The College Choice	94
	Coping with Loneliness	95
	Issues of Reentry to College	98
10	WHEN I'M ASKED HOW I CAN STAND TO MOVE AROUND SO MUCH, I REPLY I COULDN'T IMAGINE LIFE ANY OTHER WAY	101
11	SPECIAL ISSUES WITHIN THE FOREIGN SERVICE	103
	APPENDIX I - USEFUL RESOURCES	112
	SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY	113

ACCORDING TO MY PASSPORT, I'M COMING HOME

Notes From The Author

The challenges of returning “home” from another culture have only recently been addressed by business, missionary, military, and diplomatic communities. Historically, employees and some families were given perfunctory, usually business-related, preparation for an overseas assignment. Any responsibility or need for preparation when they returned home was neither acknowledged nor addressed.

Missionary communities were the first to become aware of the need to consider the phenomenon of repatriation to passport countries. They began to research and develop programs to support their families. Within the U.S. diplomatic community, it wasn't until the late 1970's that reentry concerns were addressed as interested family members gathered to discuss the issue, hold workshops, begin some minimal research, and found the Around the World in A Lifetime (AWAL) teen group.

Only in the last decade has a body of international writing and research begun to appear that addresses the issues of mobility in children and speaks specifically to their transitional and reentry needs. In 1990, a Symposium for International Writing and Research on Internationally Mobile Youth was held at the University of Florida. For the first time, those working in the field formally met to share information and research results. In the early 90's, the Department of State's Medical Division contracted with the Ackerman Institute for Family Therapy to study the effects of international mobility on returned Foreign Service families with at least two children under 16. References to the results of that study will be found throughout this publication.

The Foreign Service Teenager - At Home in the U.S., which I authored in 1987 and is the predecessor to this book, addressed the needs of reentering U.S. Foreign Service teens. Even in 1987, it seemed that the adjustments the children of diplomats needed to make were true for all young people returning from abroad to the United States. Indeed, these issues did not seem to be limited to those with a U.S. passport. Subsequent research and publications about the effects of an interna-

tionally mobile lifestyle on young people in Germany, Canada, Sweden, and Japan have indicated that this is not a nationally-based phenomenon. And these commonalities can be validated with research and writings regarding children from missionary, business, and military families.

From 1967 to 1987, I taught in eight countries on four continents and helped prepare children and teens of many nationalities, from business, military, and diplomatic families, moving overseas and returning home. When I returned from overseas, I became the Teen Program Coordinator at the Overseas Briefing Center and then was the Education Counselor in the Family Liaison Office for a total of 7 years at the U.S. State Department. For the last 4 years, I have assisted international business families with educational issues as they move around the world. These experiences have convinced me that while there may be some minor differences based on the length of sojourn in a country or the number of countries lived in, the family culture, and the total number of years abroad, and, probably more importantly, the duration and frequency of visits in the home country, the experiences of these young people — American, Danish, Swazi, or Japanese, business, military, diplomatic, or missionary — share a commonality.

Many overseas schools, most with highly diverse international populations, now organize reentry programs and/or transition programs for students who are moving, particularly those who are returning home after high school graduation. Many students share this information with their family and friends, and it is not unusual to hear international families discuss the phenomenon and actively prepare their children for reentry, searching for support groups in their home communities to ease the transition. Ideally this preparation and support will increase and become long-term responses when rearing children in an internationally mobile lifestyle.

In 1989, a group of concerned individuals within the State Department support offices (Family Liaison Office, Overseas Briefing Center, Office of Overseas Schools, Office of Medical Services and Employee Consultation Service) met to discuss the need for founding an umbrella non-profit organization outside the government bureaucracy that would address the needs of these sometimes-forgotten appendages of overseas Foreign Service employees — their children. I was involved with that nascent group, the Foreign Service Youth Foundation, and have continued through the last 10 years to work with the Foundation, helping to institutionalize services for Foreign Service young people as they come

and go. The Foundation also publishes books and materials that help educate parents, employers, teachers, and those providing services to mobile youth.

Young people who have grown up out of their home countries are often impressive. Their knowledge of the world and its diverse cultures, their understanding of things that are “different,” and their appreciation for more than one right solution to problems prepare them to look at the world in a way their monocultural peers can comprehend less easily. Indeed, this understanding and openness to a multi-cultural society prepares them well to be citizens of an increasingly interdependent world.

How many people are we talking about when we talk about those who have grown up in another culture? Estimates run to over half a million in the United States alone, perhaps 4 million around the world.

How To Use This Book

As I prepared to write again on this topic, I analyzed the issues I had dealt with 10 years ago, and found that those considered most worrisome by teens today were largely the same as then, only more so. One difference was the consequences of bad choices — the range of threatening substances and the harsher punishments for use and sale of drugs and crimes committed to maintain substance habits, translating into a longer-term impact on their future. Another was the rise of violence in our streets and schools, overseas and at home, which today touch our children more often than before.

There is now an increased awareness of the challenges of reentry on the part of the teenagers and their parents. *The Foreign Service Teenager - At Home in the U.S.* was, in some ways, a consciousness-raising exercise.

As we move into the new millennium which promises to be a time of unfolding technological advances with increased effects on everyone’s lives, this book is being presented for use in the traditional print format which will be used within the foreign affairs agencies for their overseas personnel (and which includes a Foreign Service-specific chapter). It will also be published on the internet for other mobile families, regardless of nationality, who move their children as they transition to new workforces around the world.

Hopefully, it will be used by parents early on in their parenthood to help plan their moves to coincide with their children's developmental needs and then to refresh their memories by re-reading the book as they approach subsequent moves. Children themselves can use it to validate their concerns, frustrations, and joys in their mobile lifestyles. Teachers and counselors can be educated about the special and unusual backgrounds these young people bring to their present experiences.

While relocation assistance is now more available to missionary, business, military and diplomatic families, it is still not universal. Rarely do most organizations prepare families to relocate to their home countries. And as Vicki Poulson-Larson, writing on corporate programs, stated in *Mobility*, "Children...often are the forgotten piece in...relocation packages."

Our young people have shared the experience of those from many cultures, sometimes being brought up with a language they do not know in a country they may never visit again. Let us all work to see this next generation of mobile youth, frequently called "Third Culture Kids" (TCKs), embrace their unique, and sometimes unusual, upbringing and use their experiences to contribute to this increasingly multicultural world.

Acknowledgments

Many individuals have helped me as I researched this book. The most important are, of course, the young people themselves who have been amazingly open and wonderfully articulate. They are the source of the italicized quotes in the book, many of which are from Linda Bell's work, *The Hidden Immigrants*; others directly from teens or from newsletters and school newspapers. Members of the Foreign Service teen group Around the World in a Lifetime (AWAL) read and discussed the previous publication offering their suggestions for change. I am grateful to them and to Libby Parker, their discussion leader; to Linda Lankenau who conducted two focus groups with Foreign Service teenagers, including one with AWAL members; and to Cecile M. Mines who conducted a discussion of moving and reentry with five Foreign Service children aged four to nine. I am grateful for the writings of Ruth Useem, David Pollock, Carolyn Smith, Craig Storti, Bruce La Brack, and Sara Taber, and the wisdom of Dr. Elmore Rigamer, former Director

of the U.S. Department of State Office of Medical Services, and numerous international friends and mobile parents. Dr. Robert Beck, formerly Director of Counseling at The American Embassy School, New Delhi, and currently an Area Director of Student Services in the Fairfax County Public Schools and parent of two internationally mobile teens, has been wonderfully generous with his time, discussing his observations of internationally mobile youngsters as they move from overseas living to their passport country. I would also be remiss if I didn't give a big thanks to Kendall Montgomery, Gail Knowles, and Sydnee Tyson for their careful and creative editing.

Without my sons, Clay, Will, and Mark, I would never have begun the process of finding out about the effects of mobility on young people, and without my husband Terry, none of us would have had a mobile lifestyle. Finally, I am grateful to the Family Liaison Office for publishing this material for a new generation of mobile young people and their parents.

Kay Branaman Eakin

June 1, 1998



1

IF I'M HOME, WHY AM I FEELING SO LOUSY?

I never really considered the United States to be my home in the first place. Not only was I not born there, but I had only lived in the country once before.

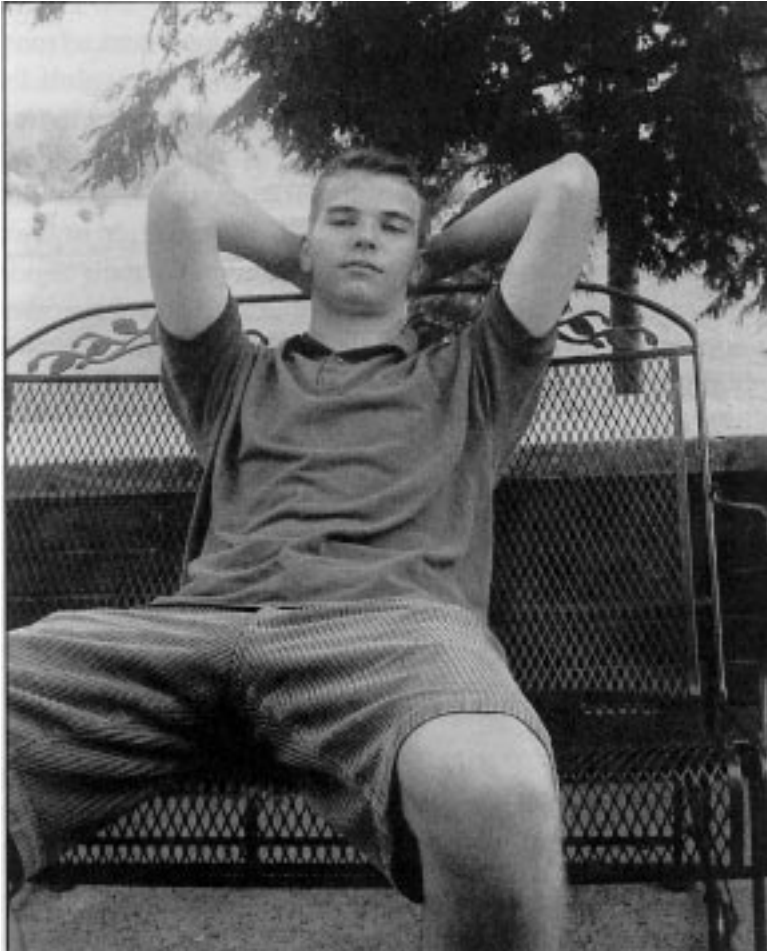


Photo by Geoffrey Knowles

I know I'll never become a real American, and it doesn't really matter if I do, because I'll be moving on to another country in a couple of years anyway.

We had to come back to the United States in the middle of high school and the last thing I needed was to be uprooted and moved to a 'foreign' country. I wasn't kidding, the U.S. seemed like a foreign country to me, and I did not want to go there.

I felt more out of place in America than I had in any of the countries I lived in overseas.

Physically, I am here. But everything that belongs to me, everything that defines me, is on the other side of the ocean where I left my friends.

These words of teen-age boys and girls about their return from overseas to their passport countries express the way many globally nomadic youth feel. Sometimes parents, in their excitement to return to extended family or a challenging new job, or even when they are dealing with their own transition issues of lost friends, the need to find employment, and overwhelming financial stress, lose sight of the fact that this can be an especially challenging transition for their children.

Those who feel that coming “home” should be no problem probably haven't done it recently. It's not just our children who find it so difficult. Most mobile adults find that it is the most difficult move in the international lifestyle. In fact, research has shown that it is a particularly difficult move for those who have adapted well to their overseas moves, that those who make a quick transition to a foreign country have the most difficulty initially when returning home.

Part of that has to do with our cultural expectations. We just don't realize that we are no longer the same individuals who went overseas 10, 7, or even 2 years ago, and that we have been changed by our overseas living experience.

While they had spent much of the last twelve years in front of the television, I had gone on safaris, visited African plains and tropical forests, eaten exotic foods and fruits, toured French chateaux and cathedrals, and ridden Eurorail to Paris.

Our non-globally nomadic friends and family have done more than just watch television, but they have not been engaged in the same activities we have. It is hard to discuss what our lives have been about with those for whom it all seems so exotic. Sometimes they resent our lifestyle, sometimes they think we're bragging, and sometimes they simply have no interest in where we've been and what we've been doing. Most of us have had an "Aunt Jenny experience" where the question about our lives turns into a recitation of Granny's latest ills. While as adults we philosophically understand why others are not interested, for our youth it can be very frustrating. They need to be able to talk about themselves in order to put some validation and worth on their experiences.

What's more, our home country is not the same country that we left. The accelerated pace of social change around the globe in recent years may mean that the vision of our country which we carry in our minds may not be based on current reality. While we were on safari or touring or just living in another country, changes were also occurring back home. As returnees it is useful to take time to listen to what has been happening to friends and relatives since we left. Their experiences may not seem as exciting to us as ours, but they are just as important and as much a part of them as ours are of us.

A few years living outside one's home country has a way of muting those images of American life once so familiar to us. We may have lived in countries where concepts of government and the rights of the individual versus the rights of the community are quite different from ours, where differing views may not be expressed and familiar goods may not be available. For parents for whom the excitement of returning to their own "root" culture may be great, it is easy to forget the confusion our young people are experiencing, and their pain upon reentry may go unnoticed. As David Pollock, a consultant and reentry workshop leader for internationally mobile youth, also called "Third Culture Kids" (TCKs), says, "Parents come home; usually their kids are leaving home."

Special Impact On Teenagers

As parents, we are probably feeling a little dysfunctional on our reentry home. Why do we need to concentrate particular attention on the effects of this move on our teenagers?

One reason for the strong impact on adolescents is that this is a time of great growth and development. Hormones suddenly start flowing and body shapes begin to mature. The acceptance of these physical changes and corresponding masculine/feminine roles leading to the establishment of healthy relationships can be confusing to the adolescent. And, for the first time, a young person's ability to reason approaches that of the mature adult. Even in the most stable environment, adolescence may be traumatic, both for teenagers and their parents.

For girls, appearance is probably the greatest concern. They look at themselves in the mirror and see the faintest skin blemish as a major eruption and their growing curves as fat. Trying to adjust to a society where being thin is the ideal, indeed where models are often anorexic, trying to deal with these changes while also dealing with the losses from an international move can be particularly overwhelming.

Boys, of course, are also undergoing physical and physiological changes. In addition, they are trying to do things differently from their fathers, partly because they feel they cannot compete on an equal footing. They often feel no matter how hard they may try, they cannot make the grade.

To further complicate matters, because they are adolescents making such enormous strides and changes, returning teens aren't sure what the standards for normalcy are — physically, emotionally, or cognitively.

Both boys and girls need strong input from their parents, but often the return to the home office for the employee means less time, not more, particularly when commutes of two working parents are involved. Again, it is very important that families try to build in as much family time, preferably quality and individual time, as possible upon their return.

Moving back to the States is like dying and being reborn as a teenager.

The most important thing for teenagers is to be accepted by their peers. Until they feel comfortable within themselves, it is hard to have the personal self-confidence that is needed to reach out to others in their age group. They feel a need to look and talk like everyone else to show they are knowledgeable and savvy enough to belong. Unfortunately, the group that most frequently reaches out to newcomers is often made up of those who are themselves operating on the fringe of teen society, often not the kids that parents would like their children to associate with. Linda Lankenau, who conducted two focus groups with Foreign

Service teenagers, including one with members of the Foreign Service teen club, AWAL, reported a fortunate wariness of kids who were too eager to be new friends.

If, during this reentry period, teens are becoming more rebellious and perhaps hanging out with the wrong crowd, they become at greater risk for behaviors that may offer momentary pleasure but long-term pain, either substance or alcohol abuse and/or inappropriate sexual activity.

Returning from fairly small, friendly, usually not cliquish, overseas schools to a larger, more impersonal environment where students have often known each other and their roles for years can be a double whammy for returning teens. In many cases they have been stars in their overseas schools — academically, athletically, extracurricularly — and have often played leadership roles. Back in their passport country, they feel like small frogs in a big pond.

In overseas schools, often in small communities, they may have been quite friendly with their teachers, even interacting socially within their school and community. This type of camaraderie rarely exists in the home environment. They often miss the friendly relationships they may have enjoyed overseas. Students who have returned report that some teachers seem to resent their knowledge of international geography, history, and travel; no doubt — in some cases, because many of these students are comfortable speaking up to adults, particularly when they know they are right! Occasionally a teacher will refer to them as spoiled kids who've lived all over the world.

On the other hand, some teachers find having internationally mobile teens in their classrooms exciting; they bring a different perspective — adaptability, independence, and cosmopolitan viewpoints — from that of monocultural students. Teachers who make a concentrated effort to reward these students' knowledge by referring to their overseas experiences sometimes unwittingly place them in a double bind with their peers; the student then is damned by his peers for the knowledge that makes him valued by his teachers.

Moving home, particularly if home is in a congested, affluent, expensive, metropolitan area, can be especially traumatic for teens. Parents may be primarily concerned about the physical tasks of the move, but for teens it can be an emotion-laden period in which they must give up old friends, worry about whether they'll like their new school and if they'll ever be able to find new friends. And they must do all of this in an environment of fast food, MTV, an incredible bombard-

ment of fast living and, at one's fingertips, all that is offered on the World Wide Web.

To complicate matters, society is far more confusing and menacing than it was when most of their parents grew up. While the United States may exhibit the most stressful changes, or at least talk about them the most, in fact, most countries now face societal dislocations that, if not the same, are as striking in their contrasts to the past. Our teens may never have to face some of the social tragedies that are present today, but when they return to their passport countries, they often face living in a society with the threat of AIDS, drive-by shootings, metal detectors at school, easily accessible sex, date rape and violence, on television if not in real life, and the highest ever divorce rate in the U.S., now over 50 percent.

Dr. Robert Beck, formerly Director of Counseling of The American Embassy School, New Delhi, and currently an Area Director of Student Services in the Fairfax County Public Schools, points out there may be a great deal of stress for these returning teens who really don't know the local mores or habits of the culture.

They all face the loss of predictability. That is an ongoing and inevitable psychological irritant that all returning teens will have to deal with. They need to understand that cues are going to be different, what was previously predictable isn't. They operate in a state of disequilibrium and will be off-balance until they can make a comfortable transition to living here.

Beck goes on to point out that the fears that families express before return are very real, that it is important for them to discuss these issues as a family before the move and after their return. Parents must continue to communicate about controversial topics to ensure their children will bring their questions and concerns about what they're seeing in their schools and among their friends to the family for discussion and guidance.

