



## How to help your expat child cope with life overseas

In many ways, moving overseas is a more challenging proposition for children than it is for parents. Adjusting to a new environment, a new international school and new friends can be a big challenge. There's even a word for it - expat child syndrome - which is used by psychologists to describe children who are suffering from emotional stress because of a move abroad.

As with many aspects of life, this challenge has been amplified during the pandemic, with many international schools closed and home learning becoming the norm. Even as countries open up and some level of normality returns, mental wellness continues to be an issue for expat children of all ages.

How do you know if your expat child is struggling to adjust to life overseas? Here are some of the things to look out for, as well as some actions that can help.



## 1. Recognise the symptoms

Keep an eye out for the signs that your child may be unhappy, no matter how subtle these may be. Symptoms may vary depending on your child's personality, but there are a number of red flags to be aware of.

Has their behaviour changed – for example, their sleeping patterns or diet? Are they more disruptive than before at home and at school? How about their social life? Are they spending more time alone than they used to? Do they complain about not having any close friends? Do you find them to be more introverted than they were previously? Are they unusually distressed when you drop them off for school and hobbies?

Some of these changes may be a natural part of growing up but you may need to seek support if your child is displaying several of these symptoms.



## 2. Talk openly

Having clear and judgement-free lines of communication with your child is hugely important, especially as they are settling into a new environment.

First, no matter how busy you are at work, make time to be aware of what is happening in your child's life. Are they enjoying school? Are they making friends? What do they find different from before – both good and bad? Is there anything they would like you to help with? How about their lives outside of school? Are they happy

at home? If not, why not and how can you help?

Do your best to involve your children in any decision making you make, as it will affect them, either directly or indirectly. Ask for their opinion, even on something as apparently simple as buying new furniture or booking a restaurant for Sunday brunch. For younger children, sit down with them and explain what is happening and why, focusing firmly on benefits. Make them feel part of this new life and not just a bystander.



# 3.

## Make sure school is working

Expat children will spend the majority of their days in one place – school. It's where they learn, where they grow, and where they socialise. The chances are that the international school in this new country is very different from their school back home, so it's vitally important for the family that school life is working for them.

You may have chosen an international school while still in your home country, but things may be very different on the ground. Check in regularly with your children to see how they're adjusting. What do they like? What don't they like? Is there any way you can help? Speak to their teachers and school counsellors if necessary – they can be an important bridge and will have deep experience of any problems you may be facing.

Your best resource is other families who have made moves similar to yours, so talk to other parents and get advice and tips on how they got their kids through the changes.



# 4.

## Strike a balance between old and new

Keeping in touch with friends back home can help with the transition to a new life and will also be good for your expat child's mental well-being. Having those connections provides them with people they can trust and share things with.

Similarly, children thrive on routines, so do your best to keep hold of some of the routines they have always enjoyed – for example, swimming on a Saturday morning, pancakes for breakfast on the weekends, and so on.

But be careful though not to be too dependent on the past. Old friends are important, but new friends will be more valuable in helping with the adjustment. Making friends should come naturally as your children get involved in school, sports and other extra-curricular activities and try to build new, additional routines and activities that will help them identify more with their new home.

## 5. Build resilience

As well as being an important overall life skill, resilience - or the ability to overcome stressful and challenging moments - is something that can help your expat child adjust to their new lives overseas.

Hopefully, your child's international school is already helping them to learn more about resilience, but you can

also play a part. Teach them to problem solve. Help them focus on things they control and to manage their emotions. Encourage them to accept challenges, celebrate successes and not be afraid to sometimes fail. Children learn by example, so it helps if you are showing these same traits in your everyday life.



## 6. Don't panic, but seek help if you need to

For any expat child, it is only natural that they will experience some challenges when adjusting to a new country, so don't panic if you see signs that they are finding the transition tough. Often these are temporary and can be tackled by open lines of communication and simple actions.

However, should you feel the situation is becoming out of control and you are worried about your child's physical and mental health, ask for support.

Your employer can help, either by giving you the flexibility to spend more time with the family or providing you with relevant healthcare resources. If needed, get in touch with a mental health professional such as a

child psychiatrist. There should absolutely be no stigma involved in getting the very best support for your children.

Your international health insurance will be invaluable in this regard - most provide expat family-specific plans that include mental and behavioural care for children and access to multilingual, professional and confidential services for families.

