

Evacuation and the Foreign Service Family



A Foreign Service Youth Foundation Publication

5:07 p.m., 18 September; 11th grade, International Community School of Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire: *The African Sun saturates my purple-walled room; I just adore the dazzling warmth that is filling up my life. From where I sit in my kente cloth-draped armchair, my world is perfect. Dad's job with the State Department has brought me so far, from Baltimore to Yemen, and now Cote d'Ivoire - not to mention countless adventures in between. My days are filled with fusions of exotic friends and experiences, and with an exhilarating junior year ahead of me, there isn't a piece of this life that I would change.*

4:12 a.m., 19 September: *Is that my alarm? I swear school starts way too early. No - it's the telephone, echoed by what sounds like thunder over the West African dawn. But it's not the rainy season anymore. Why are Mom and Dad huddled around the Embassy radio?*

Their faces, tired and drawn by creases of apprehension, tell me it's more than rain. Then, I hear the voice of my friend's dad on the walkie-talkie radio, muffled, yet filled with the same anxiety I see in my parents' eyes. He dictates the events as they unfold beside his home: an explosion, rattling gunshots, hoards of men in bloodied camouflage littering the neighborhood streets with shells. I lean onto my father, but not even his warmth can shelter me from the fear that my oh-so-perfect life, as well as those of thousands of others, is about to be drastically altered.

EVACUATION AND THE FOREIGN SERVICE FAMILY

Evacuation will drastically alter your life—challenging basic assumptions about predictability and control over your life. Evacuations involve several components that on their own would be traumatic: giving up cherished possessions, leaving behind friends (usually without the chance to say goodbye), abandoning pets, and foregoing any number of planned activities. Many times evacuation includes leaving behind a spouse or parent. Children leave their schools and adults may leave their jobs and obligations. In worst cases, evacuation comes after experiencing violence.

The difficulties confronting evacuees are often overlooked. Starting new schools or moving into a new home are stressful under the best of circumstances. Evacuations combine such challenges with a suddenly uprooted existence that demands countless decisions to put one's life in order, decisions that may have to be taken in a hurry, under stress, perhaps with financial concerns and without the counsel of an absent spouse or parent.

The effects of these stresses can be long-lasting, and all too often the people around an evacuee have little empathy for the difficulties faced. The dynamics affecting evacuees are common—you are not alone and your problems are not just “all in your head”—there are steps that can help you get back on track.



Immediate Aftermath of Evacuation

As the plane touched down, Barbara was overwhelmed. She and the children were back in the United States -- safe. The baby in her arms, Haley clutching her skirt and Ben close behind, she walked out into a barrage of reporters and people with questions about friends and relatives. At the sight of her parents, Barbara felt tears running down her face. Later, at her mother's home, the children finally in bed, Barbara talked about the events of the past days. "It's all right dear, you're safe now" her mother broke in. But in the following days, Barbara did not feel safe and neither did the children, clinging to her, squabbling and crying at the least thing. Trying to reorganize their lives, Barbara found it hard to think straight and she constantly forgot things, like water boiling on the stove. News from post was scarce and her husband John only managed to call or email every few days. As a couple weeks passed and the situation overseas did not seem to improve, Barbara had to think about finding an apartment and putting the children in school.

There is a moment of relief on arrival "home" after fleeing post. At this moment, adrenalin levels begin to drop, and shock and emotional numbness melt away. However, the relief may be short-lived. Evacuees may say goodbye to others who have gone through the experience with them, losing some of the few people who can easily relate with their plight. Then they are immediately confronted with the existential problems. Where to live? Should they put the children in school? Daycare? Do they need to purchase a car? Will they be able to return to post? When? What will happen to the pets? If a government employee spouse has stayed behind, what will happen to him or her?

People who go through an evacuation arrive stressed and disoriented, not only by the traumatic events and chaotic departure, yet by the sudden change in their lives. Hurriedly leaving post, the entire fabric of evacuees' lives disappears, at least temporarily. One day they had homes, schools, jobs, friends and pets -- and the next, everything has gone. This creates disorientation and mental confusion. The temporary living conditions that most evacuees experience when they return home increase the sense of living in limbo, and make it difficult to focus.

According to psychological theory, change—bad or good—causes stress and stress can cause physical illness. Undoubtedly, evacuees have extremely high stress levels. While stress does not automatically lead to illness, it could manifest itself physically. Common symptoms of stress include headaches, heartburn, stomach aches and fatigue. The mind and body need extra care during the period immediately following an evacuation.

Temporary living conditions increase the sense of living in limbo, and make it difficult for evacuees to reorient themselves.