Some teenagers will have a more difficult time finding their place than others. Some simply have a more difficult time adjusting to any new situation. In fact, many families have noted that one of their children may have always had more difficulty adapting to a new environment than the others.

A move anywhere is accompanied by many changes. Change invariably leads to growth in an individual, but the process of growing can be painful — particularly when you're also going through adolescence. Much of this pain comes from leaving one's friends, and by the time most are teens, they have experienced a lot of this kind of grief.

I definitely don't like change...I hated moving.

David Pollock has found that:

...one of the major areas in working with TCKs is that of dealing with the issue of unresolved grief. They are always leaving or being left. Relationships are short-lived. At the end of each school year, a certain number of the student body leaves, not just for the summer, but for good. It has to be up to the parent to provide a framework of support and careful understanding as the child learns to deal with this repetitive grief. Most TCKs go through more grief experiences by the time they are 20 than monocultural individuals do in a lifetime.

Adults can see beyond the move to six months or a year down the road when everyone will have reestablished himself at home, but for teens, today is what is important, and today looks pretty ominous — new home, new school, no friends. While most do end up making new friends and finding a comfortable niche in their new lives, it may take much longer than expected, and in the meantime they may be quite unhappy.

Home is the place where you feel at home, and for these teens who have been global nomads, home is rarely somewhere in the passport country. When young people are asked by their relatives if they are glad to be home, they usually are confused and really want to say that while this may be their parents' home, their sense of home is many miles away, usually the place they've just left.

Third Culture Kids

Most teenagers returning to their passport home do not feel they fit in. Their interests and behavior are different, and they usually feel no

one cares about them and where they've been. They've been living overseas, often as unofficial representatives of their passport country, but when they get home, they feel different from everyone they meet. Canadian or French, Japanese or English, they have become Third Culture Kids (TCKs).

The term TCK was first used 40 years ago by Ruth Hill Useem in her research on North American children living in India. TCK refers to someone who has spent a significant period of time in one or more culture(s) other than his or her own, thus integrating elements of those cultures and their own birth culture, into a third culture. Useem and others have subsequently researched and written on the phenomenon and found that TCKs cope rather than adjust, becoming both “a part of” and “apart from” whatever situation they are in. Brought up in another culture or several cultures, they feel ownership in none. An American TCK may find more in common with an Italian or Indian TCK than she does with a monocultural U.S. teen.

Other similar terms are used in the literature on the subject, including “transcultural” referring to blending parts of various cultures into one's own. MK is used for Missionary Kids, and Overseas Brats is often used to describe military dependents.

The term “Global Nomads,” while initially used for adults who grew up in this lifestyle, is now becoming more widely used to describe individuals of any age who have spent their developmental years in one or more countries outside their passport country as a consequence of a parent's work. Global Nomads International, founded in the late 80's, holds annual conferences and has branches and chapters throughout the United States, on some college campuses, and in some other countries. Often the terms “Third Culture Kids” and “Global Nomads” are used interchangeably.

Many influences go into a person's development — not all TCKs develop the same. The employing sponsor, the family's size, relationships, and cultures, the number of countries lived in and for how long, the ages at which the international sojourn takes place, the knowledge of and participation in both the “visited” and “passport” culture, the type of schooling, and where and how one lives in the “visited” culture — all have an influence. Despite those influences, however, mobile kids have more in common with each other, regardless of nationality, than they do with their less internationally mobile American peers. American TCKs have more in common with each other and with Danish and Japanese and English TCKs than with their American peers. The fact

that they have lived at such a crucial time in their development in another culture provides the thread of commonality.

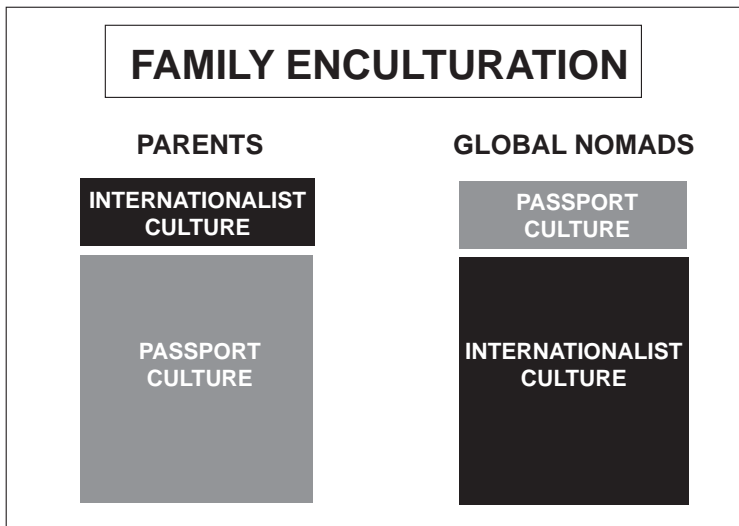
Craig Storti, writing in *The Art of Coming Home*, states that “there is...a common core of readjustment concerns that seem to transcend culture or nationality...” Storti found various research studies illustrating a similar range of reentry reactions: 50% of Swedish exchange students felt they didn’t fit in when they returned to Sweden, 55% of Japanese businessmen reported significant culture shock, and only 7% of U.S. teenagers felt at home with their peers when they returned. When returning to countries or individual cultures within those countries that are especially “closed,” problems can be particularly acute for returnees.

Most TCKs grow up accepting cultural differences and have learned how to communicate with those of several countries; many are bilingual. At a minimum, they have been exposed to other languages and, using their cross-cultural skills, body language, and even minimal language skills, can often communicate with those from other cultures even without a common language.

Many of us grew up in one culture with no international mobility, and have roots that are strong and understood. While we may leave our roots, the sense of place, of where we are from, is usually quite strong and grows stronger as the years pass. TCKs’ roots, on the other hand, are determined by people, not place. While people often come, they never really go, remaining forever a part of a TCK. In addition, the people who come are often mobile themselves, and lives of TCKs are full of the grief of saying good-bye to them.

Those of us who grew up in our passport country and traveled as adults, no matter how much we travel, primarily still carry our “home” baggage. We may have been culturally and intellectually developed in our passport culture with a small overlay of the culture of those countries in which we have lived. Our children, on the other hand, who grow up abroad carry their multi-cultural baggage with a much smaller slice of their/our home environment. Their cultural and intellectual development has taken place in an international locale with a small overlay of their passport culture.

Erik Erikson, the noted psychologist, says that the major task of adolescence is the search for and establishment of identity, and that being unable to settle upon a definite identity is what really disturbs most adolescents. Teenagers outside their home country often feel more American or more Mexican or more Swedish than they do at home, but



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when they return and find themselves different from their “passport peers,” they may begin to question just who they are. Because peer group conformity is crucial, this blurred identity of the adolescent may cause a real crisis of identity. It stands to reason that those who have gone through an international living experience during their development may well have a more difficult time finding their identity.

Sara Taber, author of *Of Many Lands*, says that she spent much of her 20’s and 30’s finding out who she was and what it meant. “It’s only now that I know how incredibly rich my life was and how incredibly difficult it was to return ‘home’.”

Another task of teenagers is to begin to look at how they will live their lives and to make at least preliminary decisions about the direction they will take to reach their occupational goals. Living abroad, however, TCKs often have had limited opportunities to observe role models in a wide variety of positive positions in their communities. This unfulfilled task becomes manifest in delayed occupational choices and a bit more “experimenting” with identities before finding one that fits.

There is some indication that TCKs often do not learn problem-solving skills in handling interpersonal relationships. With a built-in rotational cycle, there is a temptation to simply leave a problem without resolving it. Because of the importance of people rather than place, this baggage gets carried on to the next location and may reemerge and impact the development of new relationships.

This is why it became such a challenge getting used to new faces, a new home, and a new school all at once....I am constantly contemplating, not usually on the present, hardly on the future, but always on events from my past—mainly, memories of old friends.

Ruth Useem, in conjunction with colleagues John Useem, Anne Baker Cottrell and Kathleen A. Finn Jordan, surveyed more than 700 TCKs currently living in the United States, ages 25–84. They found that TCKs remain somewhat out of sync throughout their lifetimes, and that not being like their peers is usually very important and sometimes painful, particularly in their teens and twenties. The respondents characterized their difficulty with their reentry as mild to severe. In replying to how long it took for them to become adjusted to American life, most indicated that they NEVER adjusted.

Ruth Hill Useem states, “They adapt, find niches, take risks, fall and pick themselves up again. Many indicated they feel at home everywhere and nowhere.”

From their first home leave after an overseas sojourn, TCKs are cultural outsiders in their own passport country. An astounding 88% reported they can relate to anyone, regardless of differences in race, ethnicity, religion, or nationality. They generally credit their third culture background with positively influencing their adult lives.

Being a TCK is not a disease for which one gets an inoculation or has therapy or from which one should recover. It is simply a condition of experience that while usually extremely positive in the long run, may be painful living with in the short term, particularly during a move. Young people need to be assisted to find their own identities within all the experiences they have had, both internationally and when they return home.

Their feelings of home will probably never be the same as the feelings of home of their monocultural parents. Trey Reasonover expressed his reactions to home in the June 1997 *Wings of AWAL*, a newsletter for and by Foreign Service teens:

My “home” does not seem to be about concrete walls, a specific spot of land, or a street address. Rather, it is every country I have visited and lived in, and every cultural and sensory experience these travels have wrought.... If growing up overseas has taught me anything, it is that conventional concepts should always be closely examined and their frames expanded upon. Yes, I am American, but I cannot reasonably limit myself

to one nationality at an emotional and intellectual level. If the United States is "home," then, in this broader sense, so is the rest of the planet.

The following is an article excerpted from *Sentry*, the newsletter of Yorktown High School in Arlington, Virginia. Doggett was a 16 year old junior at the time of its publication. He is currently a senior at the American Embassy School in New Delhi.

NEW DELHI OR YORKTOWN

by Christopher Doggett

Do you ever wonder what it would be like to pack up and move to a new country and leave the last 2 or 3 years of your life behind you? Just imagine, you can start with a clean slate, anyone you meet will know nothing about your past. You can visit exotic places and learn about foreign countries. These are just some of the great things.

Don't be fooled though. There are many aspects which make life very difficult. In the last sixteen years of my life I've moved five times, attended six different schools, lived in eight different houses, and have made and lost fourteen best friends. The toughest move I had to overcome was actually moving back to the States. Imagine what it's like coming to a school with over a thousand kids and not knowing a single one. It's like Kindergarten all over again but worse. Everyone else in the school knows people from when they were still wearing diapers. That is exactly what it was like when I came.

Despite all the advantages and disadvantages, I've never had any major problems with my family's lifestyle. I've had fun traveling the world and learning about different countries. But, because of this lifestyle I have to make the hardest decision of my life.

When I moved back the summer before my freshman year (my) parents promised me that I could finish high school in the States. Both of my parents realized that high school was going to be a big part of my life and it would be easier if I didn't have to move.

In early September my father came home with some shocking news. The best career move he could make is to move to an embassy overseas this summer. Because my parents promised me, I have two options. I can stay here and finish high school and live with my mother while my father lives in India, or I could finish high school in India.

If I moved, I'd lose my friends again. I wouldn't be able to drive. I wouldn't be able to watch any exciting football or basketball games. But, I would be able to graduate from one of the best international schools. My senior class would consist of only thirty other students. I would be able to visit places like the Taj Mahal and nearby countries. I'm not sure what I want to do.

The Effect on Friendships

When the day came when I had to leave...how could I be leaving the best friends I've ever had?...I was thinking that I'd never have friends like this again.

By the time a TCK is a teenager, he has either become adept at coping as the new kid on the block or has withdrawn into himself, no longer making the effort to make new friends over and over again.

The hardest part of any move is leaving your friends, and a close second is meeting new ones.

Linda Bell, interviewing adult TCKs for her book, *The Hidden Immigrants*, found that people are the link for this group, and, long after the fact, they often remember they missed connecting with someone to say goodbye. She also found that because of the mobility of their lives, the TCKs she interviewed made ties quickly but then felt they had to be able to cut them quickly when they moved on.

I finally decided not to get close to anyone and go really slowly into relationships so I wouldn't be hurt when we had to go.

TCKs often appear so sophisticated. While they are able to travel halfway around the world and use interpersonal skills when dealing with adults and other TCKs, their maturity level is often erratic. They tend to remain more attached to parents than their peers who never left home.

My life overseas was exciting, but people didn't want to hear that.

They don't seem to be able to speak the language of their home country peers. Returning teens often think, or at least hope, they will be able to pick up the strands of friendships with old friends, but very often the different lives they have led preclude this.

I wish I could change them back to the way they used to be....

For many returning young people, this is a great disappointment. What they don't realize is that, because of their overseas experiences, they now have a wider world view and may not have much in common with old friends. Another disappointment is discovering that old friends from overseas who are also back "home," have changed and are not the same people they remember.

Anne Blabey wrote in a letter to the editor of Wings of AWAL:

One thing you have to realize is that being a teenager and having to move anywhere in the world whether it's the States, Korea, Brazil, South Africa, wherever, you are going to have a tough time....The first six months here were the most horrible months of my life. Now that I've been in _____ for a year and a half, I've made some really good friends here as well, as I'm sure you will in the U.S. if you give it some time.

The Importance of Establishing Independence

A very important developmental task for teenagers is to form social relationships and develop a network of friends beyond the immediate family. In order to do this, they need to establish independence from parents and reach outside the family circle for a life of their own.

Part of this task involves some risk-taking experiences that may result in greater wisdom and even more independence away from the watchful eyes of parents. That has often been difficult in an overseas community where children frequently live a fish bowl existence in a large community of surrogate parents and where teens may stand out from the teens of the country. Their schools are often small, and the students have a limited circle of friends whose parents may know each other. More time for family activities, characteristic of overseas life, may be a plus from the parents' point of view, but the danger for our teenagers is that they may become overdependent on their parents, especially when they lack appropriate outlets for breaking loose.

Increasing security concerns in many overseas locations compound the problem of teens having an independent social life. Without the ease of testing behaviors and persona in a safe environment, teens may miss out on opportunities to develop their independence from parents. This slows the teen's developmental move into becoming a self-controlled responsible young adult. Many TCKs exhibit continuing adolescent behaviors and sometimes rebellion into their 20's.

My family is very important to me since we constantly move and my friends keep changing. My parents and my sister are my best friends and, unlike other families, we always enjoy doing things together.

When a family goes "home," family members may become even closer, providing needed support for children who have yet to develop new friendships. The reentry process may further delay the maturational process of independence because parents again become the support group for their children who have not yet had the opportunity to develop new friendships. Teenagers do not assert their independence, and they may actually regress to an earlier developmental stage.

During this whole moving process, my parents were the ones that were our friends. They knew what was going on, they understood me and my brother, and they needed no explanations for our strange tales.

When teens return home, they see some of their peers leading what appear to be independent lives, at times seemingly with complete freedom. Many of their peers' parents are working, and no one is at

home at the end of the school day. Most have at least partial use of a car, a privilege that may not have been an option in an overseas posting. But it is a part of teen culture in the United States.

...my parents tend to be more of an influence to me than a friend or boyfriend...our relationships with our parents are a lot stronger than that of the average American kid.

On the other hand, if the teen does try to assert independence, an appropriate developmental response, the parents may not know how to deal with the situation and become even more anxious. They may try to reestablish undue control. This then squelches the teen's developmental need for independence.

Families return to their home countries from a variety of overseas locations, some small, some large, some in industrialized nations, some in the developing world. There are certain commonalities for expatriates, regardless of location, that may be quite different from the situation in the home country. While it is important for teens to start becoming independent from their parents, in an internationally mobile lifestyle the reality is that families usually need to be there for each other as they come and go from country to country, and this is quite different from a family in a monocultural environment.

As we moved around the world, my family was really there for me. I don't know what I'd do without them. Even though I have my friends, and I want to spend more time with them now, I still wouldn't want to not have my close family.

THE TEN BIGGEST DIFFERENCES COMING BACK TO THE US

Wings of AWAL, December, 1997

1. The cereal aisle
2. The general American attitude towards life
3. American schools
4. Ability/inability to handle weather (as opposed to where you came from)
5. The availability of any type of goods
6. The food (for better or for worse)
7. The clothes
8. The kind of stuff you can get in vending machines
9. The sports people play
10. EVERYTHING!!



2

THE TEEN SCENE IN THE U.S.



Photo by Geoffrey Knowles

Returning teenagers often have only hazy memories of what it was like to live in the U.S. Trips home may have been family vacations in which everyone tried to jam into a short time all those fun things they felt they could not do overseas. Parents, feeling guilty because their children are growing up overseas, try to compensate by making what could be a reality check at home into an extravagant holiday. Teens rarely experience a typical American teenage life during a visit, though parents often feel they have given them the chance to learn how wonderful life can be for them at home. If the visit home isn't a realistic look at what living there is like, then the goals of the parents are not met and the views of the teen end up distorted.

In addition, parents are not always so wise about some characteristics of their home societies that pervade teenage culture. The following discussions of the U.S. teen scene reflect the thoughts of many parents, teachers, and counselors and are included not to cause alarm, but to increase awareness of what is happening and what young people will be facing.

What is the scene, then, that teenagers face when they return to many of their home countries?

The Importance of Clothing and Shopping

Those of us who have lived in less industrialized nations without the influence of the mass advertising media are often startled when we return home. Many home countries have developed consumer societies. This does not go unnoticed by our teenagers. Shopping often becomes very important to them — not shopping at discount malls or chains or even large department stores but shopping at upscale stores like The Gap, J. Crew, Banana Republic, Ann Taylor, and Benetton. Many of their peers have their own credit cards and spend an inordinate amount of time shopping or just hanging out at shopping malls.

Labels are very important to many of these young people. Although returning families may not be able to afford to shop at some of these expensive stores, and, indeed, may balk at doing so for other valid reasons, their teenagers will be surrounded by peers who do. The whole issue of clothing has assumed an importance that is mind-boggling to most adults returning home. Reportedly, it is not unusual for parents to spend more than \$1,000 outfitting their teens for a school year. And this is not just for girls.

School counselors point out that with the increasing number of two-career, one-child families, there is more expendable income, a great deal of which is spent on the child. Indeed, it seems parents spend more money on a child as they spend less time with that child.

