

Expat children need a helping hand

As this is my first submission as a columnist to Expat Focus, I would like to start by introducing myself. Born in Japan (to a British father and Eurasian mother) I grew up in South East Asia, went to boarding school in the UK at 11; then embarked on the expat circuit as an adult with my oil engineering husband, and have lived in such diverse locations as Japan, Germany, the UK, Singapore, Malaysia, Zimbabwe, the UAE, Venezuela and Trinidad.

The main focus of my articles will be education (my life's work) with a bit of history thrown in (my passion, as well as travel) as over the last 5 decades, I have experienced education first hand initially as an expat child, subsequently as a teacher and most latterly as a parent. Thus, I feel I can claim to be a bit of an expert!

Long term I know that there can be few more beneficial experiences than educating your children in a variety of countries: exposed to new cultures, new experiences and new ideas, their creativity develops, whilst the sense of perspective and tolerance of tomorrow's global citizens are enhanced.

But I am also aware that in the short-term there may well be problems. Moving from one school to another can be difficult, smoothly slotting into a new school in a new country can be challenging: this may be if you're 9, 13 or whatever age.

As a teacher, I have seen children arriving from another international move: sometimes they had ground to make-up, at other times they waited for their contemporaries to catch-up. And as a parent, I have struggled with choosing the right school for my children yet again in another location and have watched other parents face the similar concerns to myself.

It's a rule of human nature that we put social belonging before achievement. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs gives us the scientific evidence of this: a child arriving in a new school will seek friends ahead of gold stars for academic endeavour. As a result, pastoral issues may create an academic deficit. Few pupils new to a school have the confidence to put up their hand and ask for help. Nor will they stay behind at the end of a lesson to ask as they won't want to sacrifice time with their new friends. In this way, minor educational difficulties can rapidly fester into major problems as a child flounders and loses confidence.

Inevitably there will also be academic gaps when a child moves to a new school. Pupils may find that there's a difference of approach to their last school, a change in pace, disconcerting changes in teaching style and most worrying of all, a tendency to cover the syllabus in a different sequence. Move from Dubai to Hong Kong, at the wrong time of year, and your child could miss out on the French future perfect tense.

Sometimes problems even originate from the schools themselves. International schools can find it difficult to cover for long-term teacher absences. In addition, the high cost of living in some of the most popular Expat destinations make it difficult to recruit experienced teachers, particularly in shortage areas such as Chemistry, Economics, Mathematics and Physics.

With these issues creating a demand for high quality tutoring, I founded an educational consultancy out of Singapore. Due to the shortage of good quality tutors in most expat locations, I drew on the support of the internet by sourcing tutors from around the world who could connect with students anywhere. Four years on, I have a large group of tutors working with me and have provided thousands of hours of quality tuition for boosting at Primary level; school entrance exams at 11+ and 13+; support through KS3 and (I)GCSEs up to A Level and IB examinations.

Even more astonishing is the fact that although I started out in Singapore, through word of mouth recommendations I have received requests for help from countries as diverse as Australia, Indonesia, American, Canada, Hong Kong, Pakistan and Vietnam as well as my original bases of Singapore. Word of mouth is very powerful when parents are seeking help for their children.

Sometimes a batch of sessions is sufficient to fill a gap in the pupil's knowledge or develop a skill. Often however, children continue tuition as they enjoy having the opportunity to set the agenda, to ask questions and have the tutor's sole attention. As such, many children benefit enormously from the longer-term confidence boost of that one special hour a week and as they move to another school in another country, the tutor can also act as the one stable educational factor in their lives.

However, it is not just people seeking support for their children looking for tuition, but also those looking to extend pupils who are exceptionally bright as some parents find that their child needs challenging and stretching much further than is possible within the normal classroom environment.

So, if your child is struggling academically with an expat move, do consider turning to a tutor for professional help. And if you are in a location where face-to-face tutors do not have the experience or skills you need, then do consider an online agency. Parents are sometimes a bit reluctant to trust the medium, but believe me, most children have no such qualms and they can chat to an adult sitting the other side of the world, in front of a screen, as if they were in the same room so in fact online tuition is often now the favoured option even if face to face is available.

In this world of the ever-expanding role of technology in children's lives, it is good to be able to embrace it to play such a positive educational role. Online tuition is certainly a technological advance that is making a large and beneficial difference to many expat children. As a student, I think back to boarding school in the 1980s when my only contact with my parents in Singapore was a weekly air letter gram and the 2p phone box to call my grandmother who was my guardian. And as a parent, I certainly wish there had been more online communication at various stages of my children's lives, but at least their children will be able to take advantage from it as your children can now.

Fiona Hodgkins - June 2017