11th Grade, Mira Costa High School, Manhattan Beach, California: "...she's joining us from Africa where she's lived for three years. All you Model U.N. kids might want to ask her some questions because she's just been evacuated from a war-torn country." Smile, I think to myself. Nod your head and stop looking so insecure. Pretend you want to be in this American president-plastered classroom with forty-two perfect strangers who assume you've spent the last three years swinging from branches and eating with monkeys. Try not to think about Dad alone in a land overflowing with trigger-happy rebels or the diaspora of your dearest companions to far corners of the planet. Smile. (teen evacuee)

"I felt like I had been thrown into outer space, floating around with nothing to hold onto. I just couldn't get my thoughts together and I couldn't get organized. I started cooking dinner and forgot about it. It was hard to remember to eat since I didn't have an appetite for days." (Adult evacuee)

Evacuation Can Be Isolating

Evacuation can be isolating. Until recently the traumatic nature of evacuation was not recognized. These days, organizations acknowledge the deleterious impact. However, most friends and loved ones will not understand how traumatic it was to be evacuated. Your children may feel even more alienated in a new classroom with children who perhaps have never even heard of the city you used to call home.

Usually you can expect an immediate outpouring of concern and sympathy and often it will be short lived. Support is sometimes a rare commodity.

Some outsiders feel that Foreign Service Officers ought to expect trouble when they go abroad. What type of nut would move to strange foreign countries? Or evacuation comes with the job!! They will feel like you are at home now, so what is the problem? Jealousy over what is perceived as a luxurious or romantic lifestyle may contribute to the lack of empathy, as well as a lack of understanding of the Foreign Service life.

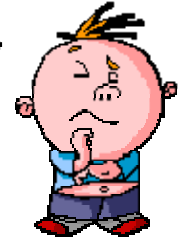
If the events did not involve direct physical harm or a high profile in the news media, outsiders will probably demonstrate little concern or interest in even hearing about your experience. Well intentioned comments such as “At least you are back in the United States now” or “You are safely home now” display the lack of understanding. Instead they may make comments such as “You’re safe now” and expect you to move on with your lives as if nothing extraordinary happened. Unfortunately, the effects of evacuations make this difficult, at least for awhile. Trying to move on too soon in the recovery process can be counterproductive and impede the recovery process. Others may sympathize, but simply remain uncertain about the appropriate way to help.

Talk about lack of family support after an evacuation! My sister-in-law said that she did not offer help because she didn't have room for us to live with her. When I said that we hadn't needed a place to stay and would have been happy with an invitation to dinner or a phone call to see how we were, she was surprised. "I could have done that," she said." (Adult evacuee)

No one understands evacuees' experiences better than others who have been through the same

Because even close family members have trouble understanding the impact of an evacuation, most evacuees find it worthwhile to communicate with other evacuees either in person, e-mail, telephone, or snail mail. Ideally evacuees form a group that meets face to face. Professional facilitators might be brought in to guide the evacuee support group. However, the evacuees should define their needs. Evacuees, who were unable to prevent others from taking away the context of their lives, can help re-establish a sense of control over their lives by actively forming and/or leading such a group. If other evacuees are unavailable, adult evacuees might consider joining support groups for victims of trauma. Younger evacuees are less likely to benefit from a general trauma group because it will expose them to sources of trauma unrelated to their experience, just when the child is trying to help reestablish trust in this new environment.

Effects of Evacuations



...in a new home, where I can reflect on all that I have undergone. I remember the times during the last eleven months when I struggled to find myself, mistakenly thinking that my circumstances and surroundings had changed my identity - who I was. Now, one year after being transported to a 'home' known only by the gold-embossed letters on my passport, 8562 miles away from what I had thought to be me, I have come to recognize the depth of the past year's lessons. I now see that my passions, my confidence, and my character cannot be lost with the luggage or left behind in the closet. Instead, I grow and learn from each of my encounters and maintain a self that will never again be misplaced. Wherever I may go and whatever I may encounter, I will always be me; a me that loves to learn, that appreciates my global home, and that looks forward to the future journeys of the adventure that I call my life (teen evacuee)

All family members are affected by the evacuation and all family members are likely to suffer from the effects of stress, grief and possibly trauma. Both adults and children may be disoriented, confused, unfocused and feel an altered sense of reality. Children's distress expresses itself in the form of bad moods and increased misbehavior. Parents carry the multiple burden of coping with their own stress while dealing with the day to day problems of reorganizing their families' lives and their children's difficulties. You may relive the experience over and over again in your head. These feelings will begin to fade for most people over time.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

Depending on the intensity and danger of the evacuation, expect some time before you feel balanced and completely able to enjoy life again. **For some evacuees the feelings do not fade as time passes and they may develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a debilitating psychological condition.** PTSD occurs when a traumatic event imprints itself so strongly on the memory that the body's primitive fight or flight responses are put on ultra-high alert, and get stuck there. Any minor stimulation reminiscent of the past danger activates these defense mechanisms. Symptoms include re-experiencing the trauma, persistent frightening thoughts, and heightened arousal. They may also include flashbacks, nightmares, phobias, a fixation on the traumatic events, problems with attention and memory, sleep problems, outbursts of aggression, emotional numbness, and social isolation.