While private schools have historically required uniforms, many now have moved toward more liberal dress codes or guidelines. At the same time, the clothing problem has become so great in public schools, some are beginning to experiment with school uniforms.

The Lack of an Adult Presence

Increasing numbers of families are headed by a single working parent or are blended families made up of “hers,” “his,” and sometimes “theirs.” Two-parent families are often also two-income families. Children in these situations often need more than the usual attention and nurturing, but it is difficult for parents to be there for their kids when they work long hours and commute long distances. Returning teens, in particular, don’t know how to manage their time and finances and don’t always get adult help. In many instances, counselors point out that kids are bringing up kids, that these young people seek attention and caring from their peers. They become pseudo-adults, serving as counselors to each other. One psychologist characterized the situation as “The kid is out, the parents are out, and there is little connectedness with adults.”

Many students indicate they would like more family activities, particularly an issue for families who have lived overseas and had the luxury of quality family time. Boys, in particular, have a sense of an absent father. When teens don’t get love from a father, they often look for it in peer relationships with the opposite sex. Psychologists point out that there is a lack of significant adults in many teens’ lives.

What’s the Social Scene?

Students are often faced with social mores and behavior different from what they have been accustomed to. The Useem et al. survey found that as this group of young persons meet new people and situations, they are slow to commit themselves until they have observed what is expected behavior. If what is expected is unacceptable or incom-

prehensible to them, they will often quietly withdraw rather than make fools of themselves or hurt the feelings of others.

Life for teenagers, wherever they are around the world, usually revolves around their friends. Developmentally, they need to move away from their nuclear family and reach out from the dependency on their parents to looking for approval from their peers. While it may not always lead to healthy relationships, this stage is necessary for them to become fully-formed adults. For that reason, returning to their passport country is often fraught with unhappiness for teens. At the same time that they need to reach out, others who are already settled into a social circle are not always receptive to an outsider. Even reentered teenagers, once they have made the transition, do not always make the effort to reach out to others more recently returned. Once friends have been made, just what is the social scene that exists for teens?

For fun we usually just go to someone else's house and watch movies or hang out because of transportation problems in the suburbs.

Once the returnee has made some acquaintances and gets included in activities, life is easier, particularly when some of those acquaintances have access to transportation. But it sometimes takes a long time to make those connections and get invited to someone's house. Most of our teens attend public or private high schools that draw from a wide geographic area, and unless they are in the middle of a city, public transportation doesn't usually provide a viable route to scattered subdivisions in the suburbs. Most returning teens do not come back with a driver's license, and, even if they do, not all families have a second car or want to let a teen take the family car for more than a short trip.

If you live in an area with no public transport, good luck. The problem with getting around is not being able to drive. Most of us have to rely on our parents for a ride to go anywhere.

The lack of good public transportation in many areas can greatly limit a teenager's social life. Busy schedules, commuting parents, perhaps only one car — all these limit the ability of teens to get round. Parents should encourage a returnee who is old enough to take driver's education as soon as possible. And of course, it can be helpful if the teen has a friend who drives.

It's common to go to the mall to hang out or a cafe or fast food restaurant.

As adults, going to the mall usually elicits a groan, at best, but, for a teen, today's mall takes the place of Main Street where we may have "dragged" looking for others out doing the same thing. Today, many teens "drag" the malls looking for information on the latest party, preferably where the parents are away for the weekend, the current place for those underage to buy beer, or the latest location for the current "in" drug. Given the nature of the suburbs around most major cities, there usually isn't a central gathering place other than a mall or a fast food restaurant, unless you go to the current mecca for teens on the weekends, such as Georgetown in Washington, D.C.

Georgetown is a place teens go.

Nearly all large cities have places, often more appropriate for adults, where teens like to gather. In the Washington, D.C. area, Georgetown has become the playground for city and even suburban kids. While they usually go in groups, it is very much a place to meet new friends with common interests. Going to Georgetown has taken on an aura of a good place to experiment with moving into the adult world. Once there, of course, there isn't much to do except wander down the streets, find a dark corner for a smoke, look in the windows, or check out a record or a new T-shirt at Smash or a book at Barnes and Noble or talk endlessly over a *latte* at Starbucks. On Saturday night (not to mention Halloween), it's the place to go, the in scene. Many teens simply try to drive up and down M Street and Wisconsin Avenue which are often in traffic gridlock. Most of the bars are off-limits because of age. A few music venues that feature live bands permit teens to attend, stamping their hands to identify them as too young to be served alcohol; but there are always a few kids who manage to pick up a six-pack to share. Seeing our teenagers experimenting with being on the fringe of this adult world makes one wonder what they'll have left to do when they reach their 20's.

Families who have returned to Washington the last few years have found their teens wanting to follow the local music scene on the U Street Corridor where several clubs book local bands, often made up of teens or young adults themselves. While this is often uncomfortable for many parents, reportedly the clubs do a pretty good job of seeing that teens don't get served alcohol. While the clubs prefer that teens be accompanied by an adult over 21, some will admit them for the live music. This is

not to say, however, that there won't be a lot of drinking and drugging going on among older clientele.

Hopefully, after at least a few months, students do acquire a set of friends, and possibly at least one with a set of wheels. Hopefully, these friends will be interested in what parents consider wholesome activities. Because, if they don't make such friends, there are always other teens around who are into alcohol and drugs.

Booze and drug parties - depends on your friends.

Alcohol and Drugs

Statistics indicate that the use of cocaine, alcohol, and cigarettes among teenagers has been rising in recent years, and more than 90 percent of high school students will have tried drugs at least once by graduation. Indeed, many counselors feel that drug and alcohol use has become a rite of passage for teens during the 90's.

Recent studies indicate that many more elementary students are coming into contact with drugs. Even more disturbing is the finding in recent studies that more than half of the parents whose children are being offered or are using drugs say they are certain that this is not true. When parents are in denial, it is difficult for them to play a key role in making sure their teens understand the dangers of drug use, learn their family's values and views, and understand that not everybody is doing it.

For most teenagers, alcohol is the drug of choice with long-term results as disastrous as those of other drugs. Research has shown that alcohol and drugs are also particularly damaging, physically and emotionally, during the teen years. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism says that a greater chance of alcoholism exists for those who begin drinking at an early age. Yet some studies indicate that more than 55 per cent of eighth graders report they have used alcohol.

Alcohol is easier for teens to obtain, and parents often don't take their teen's alcohol use as seriously as they should, partly because alcohol was their own generation's drug of choice. Although it does not have the same legal ramifications as the use of other drugs, parents sometime ignore the fact that drinking alcohol is illegal in the United States for anyone under the age of 21.

Statistics from a recent National Institute for Drug Abuse survey show that 35 percent of high school seniors nationwide have five or more drinks in a row at least once in any 2-week period. That behavior is only a step away from a parent's nightmare — drunk driving. In 1994, 28 percent of high school seniors said they had consumed five or more drinks at one sitting during the preceding 2 weeks and, what is more disturbing, one third of high school seniors did not see that amount of drinking as a great risk. With luck, these drivers manage to get themselves and their passengers home safely, but not all of them do. The resulting devastation for a family and a community is tremendous.

Alcohol is more common than drugs. Teens were more responsible with drinking overseas than they are here.

The perception is that binge drinking and large wild parties are not the norm in most overseas expatriate communities. Many of these communities are too small with many adults around to help curb irresponsible behavior. Most parents simply are more aware of what's going on with teen activities overseas. Sometimes there is an acceptance of drinking wine at home and in public restaurants or discos. Few countries prohibit drinking until 21, and parents in some countries have reported excessive drinking by teens at discos.

The climax of the school year in the Washington, D.C. area, traditionally for seniors and increasingly for younger students, is Beach Week, which has more to do with alcohol and partying than with the beach. Because it has become a rite of passage, it is difficult for many parents to say no, particularly to a new high school graduate. *The Washington Post* reported on June 1, 1997, that 75 percent of students attending Beach Week reported they got drunk every day, 33 percent said they used marijuana or another illicit drug, and 50 percent reported having sex, 90 percent of whom were drunk at the time.

Times have changed since many of us tried alcohol as teens. The age of beginning use is much lower than previously (sixth graders report it is easy to get alcohol), and there seems to be a concerted effort on the part of many teenagers to drink to get drunk. Drinking parties often include imbibing large amounts of alcohol and an expectation that those involved will get "wasted." Unfortunately, a certain number of these high school drinkers turn into real problem drinkers by the time they're in college, if not before, and it usually takes at least a few years to recognize the problem and to get it under control. By then, a number of

years of development, education, and meaningful employment have been lost.

While western cultures have been accused of worshiping youth, places for young people to gather are limited. This is certainly true in North America. Because most parties turn into large, unwieldy gatherings, many teenagers don't want to have them, but they want to attend them — at other people's houses. In some Washington area jurisdictions, police will investigate a large gathering of teens and may even arrest adults present if young people are caught drinking.

Drugs are common in Northern Virginia. You can always find someone who knows how to get them.

Those working with reentering teenagers feel that during the readjustment period teens are especially vulnerable. Teens may experience depression and may be tempted to self-medicate, using and abusing alcohol and drugs which then cause more depression. Parents will often blame drugs or peers when their child's use of these mood changers is, in fact, a symptom of other problems.

All of this information can make parents returning with teenagers frightened about the dangers for their children. They may have a tendency to hold teens back, not permitting them to go places or do things that they are not sure about. While it is always good to take precautions, one must be aware of overreaction which gets in the way of teens making the important developmental transition from family dependence to peer relationships. The best protection parents can provide teens is to be certain that they clearly understand the parents' views and know the consequences — natural, legal, and parent-imposed — of using alcohol and drugs.

Life in the U.S. is really safer than our parents think it is.

Magazine and newspaper reports in the Washington, D.C. area indicate that drug use is increasing among young people in the suburbs, particularly among white and well-off younger teens. While the percentage of drug-using teens in cities is 40%, the percentage in the suburbs and small towns is 60%! The rate of drug use today is higher among Caucasians than any other group. In the past, young users usually began with alcohol and marijuana. Today the choices include prescription pills, often first taken from the family's medicine cabinet,

designer drugs, and narcotics. Many in the field think it is the worst it has been since the 60's. There are conflicting reports that indicate while 95% of students experiment with drugs and 75% use drugs socially, only 30% seek out drugs, and habitual use is less.

Despite these rather horrific statistics, there are vocal teen groups that are active in schools and communities working to discourage their peers from using alcohol and drugs, sometimes getting them to sign pledges that they will not do so. Many schools have Students Against Drunk Driving (SADD) clubs.

Most schools have substance abuse prevention programs, and many high schools run special drug education classes for first-offender students who have been caught with alcohol, drugs, or paraphernalia or those who have been recommended to the program by a concerned adult or other student. Many schools now have a police presence. Some districts have drug use policies so strict that a student may not offer an aspirin to another student on school property or on the school bus. Some schools follow a zero tolerance policy; others expel second-offenders. Adolescent treatment programs are full, even the ones that cost upwards of \$8,000 per month.

It's important to always be aware of your surroundings and who you're with.

Thirteen and fourteen-year old middle school students in affluent areas have been found with drugs, sometimes selling to friends. This is the time when it is very important for family communication to take place. Teens need to have the language to refuse and the logic to understand why not to get involved in these behaviors. Family discussions are a good place for teens to rehearse what to say. Parents need to discuss with their teens their need to stay alert and to watch for a situation that might get out of hand. Many teens do not get involved in alcohol or drug experimentation and use, but they often need strong family support to help steer clear.

Parents need to educate themselves and then their children about safety issues and what changes have occurred since the last time they lived in the home country. There are parent education programs available throughout the Washington area, through schools, health care providers, and private organizations.

Other Challenges

Suicide, both attempted and final, is a growing problem among young people. For teens who do not fit in, who feel that they are different from their peers and are unhappy, this may appear to be an appealing solution. Since 1950, the annual suicide rate among U.S. teens aged 15 to 19 years old has tripled. This is but one indication of troubled teenagers. Eating disorders have multiplied; counselors report this is one of the major mental health problems among their clients. Close to half of teen girls have some symptoms of eating disorders. While this is more prevalent among this group who have their own changing body issues, even ten-year-olds complain of not being thin enough, and a size 5 seems to be the teen ideal.

Boredom is another issue. Many teens “back home” want to be constantly entertained and immediately gratified. This isn’t surprising when you consider that they have been bombarded with a barrage of information since infancy which has encouraged them to develop multiple-focus skills. Teens sit, as if mesmerized, through music videos which have no intermissions; they constantly surf through the channels or switch among radio stations. There is no time to contemplate reactions or thoughtfully analyze what they have heard — no pauses, intermissions, or silence between the bits of information coming in. Even with all this external stimulation, many returning teens find something is missing from their overseas life.

What did you expect? I came back from all that exotic stuff and there’s nothing to do. I had to look for something more interesting.

Whether they lived in the “wilds” of Africa or the cramped environment of a capital in the former Soviet Union, they have left a place which they perceived, or at least remember now, as more exciting. Indeed, many speak of how ordinary life is in the “burbs.” This can sometimes lead to experimentation with lifestyles and behaviors that may not be healthy, as they search for what seems to be missing.



3

ENCOUNTERING DIFFERENCES AT SCHOOL



Photo by Jessica Tyson

In the early 90's, the Ackerman Institute for Family Therapy, under contract with the U.S. Department of State's Medical Services Office, studied the effects of international mobility on returned Foreign Service families. One of the conclusions was that while older children have more difficulty adjusting socially following a move, younger children have more difficulty adjusting academically. Coming back to a middle or high school portends a few academic problems, but the problems most teens discuss are those to do with their peers and fitting in. Returning home to school is a scary proposition for these young people. They face what most consider the hardest school adjustment they'll ever make.

The experience of not being able to validate their overseas experiences with their teachers and peers can make it very difficult for our teens to feel good about themselves and who they are. It's hard for them to feel much self-esteem when there is no positive feedback about the experiences they have had. This lack of self-esteem prevents them from presenting themselves positively to their peers, thus perpetuating a cycle of non-acceptance.

I knew when I stepped on the school bus that I was somehow different and that it showed, yet also felt that nobody would think I was a foreigner, because I wasn't. (a 17-year old talking about her return to high school)

I still remember how awful the first day of school was — every time we were somewhere new. I always dreaded it. But the very worst first day of school was returning to school in Fairfax County. I didn't know what to expect. Nobody looked like me, or talked like me, or even saw me. The halls were crowded and noisy, and I couldn't find my classes. I'd never had a school locker or a combination lock before, and I couldn't get it to work. I was turned off right then and didn't even try to make that year an academic or social success. (a 30-something reflecting on his return 17 years ago)

I returned to isolation in a big school where I didn't know anyone. Even though I spoke the same language and was a natural born citizen, I wasn't accustomed to the American culture...I had no idea what was going on and felt very embarrassed for my ignorance of something that was second nature to the other students. (a 16-year old discussing his return a year earlier)

The halls were filled with hundreds of students rushing in opposite directions. Occasionally, one could hear a shouted greeting of “hello,”My small private school overseas had never been this way. This was a traffic jam! (a 15-year old discussing her return this year)

Most overseas schools are characterized by a strong support system made up of caring faculty members and a small student body that makes a real effort for new students, making a point to clue them in about the local school scene. The school also serves as a focal point for expatriate parents who may play a bigger role in the school support community than they do at home. Rob Beck who works with students in Fairfax County says the return to schools can be a frightening experience for many kids:

They've heard the worst of the stories of the schools. They're coming from usually small, supportive schools where they've been able to shine in their skill areas — athletics, sports, extra-curriculars — and in some cases, they are faced with roles already taken, sports positions already filled, musical leads already spoken for. They worry about how to communicate, talk, dress. The student who may have been outstanding academically or extracurricularly may have a tough time competing in a large school with talented individuals who have been testing themselves against their peers in a much more competitive way than students experience overseas. Their anticipation of a situation that is difficult is quickly realized.

The teachers overseas are often a part of the expatriate social community. In addition, parents often make the overseas school the center of community social life. By contrast, when students return to their home countries, their adjustment may be made more difficult by the impersonal nature of the schools, the lack of a relationship with the teachers, and almost no sense of community within these large schools that draw from a wide catchment area.

Here I was with people I thought I belonged to, and never had I felt more out of place.

When students return to their passport countries, they may be experiencing their first real national-style education. Their adjustment to school is often exacerbated by size. In the Washington, D.C. area, for example, most secondary schools have more than 1,500 students; some have more than 3,000! Unless returning to a small private school, teens find the size of the schools very different from what they've been accustomed to.

American and international schools overseas are smaller and you get more attention. Coming to the United States was scary because the classes and the schools were huge.

When a student enters a school with other students who have been together since grade school or at least for several years, breaking into previously established friendship groups is difficult. U.S. high schools, in particular, are made up of strong cliques which have sometimes been together since elementary school. Counselors and teachers from private and public schools alike report that exclusivity and cliquishness are part of today's American high school scene. Those who are already established in a group don't often reach out to newcomers to give them a "heads up" about what's "in" and what's not.

The established students often have little interest in someone with a different background. High school culture puts a premium on excluding unusual people. Returning students nearly always say that the worst thing is they feel different from their classmates.

I felt isolated and had a hard time communicating with people; a lot of them didn't understand my sense of humor, and I sure didn't understand theirs. It was frustrating not to be understood by your peers.

Cliques are enforced by the clothing their members wear. Woe to the returnee who buys something new and different on the first shopping trip and then finds out the first day of school that the only people who wear that type of clothing are either out of style or, more importantly, indicate a certain lifestyle that may not be appealing to the newcomer. An interesting aspect of this entire clothes issue is that teens do choose their own "uniforms," and they do not tolerate deviation any more than a school does when a student comes to school not dressed in the correct uniform.

I found that the school I went to unconsciously fosters a clique-oriented environment which inhibits the assimilation of new students into its population. I found I was “winging it” a lot with no preparation for life here.

New students are sometimes approached and befriended by the “marginal” students at the school who are looking for new recruits to support whatever rebellions they feel it necessary to foment.

I was a new student in a small school filled with children who had lived in the same house and associated with the same homogeneous group of people for all their lives. I was desperate to integrate myself into their environment.

Parents may need to keep reminding returning teenagers to wait awhile before committing themselves to a new group. That’s sometimes difficult for a teen who is frantic to fit in.

You can’t just look at what the kids appear to be and assume they are a certain type. You have to take time to get to know them before you evaluate them.

