



# CHILDREN AND THE BIG MOVE

HOW TO MAKE THEIR MOVE ABROAD WORRY-FREE

BY HELEN REDDING

**M**oving house is a stressful time. Add to that a new country and the prospect can be even more daunting. Leaving behind everything that's familiar and making your home overseas is a big step. It's a much bigger step if you are doing it with children. How can you make a move abroad as stress-free as possible for them and ensure that the excitement overrides any worry?

## Involve, involve, involve

Make your children part of the moving process from the outset. Don't let them feel that what is happening is out of their control. Ask for their opinions and allow them to make choices. Linda, who moved from the U.K. to the Netherlands, was keen that her children, then aged 8, 11 and 14, helped make decisions: "They saw pictures and visited the rental houses we were looking at. We let them choose between a local Dutch school and the international school. As my husband started his job first, we visited on several occasions which made them more comfortable with the news."

Hazel relocated from Australia to the U.K. with children aged 5 and 12: "When we had decided [to move] we spoke with them truthfully and made them a part of the whole move. They helped us box up their items and choose what we would take. They researched London and the route that we would be taking to get there."

Let them help you plan. Remember that children worry about different things depending on their age. An older child may be concerned about school but a younger sibling's all-consuming worry might be whether they can take their favorite toy with them. Things that seem small to you may be enormous to them – reassurance about even the tiniest detail is vital.

"The most important thing is to talk to your children and give them space to ask questions," says clinical psychologist

Dr. Susanna Waern, who specializes in pediatrics. "Children who find change difficult will need more time to prepare and will also benefit from reassurance that as many things as possible will remain the same, for example being able to bring their own furniture or continue with their favorite activity after the move."

## Be open and honest

Be positive but avoid being a Pollyanna – the move may be great but aspects of it will undoubtedly be stressful. "Some parents may want to delay telling their children," says Dr. Waern, "however, it is important to remember that children notice changes – they may make their own assumptions about what is going on, which could be something a lot more worrying than a move. If it seems to the child that the parent is hiding something from them, they are unlikely to ask questions or share their worries."

Children are sensitive beasts. It is important to acknowledge there will be challenges and to take time to consider how to address these. Dealing with issues and concerns *together* can build your children's confidence and make you stronger as a family.

"I think if you are open and honest, although it is a hard move, they cope," says Hazel about her relocation. "Involve them in every step. Ask for their opinions and use them. It will bring you closer as a family and allow them to realize that the move is not as bad as they thought."

## Sell the benefits

New job, better weather, bigger house – the benefits of your new home may be obvious to you, but they might not be so obvious to your children. You need to *sell* the move to them. Be upbeat and get them excited about the opportunities and experiences that await them.

Hazel sold her family's move as "a great opportunity to learn new things and see other parts of the world". But the benefits can be even more tangible, as Linda's approach demonstrated: "We said we would be living close to their schools and that everyone cycles. They would be able to have a bike of their choice and they could paint them whatever color they wanted. We also told them that they could choose a theme for their new bedrooms and gave them some money to spend. They loved this and spent ages picking out bedding, pillows, rugs, etc."

## Keeping in touch

Leaving behind school friends and close family is one of the biggest worries for children. Yet with the benefits of services such as Skype, Facebook and WhatsApp, there's no excuse not to be in touch. They can show Grandma your new home or support a best friend's soccer team debut, even when they're thousands of miles away. Make sure your children know that they're not giving up that part of their life and that friends and family are only a phone call or a mouse click away. And if that means getting up in the wee small hours, then be prepared to set your alarm clock. ■

DEALING WITH ISSUES AND CONCERNS TOGETHER CAN BUILD YOUR CHILDREN'S CONFIDENCE AND MAKE YOU STRONGER AS A FAMILY.

## IS YOUR CHILD WORRIED?

Children are generally very resilient. However, while older children can express their feelings verbally, younger children express distress in non-verbal forms. Psychologist Dr. Susanna Waern gives some warning signs that you should look out for:

- An active child becoming passive and withdrawn and showing less interest in the things they normally enjoy
- Increased tantrums
- Complaints about aches and pains
- Developmental regression, e.g. bed-wetting