The average evacuee experience meets the definition of a trauma, even when the evacuees are not exposed to violent events. Statistics indicate that sudden, unexpected traumas and violent events are more likely to lead to PTSD. However, even after a non-violent evacuation, adults or children may need help. Symptoms usually begin within three months of the traumatic episode and research shows that getting help quickly is critical in treating PTSD. Parents should be sensitive to signs of severe disturbance in themselves and/or their children and seek professional help if necessary. Research further shows that females are more likely to suffer PTSD, as well as those with little experience in coping with traumatic events. With proper psychological and medical support, many people with PTSD will improve significantly.¹

"These days I know how quickly conflict can escalate and serious situations develop. I am very aware of my own behavior and I encourage people to take steps to avoid those slippery slopes."

"Trauma is an experience that is non-normative, exceeds the individual's abilities to meet its demands or disrupts the individual's frame of reference."²

Children and Evacuation

Four-year-old Anne-Marie wouldn't talk about the events in Kinshasa. "It was a dream" she said, "The bad men came and took away my toys and Dino (the dog killed when soldiers broke into the house). Then I woke up and I don't want to dream it any more."

"Seven-year-old Michael had been chased out of his home twice, his pets killed and his home looted by soldiers. After the evacuation, he discovered the police emergency number and took his revenge on 'men in uniform' by screaming abuse at them. We found ourselves explaining his behavior to police who traced the calls. We later organized a trip to the local police station to demonstrate that these were 'friendly' men in uniform."

Children's reactions to evacuations depend on many factors, such as their experiences leading up to and during the evacuation; their temperament; the living situation once back in the home country; and—especially—how their parents react to the situation.

In general, how children express distress varies with age.³ After an evacuation, older children, for instance, will understand and accept that their current home is safe. Meanwhile younger children, especially those between five and ten, tend to 'carry' feelings of threat with them and feel ongoing fear. For example, small children may begin to fear the dark, strangers or even non-threatening places, such as the grocery store. A scary television show may need to be turned off.

Children's characters and personal situations affect the strength and form of their reactions to evacuations.

Some children are natural worriers, some find change difficult. Others may perceive an evacuation as an adventure – particularly if it has gone smoothly and parents have provided reassurance.

Each child also gains and loses different things. My daughter was not particularly happy at school in Monrovia and leaving – even in haste—had some appeal to her. After the evacuation, she encountered a great teacher and a welcoming group of friends at the new school. Our son was less fortunate: having been well adjusted before the move, he coped poorly with the loss of his nanny, school friends, and pets.

Typical reactions of children of different ages include:

- **Preschool:** behavioral problems such as aggression, changes in eating and sleeping habits, nervous mannerisms, separation anxiety, regression in areas such as toilet training or language, play acting of the evacuation events, and periods of sadness.
- **School age:** behavioral problems that occur at pre-school age and: distrust, stomachaches, lack of impulse control, rebellious behavior, angry outbursts, social problems, school phobia, and depression.
- **Adolescent:** depression and sadness, anxiety, self-deprecation, apathy, disenchantment, acting out, concentration difficulties, withdrawal, anger, nightmares, flashbacks, diminished interest in activities and foreshortened future.

How children react to and cope with an evacuation depends on the reaction of parents.

Children will react to the traumatic event by watching their parents. They are seeking reassurance from the primary source of safety and stability in their lives. Children should be reassured that they will get new clothes or other material things, which may seem unimportant to you, yet may be the central concern to a small child. While parents need not hide normal sadness at leaving, and in fact it can be an important affirmation of children's own similar emotions, parents also should emphasize their ability to cope. Parents should work to establish a routine and a sense of normalcy, though and strive to display good problem solving skills.

"My mom explained to me that because the ruler of Cambodia had decided to break off diplomatic relations with the United States, we—Americans—had decided to leave Cambodia along with all the other dependents from the American Embassy in Cambodia. That's the point at which I remember getting upset... If we weren't supposed to be in Cambodia anymore, why was Dad still there? But what was really scary was seeing so many of the adults around me acting very upset, and seeming not to know what to do next. Running up and down the corridors with the other kids was fun for a while, but when we got really noisy, why didn't the adults come out and stop us, instead they continued to keep talking and even crying in the rooms. I overheard, "I hope he'll be safe...." Former child evacuee remembering her evacuation as a six year old.