It is important that these young people take time to assess the group’s interests and the degree to which they share their views before becoming closely involved. Teens may need to filter approaches from questionable associates at first, and try to figure out why they are being approached. They may need assurance that they are free to pull away from an individual or a group if they discover they don’t really fit in and that there will be other opportunities to be part of a group.

Even after making new friends, I still feel like an outsider when they say “remember when...?” and I never can remember because I wasn’t there.

Because there are few newcomer groups in high schools, new students are often left to make their own mistakes. Unfortunately, other teens who’ve recently reentered and now found a niche may not be sufficiently confident to move out of the cliques that they have worked so hard to belong.

I tried to fit in with a group of people with whom I had nothing, absolutely nothing, in common, and I pretended to be like them. I pretended to like their music, I pretended to like their hairstyles, I even pretended that their

values were mine. But they weren't, and I just ended up losing myself and my identity.

While a smaller independent school may be more welcoming, choosing that option may not be possible for many families. Those for whom it is a viable choice may want to consider a private school, depending on the child, his particular learning style and needs, and the family obligations and dynamics (employed and/or traveling parents, single parent families, etc.). Those with strong religious beliefs sometimes look to parochial schools to provide smaller classes, a more academic environment, and a stronger support system. One single parent who had occasional overseas travel responsibilities placed her daughter in an independent school with a boarding unit; when she traveled, her daughter simply moved into the school dorm. While this may be a good alternative, parents need to keep in mind that some of the social behaviors they may be trying to avoid may also be alive and well at independent and parochial schools.

I went to a parochial school when I came back, but all the girls were brainwashed with that religion. I would mention the Moslem religion that was practiced by my friends where I lived overseas, and my classmates would be shocked. They were very close minded about any other religion and that made me angry.

Teenage life in many countries emphasizes sameness, which is diametrically opposed to the differentness many teens living in an overseas environment have experienced. Those who return to strong culturally-bound societies have even more problems fitting into their home culture environments. Youth who have experienced the overseas lifestyle are often far more broad-minded about accepting individual and cultural differences than their counterparts brought up in the home country, and often they have been encouraged to express their own individual opinions. If a teenager has been educated to think for himself, and determine his role in society, the pain of returning to a society where that is not the norm may be palpable. It also sets him apart from his peers.

As Sara Taber wrote in *Notes from a Traveling Childhood*, “Many TCKs end up feeling as I did. I will always live alone in discomfort, certain that, in order to fit into a group or place in which I have set myself down, I must change something deep and vague and essential in

myself. This perspective...affords one the sense of always walking on eggs.... And, always, of standing outside, looking in.”

Kitty Thuermer, after growing up abroad and serving in the Peace Corps, wrote in the *Foreign Service Journal*, “Nowadays, I still try to pass for an American. I think I’m getting better at it.”

Relationships I developed were not as warm and personal as those I had overseas.

Recently returned teens talk about how teens here compartmentalize; they have their basketball friends, their French Club friends, their neighborhood friends. One spoke of inviting several new friends over for a sleepover and finding it just didn’t work, because his guests were not already friends of each other. The growing development of groups such as Global Nomads International for college students and young adults and Around the World in A Lifetime for teens aged 13 to 18 with occasional activities for pre-teens based in Washington — that reach out to new returnees is beginning to ease the problem in some schools, perhaps affording the possibility of setting up a new group of international friends.

Because they don’t fit in, these young people often feel they are on the outside looking in. The hardest problem many returnees face is establishing themselves in their new environment. No one knows that Ashley was the Prom Queen in Hong Kong last year, or that Jason was the soccer hero in Rio, or that Jessica was the best actress in her school in Canberra. Establishing that kind of status can take a long time, particularly in a large school where many of those roles have already been taken.

When I returned to the States in middle school after living in Africa for 4 years, my classes were filled with people who had known each other forever. Their minds were filled with mutual memories and knowledge they had gained from opportunities I had never had. I loved music and immediately joined the school band. My zeal was soon dampened when I found that I was the oldest student in the beginner group and had come 2 years too late to join the band with the other sixth graders.

Sometimes it is important to just persevere, even when the situation isn’t exactly the way teens would like it to be. While a returnee may not become first violinist, she may find her new best friend in the band.

Another may not become the quarterback of the football team, but his soccer kicking skill may set him up to be the place kicker.

Finding real friends takes an investment of time and patience that is sometimes hard to give. It is at this time, in particular, that parents must be aware of a teen's need for assistance. In one way or another, teens usually reach out for help, but sometimes they need some help in reaching. Parents must understand that a particular set of behaviors may be, in fact, a cry for help.

In smaller overseas schools, the intensity of friendships seems to be closer than those developed at home where your best friend at school may live ten miles away. Returnees often report being puzzled by what seems to be the superficiality of friendships here, perhaps because they are unable to differentiate between real friends and situational friends. Relationships that develop in large educational institutions where connectedness may not exist once school is out for the day are different from those overseas where school, community, and social life are often intertwined.

Some returnees have reported that integration into smaller schools outside large metropolitan areas is easier. A smaller school allows more opportunity for the student to find a niche in extracurricular sports or activities. However, many of these schools are located in areas without much cultural diversity, where most people cannot understand the previous overseas lifestyle and are not experienced with those coming from such a different background. In fact, an advantage of large schools in metropolitan areas is that there are a large number of students who have immigrated from other nations.

While families are overseas, some use the option of a boarding school when the local overseas educational environment does not provide stimulation or a strong college preparatory curriculum. For many of their teens, that has provided a more comfortable reentry to their home culture.

Coming to _____ gave me a chance to encounter my own culture within the cocoon of the school. It was so much easier than coming back to public school would have been. That being said, it still wasn't easy. I was the odd man out who came in from somewhere else than a school down the road, and my parents were never here for Parent's Day.

While a boarding school in one's home country will probably have similar ethnocentrism among students as that encountered in public

schools, it is usually easier to find a soul mate in that smaller environment where students see each other over breakfast, lunch, and dinner as well as sharing a room or a hall with them. It at least gives the student some breathing space from the larger U.S. culture, allowing the student to dip his foot in the waters of the home culture without being thrown in to sink or swim. A majority of students at most of these schools, though, still will not have had the experience of living overseas and will not necessarily be more welcoming to those who have had different experiences. Looking for a boarding school with a significant international or expatriate population may be a good solution.

Although Central America is thousands of miles from Kenya, the kids in the international schools in both places were about the same. Only when I had an opportunity to go to boarding school in the U.S. in ninth grade did I experience culture shock.

Unfortunately, with recent budget cutbacks in extracurricular activities almost everywhere, it may take some ingenuity and creativity for a returnee to find a niche that suits her. In fact, one may have to search elsewhere in the community for recreation teams and volunteer opportunities.

There are academic issues, too. While parents understand that many students will not have the same U.S. social studies background or the same world history perspective, they don't always realize that other changes may also be encountered. Linda Lankenau conducted two focus groups with Foreign Service teenagers in 1997. Several teens spoke of encountering different math symbols and unfamiliar algorithms. One mentioned that graphing calculators were used by the students in their math classrooms, and they hadn't even known what a graphing calculator was! Several agreed that the school counselors didn't seem to understand the equivalency of courses on their transcripts and the difficulty of getting into classes, particularly AP and Gifted and Talented classes, because of differences in the look of the transcripts, or because the new school insisted in using its own identification process, delaying access to gifted and talented classes for academically talented students.

The overwhelming issue for most returning teens is adaptation to their home country school, usually a far different academic, social, and disciplinary system than most are prepared for. Dr. Beck says that those students who are successful may have to be aggressive. They may have to plant themselves at a teacher's door to ask questions about an assign-

ment or request some extra help. If, by personality, they are just not able to do that, parents may need to take on more of an advocacy role than they are accustomed to assuming. The Lankenau groups also mentioned students had to be quite assertive in asking for help.

A growing phenomenon, both helpful and interesting, are the high school reunions of students from overseas schools. While the alums sometime return abroad for these get-togethers, frequently they take place in the United States. Bonn American School, Kodaikanal School in southern India and Cairo American College are examples of schools that have had reunions in recent years, some annually.

Beth Rambo wrote for her American School of Kinshasa reunion in 1987, “When we come together, we form our own nation of travelers, of in-betweens...we meet our own again and know each other...we speak the same memories....”



4

COMMENTS FROM TEENAGERS



Photo by Jessica Tyson

Feeling Like A Foreigner — Not Fitting In

The greatest culture shock I ever experienced came when I reentered my own culture.

Just not fitting in is mobile teenagers' most common complaint when they return to the U.S. It is very disconcerting to come back to your own country and feel you don't belong. While the pseudo-sophisticated newly-returned teen may appear to be knowledgeable and able and bright, this same youngster may not have the familiarity with the new peer environment necessary to fit in easily. It may be something as seemingly trivial as not being current on the latest music or not knowing where to shop and how to get there. Mobile teens may know how to take a plane from Bangkok to Cairo but not know which bus to take to the nearest shopping mall.

Not Being In Control

I'm not at the age where I have any say in what's going to happen.

Each of us likes to feel that we have control over our lives, and that need develops at a pretty early age. For parents who are employed in an international lifestyle, having control is often more fictional than real even for them, although, in fact, most employees have some choice in an international assignment. Certainly as far as their mobile children are concerned, few can honestly say they have much, if any, control. Teens talk about not having any input, that they are powerless to influence any decision about moving.

Realistically, most mobile families are not going to permit a child to choose one assignment over another, but a discussion of the pros and cons and other options or alternatives and the reasons for parents' choices can be helpful. Most TCK teens like to feel that, at a minimum, they were able to express their opinions. In particular, educational options should be discussed and realistically considered.

The late Julius Segal, a psychologist and writer on building resiliency in children, said that one of the characteristics of resilient children is that they are able to exert a degree of control over things in their lives so that they do not feel like passive victims. Discussing possible assign-

ments as a family and eliciting feelings about these options may assist teenagers to feel they have some control.

Family discussions are helpful in some ways. Knowing what school you'll be going to is important, if you have a choice of where you go, whether or not you'll live in a house or apartment, all of this adds a little bit of control.

Those working with teenagers say that a simple, yet very effective, way of helping children feel some control over a move is to allow them choices in how to decorate their rooms when they move. This was confirmed by the Ackerman report.

About Dating Patterns and Pressures

Social life overseas often consists of young people getting together and doing things as a group and occasionally becoming a couple. When teenagers return home, they may find the social pattern for teens is different. Teen social life in the west is often characterized by serial monogamy. Dating as their parents knew it is an antique rite of passage, and the whole issue of sexuality becomes a primary consideration for girls as well as boys. Sexually provocative advertising supports and encourages these social and sexual pressures. Whether teens have an active sexual life or not, it is a consideration that is discussed, watched, observed on television, and felt as pressure by most returning teens. Some research indicates that half of U.S. girls have been sexually active by the age of 15. A 1997 Center for Disease Control report stated that 48 percent of teenagers are sexually active.

I was miserable when I first came back, and my parents never knew what I was going through. I had developed physically early, but that didn't seem to make any difference overseas. Here the guys commented, and they expected me to go to bed with them right away. I wasn't ready to deal with this.

Watching teens pair off quickly, often to become sexually involved, is uncomfortable; knowledge that many couples do not take precautions and feel they are immune to pregnancy, sexually transmitted disease, and AIDS can be frightening. Beach Week, mentioned earlier, especially with the mix of partying and alcohol, often becomes a sleep-around party where few precautions are taken. Daughters need a mother's guidance to

deal with their sexuality, but sons, too, need to know their parents' values. Parents who are comfortable with their own sexuality are usually more able to help their teens through this very important period. In any case, parents need to keep sharing their own views and values with their teens and to stay "askable" so that teens will continue to turn to them for guidance.

Overseas kids aren't as sexually active as they are here.

Many situations influence mobile teen sexual activities — the country from which the teen is returning, his or her friends both there and here, and opportunities for privacy. Despite these varying influences, some returnees are relieved to find that not all other teens are involved sexually, and there are many who don't want to be at this point in their lives.

It's not a big deal to not have a significant other. While there's a big focus on going steady, you find that many people don't have steady partners. I've found I'm fine on my own. I don't feel I have to have someone else to make me feel complete.

A small but vocal backlash has erupted from teens who are tired of the pressure to be sexually active. Primarily subscribed to by teens with a strong religious background, their message is "chastity before marriage." If a student chooses not to be sexually active, it is possible to find a support group or at least a group of others who are in agreement at most schools.

There are other issues, though, some of which are more apt to be encountered when using alcohol or drugs. Date rape may occur overseas, but the incidence is not reported as frequently as it is in the U.S. Perhaps most disturbing to returnees is the attitudes expressed by their peers. Whether students really tell it like it is or engage in age-old locker room bragging, the point is that while many returnees are turned off by these provocative sexual attitudes, they sometimes question why they aren't feeling the same way as their peers.

It's more like kids do something because of pressure and then regret it. I've heard people brag about being date raped because they say they're so good looking they got date raped.

Research indicates that love and attention from parents keep teens safest. Counselors note that the most valuable protection parents can give their children is for them to be clear and explicit about their values and preferences. Even if teens argue or pretend not to listen, in fact this information gives the students a moral certainty and may help strengthen their resolve.

Nationalism vs. a World View

Americans learn about the world through social studies class which is very limited.

Teens returning from an overseas sojourn, no matter what their passport country, universally complain that their schoolmates who have not had a multicultural experience know almost nothing about world affairs and little about anything outside their immediate focus of interest. Both parents and their children have experienced difficulty finding friends or family who really care anything about the lifestyle they've led or the country where they've lived.

Moving...has made me aware of and comfortable with many different cultures, while awarding me with patience to endure their idiosyncrasies.

A number of returnees have found their peers ignorant, annoying or even offensive and talk about the lack of a world view on the part of monocultural students in their classes.

They ask you to say something in African. Or, 'so, like, does Africa have one big president who tells everyone what to do?'

When I said I'd been living in Tokyo, classmates asked if I spoke Chinese!

This lack of knowledge not only bothers teenagers greatly, but they also often become quite morally superior about their own experiences. Needless to say, this does nothing to endear them to their classmates! Indeed, it becomes yet something else that sets them apart.

Reading or watching the news takes on a different meaning when I know someone from the topic country or have been there myself.

Because of the lack of interest among their national peers, many youngsters gravitate toward non-Americans. Many of them are new to the country and are less apt to be tightly involved with a group of friends. It also gives returning teens who have gained multicultural sensitivity as a part of their overseas lives an opportunity to reach out. Even though they themselves are having trouble understanding how to operate within the milieu, they may become cultural experts about their home country.

It is important for everyone to feel of use to others and to feel they have something worthwhile to pass on. This validation goes a long way in making people feel good about themselves and their experiences. For teens searching for their identity, it can be crucial.

During the 1990-91 Middle East crisis, those working with returned mobile youth were struck by the concern these young people felt about what they were seeing on the evening news. Many took what was happening in their former posts quite personally and worried about friends, teachers, and, in some cases, parents who still lived there. Their comments showed that they felt their homeland was being attacked. Philosophically, they realized the difference, of course, but emotionally they were still very tied to their lives in those countries and felt empathy for the people still there.

How can they bomb there? I lived there for 3 years. That was my home.

Other Issues—Homosexuality, Gangs, and Racism

Homosexuality, gangs, and racism are not endemic only to home cultures. Depending upon a family's posting, teens may have encountered and discussed these issues, but students returning home often report they haven't thought much about or dealt with them. At home, they are bombarded with information and opinions and have to consider these issues in a new light. Certainly publicity about these topics is rampant in the mass media in North America.

Homosexuality

Open discussions of homosexuality may not have been engaged in and obvious relationships may not have been observed abroad. This issue, in particular, sends up red flags for many parents, and surprises

many young people coming from cultures where it was not a general topic of discussion. While some private, and, to a lesser extent, public schools have support groups for students who are exploring their sexuality, it is still a controversial issue in most schools. Recent statistics have indicated that as many as 97% of students reported having heard homophobic comments made at school, and 53% have heard such comments from teachers.

It's pretty likely you'll get beat up if you come out in school. Many of the guys are homophobic.

Returning teens questioning their own sexuality will have the complexity of dealing with their identity regarding a very complex, personal issue in a largely controversial environment.

Gangs and Personal Threats

While gangs and racism are two separate items, they are intertwined in many minds, partly because there is a perception that gangs are monoracial and develop in reaction to racism and poverty. Before returning, gangs are a major concern for many TCKs, and probably for even more of their parents. We don't want our children to have to deal with them at school. In truth, most returnees report that gangs are not a problem for them.

What is really feared, by parents and teens alike, is the violence that nearly always accompanies gangs. Surveys show that gangs have invaded the suburbs and increased in the cities, and schools that have gangs have more violence in the schools. They inevitably lead to more crime in the schools and even shootings on school grounds. Even when gangs are in schools in the Washington, D.C. area, though, the majority of students are not touched by their violence, though some may feel pressure to join one.

There are gangs here, but we've never had a gang fight at school. I think the suburbs have wanna-be gangs.

What many students do encounter, particularly in middle school, is bullying. While it often does not take on the violent threat of group retaliation, it can be a frightening experience and one that interferes with a successful adaptation to a new school.

Racism

A minority student in overseas communities rarely has to deal with overt racism in her national community. She may encounter prejudice in the larger overseas community, but in the expatriate community, she operates as any member of that expatriate group. When she returns home, however, even if she is not particularly sensitive to her own identity, she will be perceived by the receiving community, minority and not, as a part of that minority.

People here in the U.S. view each other as Black, White or Hispanic. That wasn't true where I lived overseas. There really weren't any categories like that.

While many overseas expatriate teens haven't dealt with racism on a daily basis, most find a somewhat different situation when they return home. Minority teens often report being followed as they move around stores and being questioned on the streets, particularly when they are out of their home neighborhoods.

As a black, I don't fit in much with my black peers in the U.S. They call me white.

Black kids don't mix too much with the white kids at school. It was different overseas.

School life has *de facto* segregation — each group gathers together on the grounds, eats together in the cafeteria, sits together in classes with unassigned seats. For minority students who mingled comfortably with all their classmates overseas, this is confusing and difficult. In order to be accepted at all by their minority peers, they must walk a very fine line between being loyal to that group and cutting other friends out of their circle.

They sometimes become almost schizophrenic in their behavior. While they often respond to the expectations of their racial group, they realize that they have had friends of many cultures and races and that, too, is a reality for them. Those of mixed races and cultures are particularly caught in this dilemma of identity. Many have dated overseas without regard to culture and race and may encounter attitudes toward mixed dating that are less accepting upon their return.