Post-Evacuation—Parenting experience

Following an evacuation, a child may display strong emotions and/or unusual behavior. Such behaviors are not necessarily indicative that the child is “abnormal”. On the contrary, something would be wrong with a child that did not react to the loss of his home or a violent event. Adults often try to pretend that everything is OK. However, it is important to acknowledge that something stressful has happened. **Almost all children will show signs of distress in the form of increased misbehavior, changes in attitude or bad moods.**

Convincing others that something was wrong with the world your child was living in and not with the evacuated children can be challenging. New behaviors may emerge as coping mechanisms for feelings of sadness, fear or anger. A new behavior may not make sense to parents. Additionally, family members and friends often fail to see children’s behavior as a temporary phase stemming from their experiences. Even professionals sometimes look for fault in the children or parents. Ironically, this makes it more difficult to get the help and support needed to heal these children. It is critical that parents stay focused on the recovery of the child and not worrying about whether the child will recover. Recovery takes time and children can recover from even the most devastating events. Most likely, your children are reacting normally and symptoms should fade over time.

Most evacuated children will recover in a supportive and safe environment. The long-term effects of the experience will depend on age and character, what they have experienced and on the family’s ability to deal with the situation.⁵

Two months after we experienced our second traumatic evacuation in two years, our daughter came home from her new school upset because her teacher had told her she was disappointed that she had not provided more support for another new girl at school. When I asked the teacher why on earth she would rely on our daughter given the circumstances, she said she just hadn’t thought. Our daughter seemed so “capable” mother of twelve year old

Mustering support for children can be difficult. Evacuated children often are unable to describe their feelings or explain themselves when they behave poorly. Other children, lacking sensitivity and understanding, can be cruel. Children who are feeling vulnerable often seek other children who feel the same way. These may be children who do not fit in at school, who may be poorly adjusted and who may be engaging in antisocial behavior or susceptible to things such as drugs and alcohol. Parents should be aware that this is a time when your child may behave in a way that was previously unimaginable whether as an attempt to fit in at school or to cope with bad feelings.

Grieving: Sorrow over losing things or missing people is part of the process of saying goodbye and moving on. When parents talk about these feelings, they give their children permission to do the same. However, children need to hear an edited version that does not threaten the sense of security that they are redeveloping. Children need to work through these feelings at their own pace, and parents need to be sensitive to the moment and the mode. Let your child know that you would like to help in any way you can whenever they are reminded of their experiences and losses.

“There was no big going away party at the DCM’s house for any of us—It would have been boring anyway, except if my best friend, Jessie, could have come—Jessie, who I probably now will never see again and didn’t get to say goodbye to. When I am rich and famous, I will look for her and beg her forgiveness. The one good thing about leaving is that I had not finished my physics homework—hadn’t even started it “ (teen evacuee)

Expressions of grief should be balanced with an encouraging, positive outlook. Children should be allowed to express their emotions, but at appropriate moments parents should gently remind children of positive things.

Talking to Children about the Evacuation

Talking Cures: It is important for children to talk about what has happened.

Talking with children is vital. It will let them know it is okay to talk about their feelings. To assist children's healing, parents should focus on the children's needs; listening when they talk, helping them to express themselves and answering their questions. Parents can create opportunities for children to express themselves in other ways, through art and play, and use these points of departure to discuss their experience. Parents can help their children find words to express what these show: "That's a beautiful picture of our dog. I wonder if you miss him."

"Children are less likely to be scarred by violence when they are able to talk about it to an adult soon after their exposure to it, when they have ongoing opportunities to discuss their fears, and when adults are able to give violence some meaning that is logical."⁴



**SHARE SIMPLE
FACTS with
CHILDREN—
Rumors may
cause more worry
and fear!!**

"Trying to find the words to tell our children why things happened helped me to understand them as well. I tried to downplay the sense of bad or evil for our children. I told them, 'The soldiers that looted everything are poor people who didn't get paid and got desperate and angry about it'. It helped me to see the situation in that light as well" (Mother of two children, seven and eleven)

Children usually want to know why bad things have happened. Children should be allowed to set the pace. Parents should ask them what they want to know and answer their questions without giving them more information than necessary. Responding to questions also makes it easier to give age-appropriate explanations using simple explanations for what has happened. Ironically explaining in simple terms for children can make it more comprehensible for parents as well.

Children will often ask questions or talk about the feelings they have about traumatic events. Parents are usually the ideal counterparts to talk with their children. Children have stronger levels of trust with their parents than they do with others. Parents know about the events and can answer questions. They also understand their children and the extent of their losses.

However, parents must be calm and rational. When parents are too upset to talk to their children in this manner—when they have not come to grips with their own emotions over the events—someone else probably should take on this role. If parents need to talk these issues over in order to establish some control over them, they should seek the counsel of a friend, family member, mental health professional or clergy. Adults need to talk with other adults.

This is because **talking to children is a balancing act between honesty and protection**; expressing emotions, but not venting too much of the parents' own pain, anger and frustration. Parental emotions can easily overwhelm a child. It is important to a child's sense of security to see parents in control of themselves—it sends a message that "everything is going to be okay." Parents must censor the information children receive.

Details of violence or brutality should not be shared with children. Many evacuees are anxious for information and stay glued to TV or radio. However, media coverage can increase fear and anxiety in children and interfere with a child's recovery. If children are exposed to images of violence or ask questions, adults should discuss it with them to help put it into perspective, explaining that although things may be bad in one country, the threat is limited to that country; and that most of the people involved are not evil, but caught up in a bad situation; etc. Young children often feel that everywhere is lapsing into chaos, that all police or soldiers are a threat and that dangerous situations and people are around every corner. Children need reassurance that they live in a stable country, that the police and army are a protective force rather than a threat, and so on: these kinds of essential details are not obvious to children.

PARENTS SHOULD:

- 1) TALK TO YOUR CHILDREN
- 2) LISTEN TO YOUR CHILDREN
- 3) REASSURE YOUR CHILDREN
- 4) REPEAT

Children and Violence

In the worst cases, when children are victims of or witnesses to violence, they know that terrible things *can* happen to them, destroying their trust in the world around them. Lack of trust can endure well after the threat is gone. Children have a limited ability to understand why bad events happen. Often, they are unable to understand the differences in setting that mean that they are now “safe,” when they were not before.

Trust in the environment must be regained step-by-step. It is the mental equivalent of regaining physical skills after an accident. The path to recovery follows a certain pattern: regaining confidence in the environment, reestablishing a normal life, rediscovering enjoyment, companionship and meaning in life.

Fortunately, as these children have not suffered harm at the hands of family members, the essential trust in relationships remains intact. Trusted adults can help them to reestablish a sense of security. Patience with increased dependency, with regressive behavior and lack of control over emotions can help them regain trust in the safety and fairness of the world. The disordered lifestyle following an evacuation makes regaining these skills more challenging for children. It is important to keep goals modest in the beginning.

It may be better for parents to seek help to learn how to support their children, rather than the children building a relationship with a therapist. This is true especially if the relationship with the counselor soon will be terminated to return to the host country, or to move on. To be effective, a therapist needs to establish a rapport with children, yet this is another relationship that will be made and broken if children must leave too soon. Parents can take this opportunity to learn how to interpret their child’s behavior and the extent of the trauma. In other instances children might resist therapy. While the parent sees the need, the child often will not. Support from trusted adults may be a better option, though some children experience such high levels of distress that they truly need professional help.

Children ‘digest’ traumatic events differently from adults. Children develop new understandings of what has happened as they grow older and develop a greater ability to comprehend the situation. Therefore, a 10 year old child who experiences an evacuation will continue to process the event as a 14 year-old, and again as a 16 year-old and so on. Some therapists treating childhood trauma recommend counseling at different ages rather than a long period of counseling immediately after a crisis.

Nick spent hours and hours building toy Lego houses with high walls and lots of imaginary safety features like cameras and wild animals patrolling the perimeter. After a few weeks, he wasn't so concerned about security, but he still puts walls around all his buildings.

(mother of eight-year old)



Child evacuee uses art to depict the scene he saw at the bombing of the American Embassy in Nairobi

Adults and Evacuation

Residual stress from the evacuation, continued concerns about those left behind, and the demands of the post-evacuation situation can hinder parents' ability to support their children. In some cases, parental distress is such that they can only really help their children after they have found help for themselves.

Traumatic experiences cannot be forgotten and put away. They must be integrated into our understanding of ourselves and the world. This can be a long process, even extending over years. Evacuees will continue to be reminded of the events long after they have put what has happened in the backs of their minds. The occurrence of similar events in other countries, more political upheaval in the country of evacuation, or miscellaneous events can spark memories, insecurities, and fears. Different people adapt to these experiences in different ways, but simply ignoring them is rarely a viable option. Talking about events and feelings with others often helps.

Grief should be part of slow recovery, not an end state of reliving situations. Sometimes children are ready to move on while parents are still grieving. It is often harder for adults to let go—they are often aware of continuing situations and may have ongoing concern for the people left behind.

Evacuees can find help from family, friends and support groups, but they may need professional help to cope with problems and avoid long-term effects. The sudden loss of a familiar environment is disturbing even without chaotic and violent events. Because an evacuation happens to families, not just children, the need for outside help depends on how both children and parents are coping. Seeking support is sometimes the best way to ensure that families rebuild their lives as quickly as possible.