There's more interracial dating overseas. While it's somewhat accepted, it's not very common in schools in the United States. It's common to hear comments about "Jungle Fever." That wasn't true at all in my overseas school.

The pressures on minority teens may be far greater for many of them than they and their parents had expected. In addition to making the transition to their home culture, they have this thorny issue to deal with.

The contrast between the U.S. racial divide and the open multicultural environment I was accustomed to could not have been more stark.

Advice From Those Who Have Made the Transition

After teens have been back for awhile and have had a chance to reflect on the experience of returning to their home culture, the conversation sometimes turns to what made it easier for them or what they wish they had done. Their comments are often quite thoughtful and represent strategies that others might employ upon return.

Giving up friendships is hard for kids like me, but it helped develop interpersonal skills.

It's important to keep in touch with as many friends as you can.

Communication in the family is important. Family members need to share how they feel about the moves.

U.S. culture is just as rich — it's just different.

As a family, we were very much a unit. It's important to keep that.

It's important not to talk too much about where you lived. You look like a snob if you do. You have to learn how to talk to people who haven't been where you've been.

Over and over again, those who have returned successfully point out how important it is to join a team or club in order to have a small group to get acquainted with before taking on the whole class or the whole

school. Carolyn Smith, editor of *Strangers at Home*, herself an adult TCK, describes the advantage of becoming a member of a group to provide social anchorage. Parents can encourage their teenagers to join clubs with activities that center around previous interests and youth groups where there is an adult presence. This can be a religious group, sports club, or community service activity. Schools sometimes sponsor global nomads or international clubs that can be helpful for integrating into a smaller group rather than starting with the overwhelming numbers of students at most secondary schools. Some sponsoring organizations establish teen clubs that provide community and activities. Around the World in a Lifetime (AWAL), the club for teens whose parents have served in American embassies and consulates, is one example.

It was really fun meeting all these people who had some of the same experiences I had overseas. We discussed what it is like to come back here.

Many returnees have learned another language overseas. Continuing language study can be useful both for college admission and to possibly provide an opportunity for the returnee to help other students in the class, a role that may help in making friends, and also to communicate with visitors and immigrants to the home country. Students returning to large cities or their nation's capital (such as the Washington, D.C. area), can usually find an opportunity for interaction with nationals from their overseas sojourns.

Ardi Robert Kuhn wrote in *Wings of AWAL*:

So in the end, moving “back” to the United States is not all about the cable TV, parties, music, movies and McDonald's...it's the people. The people were the biggest adjustment for me, and now I feel as if it is my duty to prove that the rest of the world is not like what they may think.

Returning teens have suggested getting involved in a volunteer organization that may provide the opportunity to use their language skills. With a little ingenuity, students can usually find an organization in their communities that can use part-time volunteers in recreation programs, a local hospital or nursing home, a library, or other service group. It's a great way to meet other kids with similar interests and values. Besides, most high schools now require community service credit. This is one way to get a head start.

5

WHAT ARE THE ISSUES FOR YOUNGER CHILDREN?

My most distinct encounter with culture shock didn't occur upon moving to a strange, foreign country. It wasn't a product of an incomprehensible language or exotic customs....The time I felt most estranged from my surroundings was when I moved back...in the third grade.



Photo from AWAL files

Preteens often encounter the same issues and concerns as teens; some children have begun to reach puberty. They may be showing interest in clothes, the media, and sexuality. But they are also still children in many ways.

Research has shown that moves tend to disrupt younger children's education, particularly when they are developing the basic skills of reading, writing, and math. Dr. Elmore Rigamer, former Director of the U.S. State Department Office of Medical Services and a child psychiatrist, in analyzing the results of the Ackerman research project, found that while older children have more difficulty adjusting socially following a move, younger children have more difficulty adjusting academically. The move itself interrupts the continuity in development of basic skills. Once those skills are in place, moves become easier and students can keep up with their schoolwork more easily, even following a transition.

Some experts have said that moving is most difficult for children in the upper elementary grades. This may be because children begin to be more interested in friends and other activities outside the home at this age. Academically they have learned their basic skills and schoolwork is now easier for them, so they begin to focus on social relationships.

Younger children often integrate well into play groups, but that can lull parents into feeling there is no problem. One family returning with a 5-year old reported she sobbed herself to sleep every night for 3 months. It turned out she missed her caretaker and the caretaker's baby with whom she had spent a great deal of time. When a child has been that closely involved with a caretaker overseas, particularly when that caretaker has provided the daily routine of sending her off to and welcoming her back from school, she often feels she has been abandoned.

The younger the child, the less involvement he has outside the family, the more important the role of the parents in any adjustment to a move. Children who are accustomed to having a parent or a caretaker at home to talk to about the day's activities when they return from school may be especially affected if, as happens when many families return home, both parents are employed outside the home.

Craig Storti in *The Art of Coming Home* says that "...reentry has the potential of turning a child's world upside down, depriving him or her of the familiar people, places, and things that are the main source of a child's sense of security and well-being."

Because of the importance of family, an effort should be made to spend as much time as possible with younger children during the first

few months following reentry to help them process the emotional issues. Sharing activities and making time to really talk can help a preteen adjust.

Developmental needs play an important role. As children become involved with social contacts outside the family, that part of their lives becomes more important for them than the nuclear family. Children need to be involved in activities with their peer group to explore options. This is the reason that as children grow older and make friends outside their immediate family their concerns about leaving these friends change and become more problematic.

I was a very unhappy 9-year-old when I boarded the plane to fly to the United States that took me away from my friends and the only country I had ever really known or at least remembered....I did not like my dad's job that made us move to Washington.

As children grow older, it becomes more difficult to make friends and more painful to leave them. At some point, many mobile children express feelings of defeat at continuing this difficult cycle. In order to protect themselves from the pain of going through the grieving process, they simply invest a little less in each relationship.

I don't want to make any more friends, because they'll leave me (or I'll leave them).

Cecile M. Mines who conducted a discussion of moving and reentry with five Foreign Service children aged 4 to 9 found them to be quite amazingly articulate about their feelings about moving. Four of the children had returned recently; the other had just joined the Foreign Service and had recently relocated to the area. Negative aspects of reentry included leaving pets and friends, the length of time before they get their "things," and not knowing what to expect in the next country.

I had three dogs and a cat. They were with me for 3 years. We had to give them away.

I wish we could have stayed longer. We seem to move a lot.

America can be a lonely place. In _____ there are a lot of people on the street and they talk to you.

We had to pack all our things and it takes a long time to get there and we still have not gotten our things back.

The worst thing about moving is you never know what is going to happen in the next country.

I don't have a close friend yet.

Positive statements included having a good time and lots of friends overseas; interestingly, four liked school better here than at post. The other participant said it was o.k.!

In Mines' final activity, she put a block of wood, a piece of felt, a pine cone, a piece of sandpaper, and a silk scarf on a table and had the children choose an object that felt like they had felt when they moved. One girl chose sandpaper, "*Because it was rough. My aunt took a lot of my stuff and we had to find new homes for my pets.*" Another, choosing wood, said, "*It was very, very, very hard to move because I had to leave a lot of my friends and my cat behind.*" A 9-year old chose the felt because, "*It was not hard like the wood or rough like sandpaper or gooey like the pine cone. It was smooth but a little harder than the scarf...a little warm and soft because my parents let me do lots of things and let my friends come over every day.*" The 7-year old boy said, "*I would pick all of them....Rough because I had to leave behind my friends, easy because the school is better here...hard to leave my cats behind but easy because no more sneezing.*"

As preteens begin to reach out to friends, they still take many of their cues from their parents. Reentry causes high stress for all members of a family, but if an effort can be made to minimize conflict within the family during this period, the adjustment is more apt to be successful and probably shorter. When a parent is having difficulty with reentry, children will pick that up, often mimicking the complaints. Needless to say, this doesn't contribute to a smooth reentry for anyone in the family. Rather than exacerbate the transition for the whole family, parents might want to consider finding some help in dealing with their own transition issues.

Children brought up overseas, particularly in the developing world, may not have learned the household chores that their home peers take for granted. While parents usually work to instill those habits overseas, many servants abroad go ahead and do the chores. Even when that is not

the case, children sometimes still feel a little put-upon by new parental expectations. This may be true especially for families who have spent home leave on the road staying at commercial establishments where those tasks are assumed by others.

Interestingly, research suggests that those with the strongest initial negative reactions to the reentry eventually become better adjusted, in all age groups. And if the children have had previous positive transition adjustments, those experiences carry over to adjusting positively to the return home.

Moving back to the United States in the fourth grade was like moving to a foreign country.

One of the issues parents need to be aware of is the importance of the peer group from as early as second grade, obvious by fourth grade, dominating the lives of sixth, seventh, and eighth graders, according to Michael Thompson writing in *Independent School*. Nearly all middle school students experience a drop in self-esteem. When self-confidence is shaky, cliques provide affirmation, support and identity. Members of cliques in middle school can be cruel using the criteria of looks, athletic ability, and wealth to determine the social hierarchy. More importantly, though, in addition to the group, what children need at this age is a friend.

“Friendship is a phenomenon that occurs between two children with a history together,” continues Thompson. Friendship researchers say that children need eight things from childhood peer relationships, seven of which come from friendship and only one from the group or clique. Friendship provides affection, intimacy, a reliable alliance, aid, nurturance, companionship, and an enhancement of self-worth. The only thing a group adds is a sense of inclusion, something most children crave.

Because of the importance of friends, some children have a difficult time trying to find a place in school, and parents often want to step in and make it easier for their children. This is not what children want, though. Michael Thompson reports asking girls at their school what role they would like their parents to play in their social lives. Almost in unison, they shouted, “Nothing. Stay out... Tell them not to get involved!” Children do not want adults helping or interfering with their friendships and social lives.

All of the advice about having teens feel they are in control, including them in discussions of the move, and allowing them to decorate their own rooms, should be followed with younger children as well as their older siblings.



6

HELPING TO EASE THE TRANSITION



Photo by Jessica Tyson

Despite the angst that accompanies the return of many TCKs to their passport country, most of them do make the adjustments necessary to live their lives, usually within the first year. Parents can help the process along by planning ahead. Families can develop both long-term and short-term strategies to make the transitions easier.

There are no guarantees that one strategy or another will make the difference for a child during the reentry process, but there are some that we know have helped certain children. Each family will have its own process for dealing with change, but repeated studies and anecdotal evidence indicate that if a family works together to keep open lines of communication and, while acknowledging their own frustrations and challenges during this period, parents manage to stay generally upbeat, usually children will do the same.

Every child must know that she is more important to her parents than the employment which first took the family overseas and now brings the family back to the passport country. Just saying this is not enough. This concern and care for the children that overrides work considerations must be shown through attitudes and actions. If children know this intuitively, most are then able to accept the change and eventually carve out a space for themselves in the new environment. Including the child in activities as often as possible, making an effort to attend school conferences, music recitals, and sports matches help deliver this message to children.

The Ackerman Study of Foreign Service families concluded that the best predictor of a child's social ability to adjust was the mother's view of the family and her psychological and social adjustment — a heavy responsibility, but not surprising when mothers overseas are the parent most apt to be at home with children. Support from both mothers and fathers, though, helped children develop a sense of mastery over their environment after a move.

Just as a family prepares for moving to an overseas culture, it is important to prepare for reentry into the home culture. Many of the same strategies used in overseas adaptation will work upon return. As when moving abroad, you are now out of your comfort zone. You can't behave normally because you don't know what normal is.

According to Carolyn Smith, editor of *Strangers at Home*, "The bottom line for parents is communicate, communicate, communicate...."

There may be times when you feel it is a one-way street, but keeping those channels of communication open is probably the most important thing you can do with your teenagers. They may not (probably won't)

share much, but if they feel they will have a non-judgmental hearing, they are more apt to talk about their concerns and their life than they might be otherwise.

There are certain inherent “givens” in a mobile lifestyle: while parents usually make the choice to follow this lifestyle, at least in the short term, their children are carried along by the consequences of that choice. They do not choose to leave their homes to begin with, and they don’t choose when or if to return. It’s important that they be able to stay in touch with friends left behind whether in Athens, Asuncion, or Accra. Teens need to feel free to communicate with friends and family even when continents apart geographically. There will be certain expenses that are necessary to help young people make the transition from one culture to another which may include international phone calls to old friends, visits to other friends who have already returned, finishing out a school year, and, perhaps, even a return visit to the country left behind.

It’s important to write letters to your friends to keep in contact.

Letters, telephone calls, even visits are important for teens to allow them to maintain a sense of continuity following a move. Electronic mail has made this communication from one country to another much easier and much less expensive, but if that isn’t an option, then keeping in touch occasionally by phone should be considered. Teens often hope to return to their last overseas “home” the first summer after their return. It is good to encourage this possibility within the confines of well-made plans — a job for the teen that will help pay for the journey — and with the understanding that it is a commitment that can be changed if the urge is no longer so strong when summer comes.

Occasionally, international moves may interrupt a school year. Whenever possible, a mid-year move should be avoided. Sometimes employees are able to negotiate a more suitable end of assignment, or family members can remain in an overseas location until the end of a school term or to allow children to finish out the school year. When that’s not possible, delaying the move until the end of the soccer season or after the school play helps children put some closure on their experiences.

If children are in boarding schools, the effort should be made to allow the child to finish the school year and, if possible, to return to the boarding school to complete the school career when the child wants this. Some schools are willing to provide financial aid to assist a family

in this instance, particularly if the student has a good academic, extra-curricular, and behavioral record.

While many adults delight in the opportunities for overseas trips during school vacations, most children are not equally excited about that prospect. Dr. Rigamer recommends bringing children back to the U.S. each summer so that they can keep in touch with their home country, friends, and extended family members.

Many families have found that allowing teenagers to spend summers in the United States, even when their parents cannot join them, is a good idea if there is a regular program in place. Ideally, they would vacation in a part of the country where they will eventually be returning to school. This time is not for staying at Grandmother's house, sleeping until noon, and watching the soaps all afternoon, but an opportunity to interact with their peers to smooth the eventual transition back home. A camp or a program on a college campus are good activities.

I personally found that when you are moving, camp is a really great way to practice making friends. Even though other kids didn't understand what I was about, they were in camp, too, and away from home, so you had that in common.

Attending a summer recreational or specialty camp, early on as a camper, perhaps later as a junior counselor, provides a good opportunity for teens to see what their home-based peers are doing. There are athletic, language, computer, self-esteem, volunteer, and outdoor programs that can fit the interests and schedules of nearly all youths, and can give them new skills or hone current skills to make the ultimate transition home easier. Possible alternatives to camp are working, traveling around the United States, or taking a course in summer school in some subject that may not be available in the overseas school.

This may provide a good opportunity for the older teen to take driver's education. Obtaining a driver's license is a rite of passage in the United States, and by the time most teens are 16, they are driving, or at least are learning how. Ryan Stoner, writing in "Freedom on Wheels" in *Wings of AWAL* said:

The moment people receive their driving license they are overwhelmed with joy. They have the power to go where they want when they want and not have to worry about finding a ride places....Coming from overseas and being

almost 16 the first thing I wanted to do was get a license. This is the one major thing that any youth who lives overseas misses out on and yearns for.

This enthusiasm at being behind the wheel does not always translate into safe driving, although statistics show that those who have taken driver's education have a slightly lower rate of accidents. Nevertheless, auto crash injuries are the leading public health problem among 16- to 19-year olds and account for one-third of all deaths in this age group according to *USAA Magazine*. A high proportion of teen drivers in these accidents are at fault, many speeding and many without seat belts.

When returning on home leave travel to the passport country, it can be helpful to have some continuity of location. Instead of visiting the family, find a comfortable place and invite family and friends to join you there while your children participate in neighborhood activities with the same friends each year.

My family always came back to the same place each summer. I highly recommend that. We always knew where we'd go and who would be there. We did have a continuity in our friendships that way.

Developing Portable Skills

Those growing up overseas need to be encouraged to try a variety of sports, activities, and hobbies, and to learn new skills. Swimming, tennis, and horseback riding, for example, are sports that can be pursued almost anywhere and frequently more readily and at less cost than at home; private music lessons may also be less expensive. Your daughter may be the only person who can play a sitar or who has all the stamps of Burundi! The more sports and activities teens are involved in, the better equipped they will be to find groups to fit into as they move, especially as they return home. Over and over again, teens mention the importance of getting involved with something for which they feel a passion.

Joining the track team helped me overcome my social and emotional shock. Interacting with the other athletes and becoming involved with teamwork really boosted my self confidence...their willingness to accept me made me feel finally welcome.

When I tried out for the spring musical and got a part, I suddenly was no longer an outsider. I had an identity and I had a name people knew. Those awful months of feeling so alone and so weird were over, just like that.

Two brothers who grew up overseas and played field hockey at their English boarding school, continued to play and refereed field hockey matches both in the United States and internationally, including on an Olympic team. Those field hockey friends they made upon their return home 20 years ago remain their friends today, participating in their weddings and other aspects of their lives.

Of course, it isn't always easy to join a team, particularly at a large secondary school where the students have been competing with each other for years. Students need to be resourceful and find a team that needs them. Several years ago, one of the area high schools in the Washington D.C. metropolitan area began girls' crew and needed new team members. Several reentering TCKs joined, even though they'd never rowed before. One eventually went to Cornell University on a crew scholarship. Other students have found places on local recreation association teams.

Not all are successful at finding a leading role, however. Catherine M. Kehrig, Chair of Global Nomads International, points out that it is hard for global nomads to shine in one particular thing because they are never in a place long enough.

Over and over again, students indicate that they feel best about themselves during reentry when they can be with others who have had the same experience. Whether through an organization such as Around the World in a Lifetime for returning U.S. Foreign Service teens, a reentry workshop, a get-together of families from a previous "home," or a phone call with someone else who has returned from abroad, these human contacts with those who have shared the overseas lifestyle and survived reentry can be very helpful during this period.

Tracking Your Child's Education

Parents need to be aware of the academic program used in their children's school abroad. The more that education parallels education in the home country, the easier the transition to a school at home. Some families choose to educate their children in another system, either to learn a foreign language or to provide the option of higher education in

another country. However, for most children, the ability to transition back into their home system should be the major consideration. Once a school is selected, a student's progress should be monitored, keeping in mind where the education will be completed. Be sure to assemble each child's educational information to carry in your hand luggage, as you move from place to place, but especially on your trip home.