Evacuees may feel embarrassed to get professional help. Often those of us in the Foreign Service tend to be independent souls who find it difficult to ask for help. It is important to remember that an evacuation lies well beyond the average vicissitudes of daily life. Reluctance to seek assistance born of independence may be reinforced by other forces. Even with assurances of confidentiality there may be concerns that seeking the assistance of a psychologist could affect medical clearances and career options. Hopefully such concerns are unfounded. On a more personal level, some parents think that their children's need for help is indicative of their own failure at parenting.

Don't misuse alcohol or prescription pills or use other illegal substances to cope. People sometimes drink in response to various types of stress, and the amount of drinking in response to stress correlates to the severity of the life stressors and the absence of social support networks typical of an evacuation experience. Beware of this type of self-medication that may in turn lead to a dependence on alcohol. Alcohol also disturbs regular sleep patterns. These stressful times may be particularly difficult for people who are prone to substance abuse or may be recovering from an addictive disorder.

"My children survived a very terrible episode in their life, having crawled out of the bombed Embassy on their knees, most of all because we kept our family life strong and as normal as possible. It was helpful to be in a community that understood what had happened and who all were supportive. We surrounded our kids with love. We talked and talked about what happened to us and worked through it that way. The children had to tell their story in many ways: to the press, the media, the FBI, and to their school. They each wrote about their experiences and drew the story in book form. My son wrote to the President of the United States. Each time we retold the story, it diffused the emotions we felt. Even today, we continue to talk about the bombing and it helps us to understand and empathize with the many people who today are victims of bombings around the world. (Mother of two following bombing of American Embassy in Kenya)

Post Evacuation: How to Help Your Family Heal

Structure your children's environment so that it is as "normal". Go back to routines, familiar foods and regular bedtimes. If possible, keep children in a familiar environment surrounded by people they trust, such as grandparents. Familiarity is a key factor to readjustment. Activities and routines from pre-evacuation lives are a source of this familiarity. Not only do they provide security, but if parents feel disoriented, it is easier to stick to old routines, rather than to develop new ones. When old routines are not viable, create new ones.

Enforce normal rules. This also will provide a sense of familiarity, normality, safety. Additional understanding and kindness are warranted given the stress children face. Parents should anticipate problematic behavior, resulting from the evacuation. Some behaviors, such as bedwetting, should be accepted without comment. When children get angry or show strong emotions, let them know you understand their feelings, yet maintain firm limits on unacceptable behavior such as hitting. Help children find more appropriate ways to express and master emotions – even if it is just going to the park to let off steam.

Get organized. Stress induced short-term memory loss makes external order more important. Create files for dealing with papers and bills. Buy an appointment book (or use an electronic phone book) to keep track of important dates, new schedules and phone numbers. Keep track of new addresses and essential details about people if your memory is not working well. Provide older children with similar aids.

Create positive recreation patterns to help manage stress. Relaxation is important. Exercise reduces stress and can inhibit destructive lifestyle patterns. Take advantage of recreation facilities available in many temporary housing units or get a temporary gym membership. Many gyms offer child care.

Let children know what is going on. They are most interested in the things that affect them: whether they will be going back to their school and friends, if they will be starting school in their home country, what has happened to their pets. Keep them up-to-date. If you do not know yet, tell them you will let them know as soon as you do.

Give children age-appropriate power and autonomy. In an evacuation, children lose complete control over their lives. They need to take back age-appropriate control over their lives: what to wear, choosing what to eat or what to do after school, etc. Older children especially need to take back some of their independence. The fear experienced during a crisis can make both parents and children fearful, so this needs to be a careful process with respect to both. If parents are more afraid than normal, they should discuss this with their children. Parents should develop compromises with their children and ensure them that this is a temporary situation. If children are more clingy and fearful, aim for small steps to regain confidence and independence.

Get to know your children's new friends and acquaintances to ensure that they are not drifting towards risky behaviors in a misguided pursuit of relief from their feelings. Don't let your children's yearning to connect with others in the same emotional condition guide them to make the wrong decisions about the wrong friends. You can help break the ice with other children by organizing play dates, zoo outings, video evenings or picnics: events where you can be present.

In the cold winter days approaching Christmas, Danielle's children had to catch an early bus to their new school. Coming from their sunny home in Africa, the children were miserable. To help the children face the day, Danielle put a small gift -- an eraser, a hair clip, stickers, a special seed from Africa, in their lunch boxes each day, to open on the way to school.

In 2002, Jakarta Evacuee children each received a special magic key at a winter holiday party in Washington, DC. The magic key was to ensure Santa could find them no matter where in the world they were living. The party's purpose was to bring the support of the entire Foreign Service community to the evacuees and help make the season as joyful as possible.