Traveling families should always carry this educational passport, a portfolio of school work, assessments, testing, and the profile or description of the school(s) attended by each child. If your child has been in a local school, or schooled under a different system, parents need to work with the school to get as clear a record of the child's academic progress and standing as possible. It will be important in establishing just where your child should be slotted into the home system and can ultimately affect college admission. If the official transcript is not prepared, or if the school will release it only directly to another school, ask for an unofficial record of past achievements and current standing to carry with you. When the time comes to return home, it is necessary to have as complete a description as possible of the school, including its academic program and grading system and a description of the courses taken. It's also a good idea to ask the English and math teachers to provide a narrative on your student. This school profile information is particularly important at the secondary level.

Parents overseas may also wish to promote the organization of Advanced Placement (AP) classes or an International Baccalaureate (IB) program at the high school level, both of which often mean advanced placement at college or university in the United States and indicate added achievement to any university system to which the student may apply. United States college admission counselors in the U.S. look favorably at both programs.

Another area to evaluate in an overseas school is how closely it resembles the home school system's social values and attitudes. For example, while the legal drinking age in the United States is 21, drinking is condoned, at least on certain special occasions, in some overseas school systems for younger people. Parents may wish to become as involved in the school as possible, to encourage programs which share their values, for example on drug or sex education. Besides being involved in activities at the overseas school, parents need to keep abreast of educational developments in their home country by reading newspapers and magazines and remaining in touch with families in their passport country.

Stay in a place for a relatively long time so that your kids have a chance to establish their self-identity. It's hard to go through that over and over again every two years.

The longer a high school student can remain in one school, the better he will be prepared for university. Overseas assignments often offer little flexibility on scheduling, but if an extension is possible, particularly if the student is doing well, one should be considered.

The Best Time to Bring Children Back Home

There will always be a certain amount of trauma in returning home, particularly with a teenager. When are the easiest times to bring children back to the passport country? No definitive research has been done on this topic, but anecdotally, most counselors agree that the easiest moves are when children are pre-schoolers or in early elementary school. The most important supports at this age are family members, and, if that is consistent, then the child is more comfortable (that is unless the child has a very important and beloved caretaker who has played an important role in that child's life). Beyond that, even the experts differ! If your children are teens, you may have missed the boat already!

If there is more than one child in a family, it may be impossible to choose a year to move that is good for everyone. The important thing to remember is that rearing children in a mobile lifestyle gives us, and particularly our children, a unique set of circumstances. If we consider alternatives and strategies through the years, we improve considerably the chances of our teenagers adapting successfully when they return to life in their passport country.

One young man who grew up abroad and attended seven schools before returning to the United States in Grade 10 said, "The hardest thing was that first day of school," and for him the school year he returned was completely lost, no credits.

Dr. Beck, a Fairfax County Area Director of Student Services, suggests that Grade 7 may be a good time for the transition. In many school systems in the United States this is the beginning of middle school. Others have observed that children who return for the last year

of elementary school (Grade 5 or 6 depending upon school organization) almost always spend the year “friendless.” Returning the year everyone changes schools may be best.

It is really difficult to leave friends, move, make friends. It is very difficult, particularly just before junior high (middle school). Kids that age are very, very insensitive.

Middle schools are usually somewhat smaller than secondary schools, students come from a number of different grade schools, and cliques are not yet so tightly formed. Students report, however, even in the new school those students who have known each other at the previous school tend to clump together.

Dr. Rigamer has suggested it may be preferable to bring children home before high school. Tenth grade can be particularly painful, as many groups are formed the previous year, the first year of secondary school. Those who come in 11th grade seem to be more able to build a satisfactory 2-year experience, while many who return as 12th graders spend the year preparing for and applying to college with little contact with their classmates. They usually don’t even attempt to fit in or build a social life.

Leonard Lefkow, writing of his children’s experiences, admits, “We had committed a cardinal error in bringing our family back to the United States for each of our children’s senior year of high school. This is possibly the most difficult time for teenagers to adjust to a new school. For them, it was a year marked by loneliness and, for their parents, by guilt.”



7

ORGANIZING THE TRANSITION HOME



Photo by Jessica Tyson

Each family follows its own pattern when making a move. The following strategies for a smooth transition have been gleaned from ideas used by returning teens and their families and are passed on as suggestions families might want to consider when coming home.

Now That We're Leaving This Summer

As soon as a family knows precisely when they'll be returning home, they should sit down together to discuss the approaching return. It is important for parents to remember that their children may not be returning home, that for many of them, they are, in fact, leaving home. Discussions need to include the disadvantages as well as the advantages of the forthcoming move; all members of the family need to be sounded out as to their feelings about the impending move, and all the children should be allowed to express their divergent views. As parents, we often try to be unrealistically positive for our children, but this is the time to let negative views be expressed as well.

As a family, discuss strategies for life back in the United States — how to go about making new friends, renewing old acquaintances, and becoming involved in new groups. Try both as a family and as individuals to set some positive goals for the first month, the first 6 months, the length of time you expect to be home.

Getting Some Information

The more a family knows about a new locale, the more easily they will adapt to it. Those of us who have spent years moving around the world know this and usually have a routine for getting the information we need about a new overseas assignment. Many of those who move home use the same strategies to get to know the place as they would for any new assignment.

In fact, for all of us, home may have changed in our absence. There are new buildings, new Metro stops, new memorials, changed one-way streets. For teens who haven't been home for several years, there are often no strong memories of what's at home at all.

Families need to acclimatize their children to home in the same way they accustom themselves to an overseas posting. We sometimes forget

that children often don't know their home country. Viewing the return as a cultural experience and preparing to be a tourist in one's own country can be as simple as scheduling a weekend exploration of a park or a new museum or taking a hike along a canal, river, or lake. For teenagers, it may be making a foray to the nearest mall, to discover the best stores, preferably in the company of other teens more "in the know."

Lankenau's focus groups felt that those who came back to friends from an earlier time felt those old friends made it easier to psych out the local scene, that it was easier to ask questions and talk about fears about a new school with them than with new-found classmates. These old friends, while they may not remain best buddies over the long run, gave them a base from which to branch out.

When I lived in Stockholm, I knew what music was "in" there and how to dress. I knew how to talk to my friends.

Ideally, on the first day a child sets foot in school, wrote Sidney Werkman in *Bringing Up Children Overseas*, he should know how to play baseball, football, soccer, basketball, and hockey; he should know the names of outstanding professional and college stars in each of these sports...he should also know the current movie stars, TV actors, rock groups, and advertising slogans. It would help if he could speak in the current slang and wear clothes indistinguishable from those of all the other children in his class.

Times we sounded really American and sometimes European. Now I don't know what's "in," what to say, and I really feel like a nobody.

Many of our teens won't have the chance to know all these things, but parents can help find old friends, reentry support groups, or a summer program, all of which provide opportunities to interact with their peers. Subscribing to a hometown newspaper or magazine a few months before moving can be helpful also.

If a family does not already own a home, the quality of various schools should be considered before choosing a neighborhood. If a home is already owned, try to determine if your neighborhood schools will fit the individual needs of each child. If not, look around for alternate or magnet programs which exist in most school systems with the understanding that it may be necessary to wait a year to get into popular

alternative programs. Exploring options other than the neighborhood school is a useful exercise. What you find may not be the easiest financial option, but making an alternative choice may smooth your child's adjustment, a boon for the entire family.

The title for the previous section, "Now That We're Leaving This Summer," was not chosen lightly. Most families return in the summer. Students and counselors universally recommend that the high school student avoid returning during the school year if at all possible. In addition to the social disruption and difficulty of finding a niche within a group, the challenge of finding a fit in courses that will ultimately lead to high school graduation can be very difficult. The ideal time to return is three to four weeks before school starts, enough time for teenagers to find their way around and not long enough to get bored.

Research indicates that mobility has a positive effect on good students but is an added stress factor for weaker students, often resulting in lower achievement. Students returning home often report feeling lost, not knowing what they need, where to get it, to whom to turn, or why they feel as they do.

Saying Good-bye

It is important for family members to talk about their feelings, fears, and frustrations regarding an impending move and for each to try to understand what the others are feeling. The commotion of last minute packing and shopping, eagerness to see friends, and good-bye parties can keep us from focusing on the ways in which the return might be more successful. Expressing how we're really feeling often serves as a release that prevents those feelings from becoming overwhelming. Talking about some of these matters in a relaxed atmosphere before leaving can be far more helpful than talking about them later during a crisis.

Increasingly, we are becoming aware that putting closure on the overseas experience is the first step in making a comfortable transition home. Parents can help their children by encouraging them to think about and plan how they want to say good-bye.

Catherine Kehrig, Chair of Global Nomads International, says, "You have to say a good good-bye before you can say hello."

Many overseas locations now have reentry programs, sometimes in the local community, most often in international schools. If not, with a little encouragement from parents, a school will often sponsor such a program. Most locations have a teacher, counselor, or community member who is knowledgeable about transitions and can help lead a session.

The process of moving and integrating into home includes four steps — saying good-bye, disengaging or letting go, “limbo” (when one has not committed to the new environment), and re-engagement. Some people are startled when they hear that saying good-bye is part of arriving successfully home. However, we now know that if people do not “finish” one part of their lives before they move on to another, the “unfinished business” has a way of cropping up and interfering with a feeling of well-being. If a teen has had an argument with a friend or disagreement with an important adult in his life, it’s important he reconcile those differences before leaving.

I get so sad when I leave my friends. Each time I do it, it gets harder and harder. Saying good-bye is so hard because you know you’ll probably never see your friends again.

To avoid feeling hurt, sometimes teens will withdraw even before they get on the plane, causing those being left to feel they’ve already been forgotten. Many teens talk about their disappointment when friends don’t show a reciprocal need to stay in touch. Our teenagers’ feelings of grief are real and need to be recognized and sympathized with.

You get to the place you don’t want to make friends anymore.

Helping teenagers plan appropriate opportunities to say good-bye to close friends and encouraging them to make plans to stay in touch and to plan future visits is a good way to assist with their transition home. These friendships may be much more important to your child than you imagine. After returning, it is important not to gloss over the real hurt that they may feel when the days go by and the postman never has a letter for them. Teens who are naturally shy and reserved can be especially affected, fearful that they will not be able to make friends again.

Decisions To Be Made

When packing air freight and accompanied baggage, it is important to make room for each member of the family to carry some “sacred object,” the thing that once was on the wall or dresser that signifies home. Children, teens, and adults, all have these — maybe a favorite poster, statue, photo album, or even a CD of local music. Whatever it is should be given priority in packing.

If there is a family pet, that pet should travel home with the family, too. Occasionally a family leaves a country in a crisis situation, and it may not be possible; discussing the situation, helping find the pet a temporary home, and trying to get the pet out is well worth the effort. Children have been known to comment to counselors that maybe they are as dispensable as their dogs.

Children should be involved in decisions about what to send home and what to give away. Helping make those choices assists them to feel that they have some level of control over the move. One of the “Voices” in Bell’s interviews in *The Hidden Immigrants* said, “Selling off the children’s belongings in preparation for a move may not seem much...only material goods...but there are connections there.”

In the effort to get things done and to “clean up that messy bedroom,” some parents use the occasion to throw out children’s “junk” that has accumulated during the stay. It is very important that your teen throw out her own possessions and make the decisions about what to keep, give away, or sell. After all, one person’s junk is another person’s treasure. (How many of us have packed heavy rock or smelly shell collections to send halfway around the world?)

If at all possible, consider taking a short vacation en route home, in a neutral place overseas or in the home country but not at the final destination or where there are family members or close friends. Closure is the key concept here, giving the family the psychological space to separate one chapter of life from the next.

In the old days of ship travel, families could close this chapter of their lives on a long, peaceful ship voyage during which the family could focus on the country just left and talk fondly about their experiences. But today, with modern jet travel, families may return within hours of departure and plunge directly into establishing a new home. Taking time out before beginning these tasks can help pave the way for a much more relaxing and calm transition for all members of the family. Whatever place is chosen, it should have activities that all can enjoy and be a place where as a family, the mental changes from there to here can be made.



8

WHAT CAN WE DO ONCE WE
GET HOME?

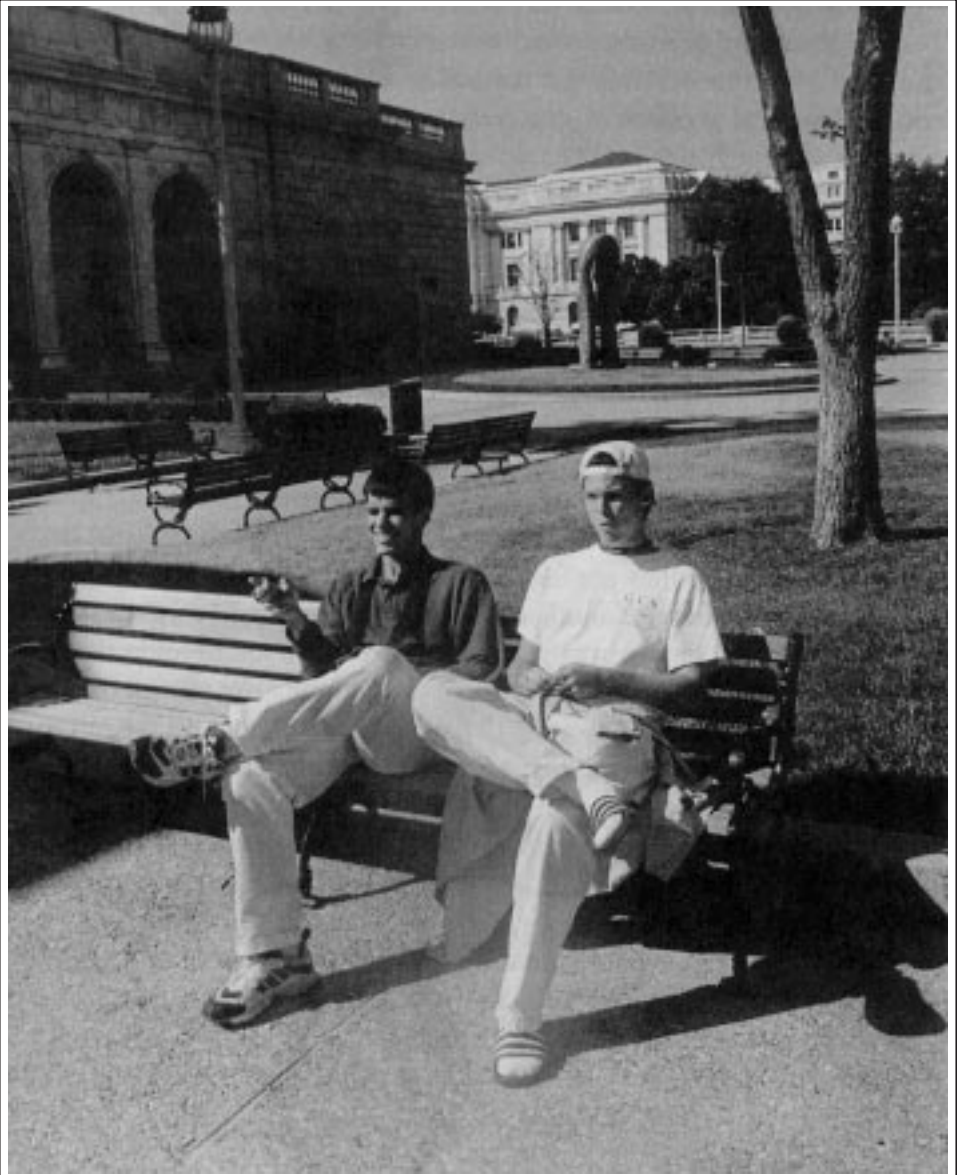


Photo by Geoffrey Knowles

Readapting to home after living overseas is often the greatest challenge in an international life cycle. Reverse culture shock may be marked by initial euphoria (“I’m so glad to be back home where everything is familiar and civilized”), irritability (“What’s wrong with these people — they don’t know anything”), hostility (“I hate it here and wish I were back in _____”), gradual adjustment (“I’m finally beginning to feel at home”), and adaptation (“I really like it here and wouldn’t want to move again”). Most members of the family, including the unhappy TCK teen, will traverse these stages, and most will make a partial, if not a total adaptation.

All of us tend to improve on the last country we lived in once we have left. With time, we forget the bad and highlight the good experiences. Don’t be shocked if your teenagers talk about how wonderful it used to be in _____ and become mocking or belittling or even arrogant about what they see as faults in their home culture. This seems to be the first necessary stage of their cultural adjustment, followed by a tolerance, hopefully an appreciation, and, with any luck, some level of acceptance. Research has shown that those with the strongest initial negative reactions to reentry eventually become better adjusted and that those with previous positive transition adjustments will probably make a successful adjustment home.

The culture shock of the move for teenagers has been compared to a roller-coaster ride — initial excitement about the new things in the environment followed by down times when they think they’ll just never fit in. Even though they are usually mature enough to realize that moving from one country to another is the reality of their lives, they may still be angry at the parent whose fault it is, whose job brought them back home. This anger is often suppressed, coming out unexpectedly at inappropriate times that seemingly have nothing to do with the move.

Sometimes a younger child in a family quickly finds neighborhood friends, which makes older children question why they are having such a hard time still struggling with the tasks of getting settled. “If Mom or Kathy is happy, why aren’t I?” leads to, “There must be something wrong with me, or I’d be happy to be back home.”

Some teenagers seem to naturally fit back into the routine they left behind, to pick up their friendships from the last time they lived at home. It doesn’t always happen, though, as we are changed by our experiences, and friends left behind have gone on with their lives, often in quite different directions.

Returning teens may have a tough experience trying to make new friends. Because of the usually close integrated school and living communities abroad, friendships are often very close and more intimate than at home.

Stateside friendships are harder to maintain.

Students often live miles away from schoolmates and have little contact with each other except at school, over lunch, or in a club. It's difficult to find time for long sharing conversations about what each other likes and believes. Returning teens often haven't learned to distinguish between situational friends and real friends.

If a teen is having an extraordinarily difficult time, it is important to analyze what really is causing the problem. The initial period of moving is characterized by stress and chaos for everyone; it is normal and should be expected. Everyone has conflicting feelings which need to be expressed; otherwise frustration will be directed not at the real reason for the stress — the move — but at anyone who just happens to be around, usually other members of the family. Talking together as a family about each other's problems and feelings can serve as a release so that problems don't build up and become overwhelming. It is up to the parents to give the children a sense of roots and stability, if only temporarily, a sense of place which is safe and supportive.