Create positive experiences to balance negative ones. Putting good things back in children's lives reminds them that the world can be a good place. The 'positives' can be an outing to a movie or the zoo, or simply finding time to play a game or cook a favorite meal. Identify critical moments of the day when a child seems most likely to experience problems and provide something special at that point. Such efforts can change a child's mindset for the rest of the day and bypass an outburst. Parents should not forget to put some positive experiences back in their own lives too.

Celebrate everything you can think of: birthdays, anniversaries, a letter from old friends, new friends. Apart from creating fun events, everyone will remember that it is okay to smile and think positively.

Be your children's advocate. Remember that it is difficult for those who have not been uprooted and plopped down in an unexpected situation to understand the pressures on your children. The misbehavior that results does not fit their expectations. Stand up for your children and explain. If necessary bring in professionals, such as the Family Liaison Office and the Office of Overseas Schools, to deal with schools. Remember, however, that the concerns of other parents and school officials also are legitimate, so be prepared to seek reasonable solutions. Parents may need to take a child out of school for a day or two. However, this should be a temporary measure. If children are struggling with the situation after a few weeks, it is time to get help.

"My son's teacher was very surprised when I told her that under no circumstances should she yell at our son or he would run away. I promised to come to the school immediately if she had problems with him. I could see on her face that she was thinking, 'There's nothing wrong with the kid but the mother's really lost it.'" (Mother of a six-year-old)

Talk to children's teachers before they start school. Let them know what your child has been through, the effects and what may happen in class. Ask them to keep an eye on how your child gets along with the other students. Your child may feel threatened by seemingly normal incidents or need more reassurance than normal. Ask the teacher not to force children to talk about their experiences. Although some will be happy to talk and this will help them integrate their experiences into their new life, some incidents need careful handling or children may feel that something is wrong with *them* rather than the situation.

Eight-year-old Esther gave her new classmates a graphic account of how the family's dogs had been killed and eaten. Other parents called the school, indignant that their children had been exposed to these stories. Esther felt that she had done something wrong.

Reconnect with home. Make the most of the opportunity to spend time with relatives and friends. Catch up on what is happening, discuss current issues, read the newspapers, watch television. This has a stabilizing effect and is an opportunity to bone up on home culture. Help children do the same. Buy local magazines and let them catch up on TV shows and go site-seeing.

Make your four walls a home, no matter how temporary. Buy a few flowers or a cheap potted plant, put up photos of friends and family, let children choose a few posters, hang their paintings on the refrigerator, and cook favorite foods. These simple acts give everyone points of reference to work around, providing some sense of security.

Get in touch with the friends, neighbors and colleagues you can find, if you do not go back to your host country. In emergency situations, evacuees rarely have time to say goodbye or think it will be necessary – after all, the plan is to return when the trouble is over. Yet if the trouble does not end or you decide to move to a new post, this becomes unfinished business. Without good endings, good beginnings are more difficult.

Accept any help offered. Social support is important in coping with personal disasters. Evacuees are in a difficult situation and need it. Because an evacuation affects the whole family, family members are less able than they normally would be to help one another cope with problems big and small. Thus evacuees may have a particular need of support from outside the family.

Many people are happy to help, if they know how or if someone in need asks for it. Ask friends for simple things, such as recommending a doctor, lending your children some toys or meeting for coffee. Give people a chance. A simple request is easier than being angry for years because people did not come through when you needed it.

A family's process of adjustment after an evacuation may take months or even years. Foreign Service evacuees have access to resources to help them through the difficult periods.

- Family Liaison Office
- Employee Consultation Service
- Foreign Service Youth Foundation

Work to establish continuity. The suddenness of the move from host country to home leaves few markers between distinct life stages. Stress related memory problems can also leave gaps in a sense of time. All of these disrupt the continuity of "life stories," that can be a source of longing and sorrow later in life. Try keeping a diary, or take a few photographs and use these to create timelines.

Help your children to see the positive aspects of the evacuation, such as trying new things, visiting Grandma and Grandpa or watching a favorite movie. Children should be reassured that they will get new clothes or other material things, which may seem unimportant to you, but may be the end of the world to a small child.

If you seek professional help, carefully check your therapist's credentials. Finding the right help is critical. Not all professionals are skilled at dealing with trauma; in fact some do not believe in traumatization. Be certain they know the symptoms of PTSD or have experience dealing with trauma or perhaps refugees. Since all family members have been through the crisis, family therapy is usually the most appropriate. To help regain the sense of control that evacuation saps, look for a therapist who encourages clients to take control of their therapy when possible.

Long Term Effects of Evacuation

Traumatic experiences cannot be forgotten and put away. They must be integrated into our understanding of ourselves and our world – and this can be a long process, even years.

Five years after leaving Afghanistan, and quite independently, Nancy's children both began writing about the coup they had experienced. As a result, they discussed memories, some for the first time, of how Nancy had turned up the music to drown out the helicopter gunships shelling the king's palace. "When I hear those songs, I still think of Kabul and gunfire," her son said.

Evacuees will continue to be reminded of the events long after they have put what has happened in the backs of their minds. The occurrence of similar events in other countries, more political upheaval in the country of evacuation, or miscellaneous events can spark memories, insecurities, and fears.

Children may want to talk about an evacuation, even years later.

The age-related reprocessing of traumatic events in children's lives means that they may ask more questions as time goes on and they are intellectually and emotionally able to deal with more details. They are also likely to show a sudden interest in the country they were evacuated from, even years later. They may decide to do a school project on it, show an interest in the language, or try to find ex-classmates.

"Since the evacuation, I still panic if people are late arriving.—I think something terrible must have happened to them and I think of negative things happening to all of us more often than I used to before the events in Somalia. I try not to, and it is improving but I don't think I'll ever quite get over it."

Home may become a precious item. Evacuee children may value 'home' in a way that others do not. Our own daughter, while remaining interested in traveling finds it difficult to tear herself out of one place and move on. Evacuee children are also particularly sensitive to the dangers of living abroad and very realistic about the pros and cons.

Children often 'return' to the evacuation country either physically or emotionally, even years later. In many cases, an effort to complete 'unfinished business' by returning to the evacuation country is healthy. Some children find reasons to return to the host country for a visit or for a longer period of time. Many, at some point, will show a particular interest in their evacuation country. Some may be content to re-establish contact with old friends. I was surprised to find that our daughter had found most of her old classmates from one country, even though this school experience had not been her best.

As part of her Master's degree, Charlotte returned to Liberia to study the linguistic characteristics in this part of West Africa. Her parents were concerned as trouble was again brewing but Charlotte insisted that both this topic of research and her return to the country of her childhood were important to her.

"These days I know how quickly conflict can escalate and serious situations develop. I am very aware of my own behavior and I encourage people to take steps to avoid those slippery slopes."

Evacuations may have positive effects too. Evacuees also may develop a heightened awareness of danger and therefore live more safely. Evacuees may place a greater value on life and family after a separation or harrowing escape from danger. Children may be inspired by the heroism of others. Increased understanding and empathy can enrich our lives and those of others. A number of evacuees become involved with helping people who have been traumatized, or lost their homes or countries.

An evacuation unequivocally affects the entire family. The process of recovery may take months or years. Foreign Service evacuees have access to resources to help them through the difficult periods and can later use their experiences in a compassionate and positive way and to work harder to make the world a safer and better place.

¹.Many therapists with this experience are listed with the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies.

² Figley, Charles, C. Scrignar & W. Smith. *The Aftershocks of Trauma*. Patient Care: March 30, 1992.

³ McCain, Lisa and Laurie Anne Peachman note that the question of whether the severity of PTSD varies according to age has not been settled. *Psychological Trauma and the Adult Survivor: Therapy and Transformation* (Brunner/ Mazell Psychosocial Stress Series, No 21) 1990.

⁴ Weissbourd, Richard. *The Vulnerable Child: What Really Hurts America's Children and What to Do About it*. Addison-Wesley: Reading, MA 1996.

⁵ Figley, Charles R. *Family Traumatic Stress* in a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Family Therpay Association, Washington, DC, 1986. Figley notes that the social support within the family is dependent on cohesion and family relationship skills (e.g. communication and empathy)

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A psychologist from New Zealand, Ngaire has spent 26 years abroad in North America, Australia, Europe, Africa, the Middle East and the Mediterranean. She has been involved in intercultural training for 12 years in a variety of settings: companies, expatriate communities and schools. She has a B.Sc. in Psychology, a diploma in psychotherapy, a Master's degree in Sociology and a teaching certificate for international schools. She and her husband have two children and have faced many of the situations that can arise abroad from dealing with learning problem to preparing for evacuations during wars and rebellions. Ngaire works as program developer, trainer and researcher.

About the illustrator: Mikkela V. Thompson

The daughter of an American diplomat and a Danish mother, Mikkela V. Thompson grew up around the world. She studied art history and the fine arts in London and New York and was selected for the 1993 show at the Handwerker Gallery. Her paintings are in private collections in Denmark, England, India, Sweden and the USA.



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The Foreign Service Youth Foundation (FSYF) is a 501 (c.) (3) non -profit organization established in 1989 to:

- Inform and assist for Foreign Serive youth and their families in the Washington, DC area and around the world;
- Develop, fund and implement educational, social and training programs for Foreign Service families;
- Recognize and promote the community service contributions of Foreign Service youth;

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