Celebrating the Family's Arrival

People reestablish their homes in different ways after a move. Some tear into the packing boxes, putting everything away on shelves and hanging the pictures on the wall, rarely coming up for air until they have exhausted themselves in the process. Others procrastinate and seem to have difficulty moving out of the ennui caused by the move, and some end up re-moving unopened boxes the next time around! Whatever your family's style, take time out to have some good times together.

While we find many ways to say good-bye to a community, we don't seem to have the same kind of rituals for saying hello. Celebrate your arrival home by doing something special as a family. Make a point to look up old friends from your neighborhood or from previous overseas postings.

Most families have activities that they do together for enjoyment. It is important to make time for these activities early on whether it's lazing on a beach, hiking in the mountains, or touring the local sights. Maybe sailing or fishing floats your family's boat. Most cities have wonderful ethnic neighborhoods or farmer's markets or something akin to the souk your family used to wander through in Cairo. Whatever your family enjoys doing together should be explored, not after you get settled, but soon after arrival — even if all the boxes aren't unpacked. If you are lucky and home is in a metropolitan area with many immigrants, you may find an ethnic festival which will help family members retain their memories of the language, music, and other rhythms of their life together overseas.

Another useful role that parents can play is to provide as many constants in their children's lives as possible — displaying “sacred objects,” sharing family activities, hanging certain pictures, and reestablishing the family rituals that existed before the move.

Practical Tips for Helping Your Teenager

Occasionally, in an effort to keep everyone busy and involved, families make the mistake of insisting that everything be done together — the trip to stock up at the supermarket, the errand to buy nails or paint at the hardware store. Stopping off for a holiday en route home or visiting relatives while on home leave, you may have become accustomed to being together, forgetting that everyone needs a little breathing space. Teenagers especially need private time so they can begin to work toward some independence.

It helped a lot and made a big difference when my parents allied with me on the difficulty of transition.

At the same time, it is important to establish the regular routines that existed in your last location. If you always had Saturday brunch or Sunday night pizza together, try to keep that going after your return. Maintaining these family events allows a sense of continuity to flow through your moves. It also makes it easier to let your children move away for other activities and find their own independence while still maintaining a strong sense of family.

Eugenia Gratto advised parents in “Coming In For A Landing:” Don’t say you understand. The fact is, you don’t. Your kids may go through social hell, and there’s nothing anyone can do about it. Be understanding, but realize that doesn’t mean you know what it’s like. Being understanding with your children, making yourself available to talk about their feelings, and keeping the lines of communication open can be helpful while they are going through the transition.

If my parents had been more comfortable allowing our negative feelings and more involved in helping us adjust, reentry would have been far easier.

It is important to be consistent. There may be long unsupervised afternoons between school dismissal (sometimes as early as 2 p.m.) and the time a commuting parent gets home. Nevertheless, it is important that teens understand that the general rules of the house need to be maintained. Despite complaints from teens, underneath it all they really value the safety net that parents’ rules give them when they are tempted by new acquaintances or situations.

The best welcome home gift you can give your teenager is a road map and bus and subway maps of the area where you’ll be living so he can find his way around the neighborhood, the route to school, the closest shops, the subway connections to cultural attractions. If she has a driver’s license, let her run some of the myriad of errands involved in moving into a new house. Then explore the public transportation system as a family, letting your teen be your guide.

Sticker Shock

Most families are struck by the expense of a return home. It is wise to consider this in advance of your return and to make plans that will allow for settling in and providing the nurturing environment that young people need.

You might as well make up your mind as parents that the largest expenditure you will probably ever make for children’s clothes will be upon your return home. Clothes are very important for most teenagers, and not as frivolous an expense as it may seem. Judgments are some-

times made about what kind of person someone is by the clothes he wears. It can be very important that your teen not dress in a way that gives the wrong message.

Brand names will probably be more important to your children than they ever were to you. Many families have learned that a good source for some of the “in” brand names is an outlet mall. Located across the United States and in some other countries, they sell reduced price (and sometimes off-quality) brand names. It may be helpful if your teen can go shopping with a friend who will be attending the same school. Most parents have learned that picking out a teen’s clothes is usually not successful.

One technique is to give your teen a certain amount of money that must pay for school clothes for the year (expect this to be much more than you would normally consider, perhaps offered in seasonal installments). If she can’t afford the kind of clothes she wants, she’ll need to buy less or get a part-time job to afford others. Some families have found keeping track of their expenditures for a child’s clothing over a 6-month period and then giving their teens a lump sum to buy their own clothes and do their own budgeting is the best answer; even when they don’t make wise purchases, they will learn from their mistakes.

One particularly confident young woman wore very individualistic clothes from her last overseas home instead of trying to look like one of the crowd, but many teenagers are not comfortable doing that. It is also possible that the ethnic dress popular overseas may signify a counterculture group at home.

Teens should be their own room decorators. Let them paint their rooms or put up the posters they like and choose their own furnishings, as budgets and family ethics permit.

Encourage your child to bring friends to the house. Hang around, but don’t let him feel you are interfering in his social life. Lankenau’s groups mentioned that they have to work out their transition on their own, that parents can’t do it for them. Having your son or daughter bring friends home gives you a chance to see who your teen is spending time with and helps you assess the appropriateness of new acquaintances. But keep in mind that appearances can sometimes be deceiving: the boy with the long hair or beard or the girl with eyes and body dressed in black may also be the class honor student. It’s important to remember that kids move at their own pace and have their own ways of making friends.

The adolescents in the Ackerman study stated that the following strategies were most helpful in adapting to a move:

- socializing with friends of the opposite sex;
- developing oneself as a person;
- keeping in shape and well-groomed;
- getting involved in social activities with friends;
- making plans for the future.

Most mobile teenagers returning to their passport countries do make the transition from “there” to “here,” and most even begin to think of their parent’s home as home. Many eventually have the same attitude as the young man who said:

We have to learn what the scene is like here.

But how long does it take? The answer varies from youngster to youngster. The Useem et al. research showed that TCKs never really adjust. Nearly all have mild to severe difficulties with reentry. They adapt and some manage to fit in fairly quickly and find a comfortable place in high school or college. They can feel at home everywhere and nowhere. Many even decide that they don’t want to go overseas again, that their roots are now put down in their “home.” Others take a much longer time, even years.

I have been searching for the past 24 years for some group where I could gain an association...find a sense of belonging. I am what I call a foreigner in my own country...I spent 17 years living overseas...came back to the United States for the last part of my senior year (from a school of 125 to one of 2500) and then on to university. I have never felt part of this country and have always felt like no one understood me. There is a unique relationship between those of us who grew up this way. I do not want anyone else to go through what I did....

Some never completely come to terms with their passport country. Others can’t wait until they get the word they are on the move again. Most, however, settle in well enough to function in school and society during the first 6 months to a year. But some just bide their time until they’re on the road again and may ultimately seek careers that will enable them to live overseas once more.

Adapting and being happy and comfortable are two different things.

Seeking Professional Help

Adults realize that 6 months down the road things will be better, but it is difficult for an adolescent to accept that idea, because to them reality is now, today. A willingness to delay gratification takes some maturity that many adolescents have not yet developed. Sometimes a gentle reminder about how difficult it was the first few weeks or months in Ouagadougou or Bucharest or Singapore, whichever place they are now missing with such fervor, will remind the student that this period does not last forever.

If a teenager is having school problems, setting up a relationship with the student's school counselor may be helpful. In fact, it's wise to establish that relationship before problems occur. A word to the counselor about the recent reentry may be enough to alert him to watch for warning signs that could otherwise be missed because of an overwhelming student load.

Most adults have developed defenses against social stigma and negative labels, but teenagers are still grappling with how to handle these and are strongly influenced by peer opinion. Repeated violent outbursts should always be a red flag to parents that something is going on that is not being talked about.

There are other warning signs that parents need to be aware of. Exhibition of one or two of these is probably normal. If, however, a parent notices several of these behaviors over a prolonged period of time or if several of the behaviors seem particularly extreme, especially if they represent a major change in the teen's normal patterns, it may be time to seek professional help. Some of these behaviors are also warning signs that teens are seeking self-medication to handle their pain.

Teenagers need some encouragement as well as some understanding when things get a little rocky. One study of children of U.S. military parents showed that as many as 10 percent sought professional counseling when they returned home. Sometimes no more than a counseling session or two is required to clarify some small thing that has assumed large proportions. A few may have serious problems including deep bouts of depression, anxiety attacks, drug and/or alcohol abuse problems, and suicide attempts. Families are urged to investigate resources

after they return home, preferably before a crisis occurs. In many cities around the world, there are now counselors who are familiar with and have worked with clientele from the internationally mobile community.

Some “red flags” to watch for are:

- wanting to be alone, shutting himself in his room for hours at a time, cutting off normal communication within the family, becoming secretive;
- sudden drop in grades;
- emotional acting out — moody, tearful, angry;
- any major sleep change — wanting to sleep more than usual, or staying up very late and then not able to get up at the regular time in the morning;
- childish behavior — return to a previous stage;
- more illness — colds, headaches, or ennui;
- accident-prone — including falling or dropping things;
- change in eating habits — particularly watch for dieting in girls;
- lack of interest in past passions such as shooting baskets or reading, or developing new unhealthy passions, or no passions;
- inability to get along with members of the family, lack of patience, irritability, resistance to affection or touch;
- lonely and unable to make friends.



9

COMING “HOME” TO COLLEGE



Photo by Jessica Tyson

The vast majority of U.S. TCKs continue their education, usually in the United States. The Useem et al. study showed that 80 percent went on to complete their bachelor's degrees and 40 percent completed graduate degrees (twice as many as in the general population). But the path to these degrees is not always a steady or sure one.

The College Choice

One lament made by many TCKs who returned directly from an overseas assignment to college was that they hadn't conducted a proper college search. Many select a college sight unseen, schools their families or friends attended (often 40 years before), sometimes located near extended family. Occasionally they choose small universities which resemble their international schools or large universities with a large foreign student population. If possible, families should devote time to college-visiting when they are on a home visit, even if it seems a bit premature for a 14- or 15-year old and, when possible, take advantage of pre-college summer programs for teens on many U.S. campuses. While stateside high school students are visiting possible college options on weekends, overseas students are left out. Fortunately, recent computer software has opened up avenues of exploration for many overseas students.

In recent years, the college advising offices at most overseas high schools have greatly improved but for students attending host country or national schools, there is very little assistance. The College Board's Overseas School Project Survey of 1995 graduates of overseas schools indicates that almost half of them felt they needed more information to make a good college choice. While 40 percent of the students applied to seven or more colleges, only somewhat less than their U.S. cohorts, many more stateside students take advantage of early decision applications, compared to only 13 percent of overseas students who do so. (Early decision is often an indication of a student knowing exactly what he wants, something harder to do when campus visits haven't been made).

One suggestion by those currently attending college is that prospective students check to see how many international students attend a school. Are they from many countries or are there many students from just a few countries? Are they from countries in which the student has lived? Another consideration might be to look for a college or univer-

sity that has a Global Nomads organization. These now exist at more than 20 colleges. Information on colleges with global nomads groups may be obtained by contacting Global Nomads International or Global Nomad Resources, listed in Appendix I. Attending one of the summer school programs on a college campus during the high school years may, or may not, trigger an interest in that particular college, but it will introduce a young TCK to important aspects of college-level independence, including dorm life and time-scheduling.

Coping With Loneliness

The most devastating feeling in the first few weeks is loneliness. During the first weekend of college I was one of two people on my floor who did not go home. I guess that all I can say is to be prepared for this.

If a student has selected a college with a national enrollment, that will mean more students remaining on campus on the weekends. Parents often don't see a problem with their teenagers returning home to enter college while they remain abroad, or in sending a teen off to college and leaving immediately for another overseas posting. After all, they are "home," aren't they?

The family becomes your traveling social group. When I came back to the United States to begin college, we all drove across the United States. I knew I was going to be left alone and my family would return overseas. As I stood on the edge of the Grand Canyon, I seriously considered throwing myself over the edge.

For those returning to enter college, the issue of leaving the security of the family needs to be addressed. For many who have been abroad through high school, this may be the first time they've been away from family. Many times, this entry to college corresponds to when Mom and Dad are going off to another overseas posting. When this happens, there may be some ambiguity about who is leaving whom. While students may feel anxious, oftentimes they are uncomfortable in raising the topic with their parents, particularly if they're in the throes and excitement of going off to a new post — unaccompanied.

I was so lonely when I came back to college, and I really missed being in _____ . I wrote my mom and dad. They wouldn't respond to what I'd written about my loneliness and homesickness, and it was just too painful to talk to anyone else about it.

Ruth Van Reken, author of *Letters I Never Wrote*, suggests the therapeutic effect of journaling can be helpful to lonely college students who have returned from abroad. *Of Many Lands*, published by the Foreign Service Youth Foundation, is a guided journal for those who have grown up away from their passport countries and could be helpful to returning college students and teens.

If possible, college students say, it is helpful if at least one parent can be around for Parent's Weekend, usually held 4 – 6 weeks into the fall semester. One student recalled feeling like an orphan when her dorm-mates' parents came to visit — *Mom and Dad were going home, but I was not. After all, Paris was my home, and while they were going back, I couldn't.*

If parents are not going to be around during a college student's first year, they should consider setting up a support system to substitute for their presence before a problem arises. Parents and the student should agree on someone whom they can ask to act as an informal guardian, someone whom the student trusts and feels comfortable with. Hopefully, it will be someone with whom the student feels free to discuss feelings and raise questions. A friend of the family or a godparent may be more appropriate than a family member. Of course, this guardian must be someone who is willing to take on the responsibility! The student should always have a list of important telephone numbers and know how to get in touch in an emergency. Frequently, college students have unanticipated expenses — most requiring cash — and need some way to access money. Financial managers suggest having a smaller amount of cash deposited directly into an account on a monthly basis rather than one large amount that invariably gets spent before the semester is half over. Having a credit/ATM card can be helpful but dangerous; financial advisors recommend a low limit. Some parents leave an emergency cash fund with a guardian. Whatever strategy is decided upon, this issue needs to be discussed in advance and arrangements made in concert.

One supplemental expense of an internationally mobile lifestyle is a long, long distance telephone bill. Some families, where it's possible,

get a 1-800 number; others get “Call me” cards that can be used only for the parent’s number (unfortunately, these don’t always work overseas). The frustration of mail delays has built a dependency on long distance calling. Electronic mail has helped alleviate some of the frustration of trying to communicate across time zones and is usually cheaper and infinitely easier. There are times, however, when you just want to hear the voices and have an immediate reaction to an idea or a problem.

For many of our children, their return to college is marked by a dispersal of their friends around the globe and certainly around the country to a myriad of universities or jobs. Keeping in touch with them is important, particularly in order to talk to someone by phone or e-mail who is going through the same stages of reentry and adjustment to their home country.

Students returning to their home country for college have many of the same adjustment challenges as their younger siblings. Surveys of Global Nomad college students have shown that they often experience “culture shock” no differently from their younger brothers and sisters. They feel different, they can’t fit in, they don’t feel that many of their peers share their interest in international issues. But, unlike their siblings, they are facing the situation without the family support that has usually played a large role in their lives. It becomes very clear very quickly that this time they are really on their own.

Not surprisingly, they often reach out to foreigners, exchange students or non-English speaking minorities. They may change colleges two or three times, quite often because the choice they’ve made was not the right one. (Changing colleges or dropping out is not, of course, limited to globally nomadic students. One state flagship university reported a 30% freshman dropout rate, 30% of whom left during the first three weeks.) In Useem’s study, 38% of her respondents did not receive a degree from their first college. Forty-five percent of those attended three or more colleges, and one had attended nine colleges before graduating!

TCKs often major in subjects that they feel will get them overseas again — international relations, business with an international component, teaching, or foreign languages. Some don’t even wait until graduation to return abroad. One-fourth of the Useem et. al. study respondents spent part of their college career studying abroad.

Issues of Reentry to College

I just had no idea how hard coming back and adjusting to my own country was going to be. I wished that I had paid more attention to what was going on here before I returned. I think if you come back to college after not having been here, it just takes a lot longer time to adjust.

College should be a good time to return as everyone else is starting out anew. But these globally nomadic young people often are not only living away from their parents for the first time, they are also living in an unfamiliar environment and tend to be less ready for the independence that comes with college life than their fellow monocultural students. Not having been around to observe older siblings or friends making the move to college, they haven't a clear idea of what differences being at college include.

I wasn't prepared for the acute feelings of separation from my family and its support system. I had never paid rent or electric bills and found myself half-way around the world, and I couldn't even get a call through to them except in the middle of the night. And they weren't really prepared to be supportive when I'd just wakened them.

Woe is the kid who arrives without a driver's license. Should a student return to the United States without a driver's license, she is often stuck for acceptable picture identification which is needed to cash checks, prove residence, or just identify who she is. Students don't want to always have to carry a passport with them. Most jurisdictions in the United States, and certainly all jurisdictions in the Washington area, will issue identification cards for individuals, usually through the Department of Motor Vehicles. Identification cards are also available through some commercial check-cashing offices, and most colleges issue a student identity card, but they are not as readily accepted, particularly for financial transactions.

I thought "Where are you from?" was a trick question, but the trick was on me, because I didn't know where I was from or which country I'd be from next.

While teens talk about how to answer where they are from, even those in college haven't figured out the right answer. No answer ever seems quite accurate. If they mention an overseas location, that promotes more questions than they may want to deal with. If they say their "home leave" address, they may end up having to discuss a place that is more foreign to them than where they've lived. Some students have decided to just say where they were born. One adult TCK decided to say simply that she grew up in the Foreign Service.

For many returning college students, returning to their home culture may be more difficult than dealing with a poor college choice.

Before I got to college, I never got to play football or have a car.

There is a certain expectation that freshman college students will be knowledgeable, even be savvy about what's "in", what's "out." Playing football (or baseball or basketball) or at least being knowledgeable about the rules and stars is one of those expectations. For those returning from a school abroad where football is played with a round ball, and from a place where the star system isn't the same as here, there is a gap in the sort of easy language and camaraderie that monocultural students automatically engage in.

While there are no statistical studies to substantiate this, anecdotally many parents of these youngsters talk about their children's apparent need to return to the family home — in the United States or abroad — after or during their college years. They become a part of the phenomenon of boomerang kids.



TIPS FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS AND PARENTS WHO ARE OVERSEAS

(Updated from Alexandra Mattson, Program Director,
Foreign Service Youth Foundation, 1989)

MONEY MATTERS

- Arrange for parents to send a stipend each semester to cover costs for books, school supplies, meals and incidentals. Consider a college meal plan, but make provisions for other meals on special weekends or school breaks (when many other students will be going home). Don't forget costs of joining organizations and expenses arising from that membership.
- Consider not working during the school year if possible or putting off getting a job until second semester or sophomore year. Part-time work that doesn't interfere with classes, study or sleep time, preferably located on or near campus is best.
- Consider insuring college tuition payments in case of parent's death or loss of income.

TRAVEL ARRANGEMENTS

- Arrange to spend Thanksgiving weekend with college friend or family member. Arrange a phone call to overseas family.
- Decide on plans for winter break by Thanksgiving in order to be assured of travel arrangements that work around reading period and exams, dorm closings. If the student is not traveling overseas, make advance alternative plans for home stay with a friend, family member or family friend. These holidays are often as long as a month; consider travel excursions, inviting friend to visit overseas with student, or part-time work.
- Make similar arrangements for spring break (usually a week or ten days). Even if not traveling, alternative housing arrangements will need to be made.
- If the student is going to post for the summer, consider allowing a week at the beach or with friends in order to put some closure on the school year. If the student is not going to post, organize a structure — summer school, work, internship, visiting family and/or friends.
- A 2-week break before college starts should be allotted to make the transition back.

STAYING IN TOUCH

- Parents, remember to write frequently, call often, keep in touch by e-mail. Checking in, even with little response, is important to remind students you are thinking of them.
- Students need to do the same to acknowledge that parents care and want to hear!
- Parents, try to remember to send a "care package" for Parents' Weekend/Homecoming/Birthday.
- Consider a private phone, particularly if calls must be at odd hours to accommodate time differences and to allow for emergencies.
- Best of all, visit or have extended family or friends take student out to dinner.

10

WHEN I'M ASKED HOW I CAN
STAND TO MOVE AROUND SO
MUCH, I REPLY I COULDN'T
IMAGINE LIFE ANY OTHER WAY



Photo by Jessica Tyson

This statement is repeated in one way or another by many globally nomadic teens and young adults. As frustrating as the lifestyle gets, most who have grown up in other cultures cannot imagine being brought up differently. Despite the pain and grief of leaving people and places, to have experienced those people and places seems to have been worth it all.

My story, and the places I've lived make me feel like a global Jack Kerouac: a hitchhiker, awed, not yet wise, hungry for more.

It has been hard and it has been fun, and I wouldn't trade my life for anything. Growing up internationally mobile is something only those of us who have done it can understand. It is like a secret and special club with an initiation that you can't explain. It is a way of life that never leaves you, no matter where you live.

Moving back to the United States definitely forces you to start over...(it's) extremely difficult to leave your friends and the lifestyle you grew used to, but change is good and the more you experience in life, the more you can enjoy it.

You find you can't afford to make any real enemies when you're in a small community — different ages, community brothers and sisters.

Living overseas influenced my opinions and created new experiences and most significantly increased the amount of tolerance I have for people of different backgrounds and nationalities.

I've swum in the Indian Ocean, skied in the Alps, boated on the Zambezi, conversed in German with Czechoslovakians, eaten pizza in Italy, and done thousands of other things I'd have missed had I spent the whole of my life in America.

I am struck again and again by the fact that so much of the sociology...history, geography, questions on other religions, my sisters and I acquired just by living.

11

SPECIAL ISSUES WITHIN THE FOREIGN SERVICE



“Living overseas can be a mixed blessing for the children of Foreign Service employees. Transfers result in frequent uprooting — occasionally in the middle of a school year — interrupted contact with American culture and reentry adjustment when returning home.”

This statement, from the State Department brochure, *Information for Applicants and Family Members*, should alert prospective Foreign Service personnel that there are stresses and strains for children growing up in a mobile lifestyle. But we tend to hear what we want to hear, and when a young Foreign Service applicant reads this, often there is not even a spouse to consider let alone some fictional children.

In Cecile Mine’s exercise with elementary students, a 9-year old child whose father had just entered the Foreign Service, said, “I wish my uncle had never told my dad to take that test.”

Add to this the complications of the fish bowl existence, the automatic description of “daughter of the Political Officer” or “son of the Systems Manager” or “children of the Ambassador,” small wonder that many of our children are overwhelmed or frustrated by yet another culture — their return to U.S. teen culture.

It wasn’t until the late 70’s that efforts in an institutional, organized, and sustained fashion were made to address some of the needs of our young people who follow their families around the world.

The Overseas Briefing Center (OBC) began sponsoring transition workshops, both for going overseas and reentry. Teens were encouraged by interested parents in organizing themselves which resulted in 1983 in the formation of Around the World in a Lifetime (AWAL), an organization by and for teenagers. The Family Liaison Office (FLO) designated the education officer to advise the AWAL steering committee.

Today, with the oversight and assistance of the Foreign Service Youth Foundation (FSYF), many teen activities are sponsored by AWAL. It has been a great help to many teens when they return to Washington. AWAL’s purpose is to give teens a built-in social organization, a group of friends where they can talk about their overseas experiences with others who have been there and to whom they do not have to make apologies for having climbed the Matterhorn.

Prior to departure from post, returnees receive an AWAL brochure outlining activities and including membership information. Whenever possible, reentering teens are identified by Community Liaison Office Coordinators (CLOs) in the overseas Post Youth Survey carried out by the Family Liaison office in January. At some posts, CLOs or schools organize reentry programs or teen teleconferences that bring young

people into contact with teens in Washington and introduce them to useful ways of thinking about the upcoming challenges of reentry. Each overseas post also receives the April international edition of *Wings of AWAL* newsletter with highlights from the previous year and some solid advice on coming back to the United States which is made available to those coming “home” by CLOs or Administrative Officers.

Upon arrival in the United States, youth receive a welcome folder with information on how to get around, what’s going on during the summer, and summer AWAL activities. These AWAL get-togethers help bridge the gap between arrival and the beginning of school, a time when many reentering students have not yet developed a circle of friends. They are invited to attend newsletter meetings held in the FLO office at the State Department and basement discussion-social meetings held in an AWAL member’s home.

The Foreign Service Youth Foundation sponsors a Welcome Tea in September for parents. AWAL simultaneously holds a Teen Basement Meeting discussion of reentry issues. A Reentry Day is conducted by the Overseas Briefing Center which often includes an afternoon program for young people. This AwayDay activity, a ropes course and team building exercise, is primarily for new returnees (and is repeated in the spring, primarily for those going overseas).

The best transfer I had was coming back here because of AWAL. I could talk to people about climbing castles in Spain instead of just keeping to myself because other American kids aren’t really interested.

The capstone of the reentry activities is the Getaway, held every fall since 1983, a weekend training exercise for teens 13-18, emphasizing techniques for transitioning into the passport culture. In an environment away from the D.C. area, teens and training facilitators work toward a healthy transition attitude and discuss reverse culture shock, how the school year is going, what has worked (and not) to help adjustment.

At the getaway...(we) talked...about the stages of getting adjusted to the States...(which) included stuff like initial euphoria, then hating it here, but eventually...you are eventually completely adjusted....The last stage should be changed; you just learn to deal with it. You have good days and bad.

Those of us who are in the Foreign Service chose this way of life; many spouses also made that choice. But our children had no choice in

the matter. And we can never expect them to have the same feelings about the United States as home that we do.

We...must shoulder the cultural baggage of an entire nation. As envoys, we must consider how our actions reflect not only on ourselves but on the millions of citizens we represent. I've often resented this. My father made a conscious tradeoff between personal freedom and a promising Foreign Service career. I never had a choice, yet my rights of expression are as limited as his.

Anyone who questions whether our teens are bothered by such things need only read the words of a 15-year old as the airplane circled up and over his last overseas post:

I don't ever have to worry again about what I do and how it might affect my dad's job.

Wings of AWAL, the monthly newsletter, is distributed to 250 members worldwide; the April international edition goes to all posts for distribution to all families with teenagers in the Embassy community. The newsletter committee meets monthly to write articles and lay out the publication. In addition, teens gather at a monthly basement meeting (so called because it is usually located in the basement of an AWALer's home) to discuss issues of importance to newcomers. During the winter, various monthly activities may be offered including a Getaway Reunion, a Holiday Bash, and a video sleepover.

Spring is Teen Season: Teen Teleconferences are set up by the Family Liaison Office to connect teens in the United States with teens at post preparing to return home. For the past 8 years, FSYF has recognized teens' outstanding community service with Foreign Service Youth Awards featuring bond awards to top winners and international recognition for their work. An international potluck usually rounds out the school year's AWAL activities.

The Family Liaison Office has made several videos which feature teen discussions on reentry. These tapes have been sent to posts around the world. Throughout the year, FLO and FSYF sponsor lectures and programs for parents. And the Foreign Service Youth Foundation has published two books: *Notes from a Traveling Childhood*, a collection of essays on raising internationally mobile children, and a journal, *Of Many Lands*. FSYF plans to publish the curriculum of the basement

meetings in 1998. These program designs will be useful to groups overseas who organize reentry training for young people.

Despite these institutional supports and the nurturing and care by parents of Foreign Service young people, some seem to have a more painful readjustment than others. If a child is still struggling with the reentry transition after 6 months, or if his symptoms seem especially disturbing, families need to consider getting outside help. The Employee Consultation Service (ECS) has trained social workers who can help families analyze what may be going on and how to arrange professional assessments or find programs or counselors accustomed to working with mobile children and families.

Our youngsters have had many worthwhile experiences that have prepared them to be well-integrated adults. Many have learned foreign languages and have developed a world view. They know from experience that there is a viable and valuable world out there beyond the boundaries of the United States. They have a lot to offer the world in the 21st Century if they can transcend the challenges that come with their unique upbringing.

There are children for whom this transient way of life simply doesn't work. And there are other children for whom the time just isn't right for another move. Sometimes an employee must make a choice between what's best for the career and what's best for the family. How a parent answers that question will depend on many things including personal ambitions and other family dynamics.

As one counselor contacted for this study said, "What all Foreign Service kids need to know is that they are more important to their parents than either of their professional careers." Within a life that has many concerns and considerations, not the least of which is the financial viability of the family, that may be a tall order. Perhaps we might want to consider it, though, as we pursue our internationally mobile lives.

**DEPARTMENT OF STATE
OFFICES AND ORGANIZATIONS SUPPORTING
FOREIGN SERVICE YOUTH**

FLO

Family Liaison Office
Education and Youth Officer
Department of State, Room 1212A
Washington, DC 20520-7512
Tel: (202) 647-1076
Fax: (202) 647-1670
Website: www.state.gov/www/flo/

AWAL and FSYP

Around the World in a Lifetime
Foreign Service Youth Foundation
AWAL Administrator
P.O. Box 39185
Washington, DC 20016
AWAL website:
www.erols.com/fso/awal.html

OBC

Overseas Briefing Center
Assistant SOS Coordinator
Foreign Service Institute, Room E 2105
4000 Arlington Boulevard
Arlington, VA 22204-1500
Tel: (703) 302-7267
Fax: (703) 302-7452

Foreign Service Lifelines

<http://www.kreative.net/fslifelines>
Website featuring information of interest to
Foreign Service families

A/OS

Office of Overseas Schools
A/OS, Room 245, SA 29
Department of State
Washington, DC 20522-2902
Tel: (703) 875-7800 Fax: (703) 875-7979
Website: www.state.gov/about_state/schools/
E-mail: overseas_schools@dos.us-state.gov

ECS

Employee Consultation Service
Department of State, Room 5914
Columbia Plaza, Room L127
NFATC, Room E3127
Washington, DC 20520-2256
Tel: (202) 663-1815
Fax: (202) 663-1613

AAFSW

Association of American Foreign
Service Women
5125 MacArthur Boulevard, NW
Suite 36
Washington, DC 20016
Tel: (202) 362-6514
Fax: (202) 362-6589

CLO Community Liaison Office

Available at over 150 posts

Flow of Care for Foreign Service Youth

The following organizations, working in collaboration, have developed a flow of care to help Foreign Service teenagers meet the challenge of a mobile life style: the Family Liaison Office (FLO), the Foreign Service Youth Foundation (FSYF), Around the World in a Lifetime (AWAL), the Overseas Briefing Center (OBC), the Office of Overseas Schools (A/OS), the Employee Consultation Service (ECS), and the Association of American Foreign Service Women (AAFSW). Overseas, programs are developed by the Community Liaison Office (CLO) at post. For additional information on a program, please contact the office noted on the right.

PREPARATION FOR GOING OVERSEAS

- **Away Day** - outdoor obstacle course promotes team building skills OBC/AWAL
- **Going Overseas Workshop** - strategies for saying goodbye, reconnecting at new post, and logistics of moving OBC
- **Youth Security Overseas Seminar** - for ages 6 to 18 OBC

PROGRAMS AT POST

- **Welcome and Orientation for Youth** - at post CLO
- **Teen Teleconferences** - U.S. panels and overseas teen groups discuss reentry and life at post FLO
- **College Panel** - CLO connects visiting college students to teens at post CLO
- **Teen Reentry Tapes** - CLO makes available to community CLO
- **Reentry Workshops** - CLO begins preparation for teens returning to the U.S. CLO

ON RETURNING TO WASHINGTON

- **Welcome Folders** - provides useful information for teens on living in Washington area AWAL
- **Summer Fun Events** - introduce teens to each other, no matter where they live in DC area AWAL
- **Welcome Back Reception** - fall event offers families networking opportunities and gives teens an inside look at AWAL FSYF/
AWAL
- **Reentry Workshop** - gives local equivalent of post orientation for teenagers OBC
- **Reentry Away Day** - promotes team building skills OBC/AWAL
- **Program for Preteens** AWAL

WASHINGTON ACTIVITIES

- **Getaway** - weekend retreat focuses on transition to Washington and American culture OBC/AWAL
- **Social Activities and Adventure Outings** - events between January and June AWAL
- **Wings of AWAL** - teen newsletter produced at monthly meetings FLO

FOCUS ON YOUTH (Spring)

- **Lectures and Workshops** - experts advise parents on teen relocation and other parenting issues FLO
- **Awards** - recognize outstanding volunteer leadership and service to peers FSYF/
AAFSW

COUNSELING

- **Education Counseling** - provides information to students and parents on Washington area, overseas, and boarding schools, as well as on colleges and correspondence courses FLO/
A/OS
- **Evaluation and Referral Services** - for young people experiencing unusual difficulties ECS

PUBLICATIONS

- *According to my Passport, I'm Coming Home*,
Kay Branaman Eakin - FLO
- *Of Many Lands, Journal of a Traveling Childhood*, Sara Taber - FSYF
- *Notes from a Traveling Childhood*, Karen McCluskey, ed. - FSYF
- *Manual for Teen Discussion Meetings* - to be published 1998

Typical AWAL Calendar of Events

January

1st Tuesday - Basement Gathering

1st Saturday - Newsletter Meeting

3rd Saturday - Video Sleepover

February

1st Tuesday - Basement Gathering

1st Saturday - Newsletter Meeting

3rd Saturday - Getaway Reunion

March

1st Tuesday - Basement Gathering

1st Saturday - Newsletter Meeting

3rd Saturday - Soccer Game at MCI Arena

April

1st Tuesday - Basement Gathering

1st Saturday - Newsletter Meeting

3rd Saturday - International Potluck

May

1st Tuesday - Basement Gathering

1st Saturday - Newsletter Meeting

3rd Saturday - AWAYDAY

June

1st Tuesday - Basement Gathering

1st Saturday - Newsletter Meeting

3rd Saturday - AWAL Barbecue and
Talent Show

July

1st Tuesday - Basement Gathering

3rd Saturday - Tubing Trip

August

1st Tuesday - Basement Gathering

1st Saturday - Newsletter Meeting

3rd Saturday - King's Dominion Trip

September

1st Tuesday - Basement Gathering

1st Saturday - Newsletter Meeting

3rd Saturday - Welcome Tea

October

1st Tuesday - Basement Gathering

1st Saturday - Newsletter Meeting

2nd Saturday - AWAYDAY (ropes course)

November

1st Tuesday - Basement Gathering

1st Saturday - Newsletter Meeting

3rd Saturday - GETAWAY WEEKEND

December

1st Tuesday - Basement Gathering

2nd Saturday - Newsletter Meeting

T.B.A. - HOLIDAY BASH

APPENDIX I

USEFUL RESOURCES

Foreign Service Youth Foundation

P.O. Box 39185
Washington, DC 20016
Tel.: 202-647-1076

For information relating to AWAL and other Foreign Service teen issues, the Foreign Service Youth Award, and publications.

Global Nomads International

P.O. Box 9584
Washington, DC 20016-9584
Tel.: 202-466-2244
Website:
<http://global.nomads.association.com>.

For current information relating to college and adult chapters of adult global nomads. Definition: those who spend their childhood outside their passport country due to a parent's career.

Global Nomad Resources

Norma McCaig
P.O. Box 8066
Reston, VA 20191
Tel./FAX: 703-758 7766
Email: nmccaig@gmu.edu

For updated information on global nomad -related presentations, workshop materials and resources, including campus-based global nomad programs and services.

Interaction, Inc.

17 Campus Heights
Houghton, NY 14744-0158
Tel.: 716-567-8774

Primarily for missionary families, it also provides reentry programming open to others.

National Military Family Association

6000 Stevenson Avenue, Suite 304
Alexandria, VA 22304-3526
Tel.: 703-823-6632
Email: families@nmfa.org
Website: www.nmsa.org

Fact sheet on military dependent overseas student travel.

Overseas Brats, Inc.

6000 Stevenson Ave., Suite 304
Alexandria, VA 22304-3526
Tel: 703-823-6632
Website:
<http://members.aol.com/nomadpub/nomad>

For alumni information on many DoDDS schools, publisher of *Nomad: The Brat Journal*.

David M. Kennedy Center for International Studies

Brigham Young University Publications
P.O. Box 24538
Provo, UT 84602
Tel.: 1-800-528-6279 FAX: 801-378-5882
Website: <http://www.byu.edu/culturgrams>

Provides information and publishes Culturgrams for 160 areas of the world.

TCK Researchers Network

Tel: 352-392-3247
FAX: 352- 392-5575
Email: downie@nersp.nerdc.ufl.edu

List-serve available for researchers in the field of TCKs/Global Nomads.

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