

## **Coping with teenage repatriation trauma**

**Going home is never easy, particularly for teenage children. Marian Weston provides some guidelines to help make the transition smooth.**

The phrase "going home" evokes strong emotions for the repatriating family, none more so perhaps than for the repatriating teenager for whom, until now, home has always been where his globally mobile parents happen to be living at that moment.

So-called Third Culture Kids (TCKs) are raised in a culture that lies somewhere between their parents' native culture and that of the country in which they are based. Such children develop a sense of belonging both to their host and passport cultures, but do not have a sense of total ownership in any culture. When asked where they are from, they often respond with a question: "Do you mean where I was born or where I live now?"

Repatriation is a double challenge for teenagers: not only are they having to cope with the traumas of adolescence, they are also having to face loss of identity and displacement on their return. Many TCKs, although well-versed in foreign affairs and travel from their overseas life, are at a big disadvantage when it comes to the practical life skills required for living in their home country. They might not know how to use public transport, manage money and have a holiday job, for example.

A recently repatriated 15-year-old TCK from Islamabad to Ireland described his reactions to repatriation. "Everything was different, the culture and the people," he said. "There was huge consumerism after living in a country like Pakistan. I missed the lack of rules, the way everything overseas was much more laid back. I also missed the diversity of such a big country and the fascinating travel experiences.

"I felt slightly out of place, because I feel I'm a bit more open-minded and six months into repatriation, I don't miss the old life as much now, though I still miss my friends."

The repatriating TCK faces multiple losses: loss of the country and lifestyle they have been living in, loss of close friendships and loss of identity. Wherever there is loss in life, there will always be grief, and this will be the most profound emotion the TCK will experience on repatriation.

It is imperative that parents and managers responsible for their repatriation understand that these emotions are very real and frightening and should not go unrecognised. For those families who have the luxury of knowing their repatriation date well in advance, communication and preparation are key considerations. Parents are encouraged to talk regularly with their children about their repatriation.

This gives everyone in the family a forum to voice concerns, and also discuss the benefits about the upcoming move. These family meetings will be the foundation from which parents can develop a 'bespoke' action plan for their respective teenagers several months in advance of the repatriation date. There are dual benefits to having a good action plan,: it helps the family unit become more comfortable with the concept of repatriation, but also importantly allows the repatriating teen a period of time to research different schools/colleges and establish contact via social networking sites with his/her peers in the home culture before the repatriation process kicks in for real.

One family who repatriated from the Middle East with their young teenagers reported: 'Several months before our departure we talked regularly as a family about our imminent departure and repatriation. Always taking care to ensure that the children were included in all of the conversations/decisions we made. The children's overseas education boosted their confidence and

this really helped them make a successful transition. The children were pleased to come back, although at first other children were intrigued by their expatriate experiences and made assumptions. Our children happily shared/talked about their expatriate experiences with their peers, this helped dispel any uncertainty, ensuring they were readily accepted and successfully integrated into their new classes/environment.

Well-known Canadian author and expatriate expert Robin Pascoe writes extensively about this in her book 'Repatriating Global Nomads. Having repatriated several years ago with two teens myself, I endorse this book as mandatory reading for all repatriating families. In the months leading up to our repatriation, and during the challenging, early days of repatriation it was my constant companion and well-thumbed reference, giving us individually and collectively as a family the tools to recognise potential turbulence and successfully navigate our way into calmer waters.

Most recently Robin Pascoe has launched 'Successful Living Abroad. This is an 18-part online global lecture series based on her series of expatriate family books.

Many companies wrongly assume that repatriation is by far the easiest part of the posting, requiring little if any provision of support for the repatriating family.

And as the cost to companies in providing more support and training for repatriates is overall a comparatively small expense when compared to the huge expenditure that a failed expatriate assignment can cost the company, it is imperative that human resources personnel pay equal attention to the services and support they offer to repatriating personnel as they do to expatriating employees.

Do not be disillusioned: repatriation is more commonly referred to as reverse culture shock. Expatriate author Robin Pascoe puts it thus: "Repatriation is like when you feel like you are wearing your contact lenses in the wrong eye, everything looks almost right."

### **How to help them re-adjust**

There are a variety of positive strategies companies and parents can adopt to make the teenage repatriation process less daunting, and the total family repatriation a more positive experience.

For example, while overseas the TCK may have been following the International Baccalaureate system and wish to continue on their return. Research educational facilities in the area to which they are returning, providing a list of options, specialist subjects and costs that enable the student and family to build up a portfolio of options.

- Provide information and supporting manual to both the parents and teenagers before they leave on their posting. Research the country and the school the teenager will be attending thoroughly, in particular highlighting services the school may provide such as counsellors and voluntary activities.
- If the student is returning to study at university, if possible arrange a visit back for the student to do a familiarisation tour of several of his/her university choices. These University visits let the student to experience first-hand the location, facilities and local community, enabling them to explore whether the specific university matches their individual requirements. This preparation will enable the student to be better informed and make an informed decision.
- As with expatriation, provide the repatriating family with a pack of useful information and addresses such as schools, shops, leisure facilities and clubs. A useful addition to this pack is

an appointed contact within the organisation who is responsible for liaising with the family in the event of any difficulties.

- Provide guidelines for returning potential university students, including approximate costs of tuition, accommodation and entitlements.
- Set up a support network between families/adolescents who have recently repatriated and those who are in the process of repatriating.
- Provide a list of useful books, websites and contacts of expatriate coaches and other professionals.
- Pay for/ or make a contribution towards the cost of a repatriation programme for the TCK.
- Farnham Castle, the international briefing and conference centre in Surrey, UK, runs a unique programme for repatriating families and teenagers. Marketing Director Jeff Toms says the programme is popular and necessary because repatriating with teenage children is particularly difficult, especially if they have been away for a long period or have been living in a dramatically different culture. "Unhappy children almost certainly mean an unhappy homecoming," he said.

Remember, 90 percent of TCKs choose to return to expatriate life, and if the needs of today's TCKs are acknowledged and provided for, the companies are well ahead in laying foundations for the guaranteed success of their future expatriate workforce.

Marian Weston / Expatica

*Marian Weston is a qualified and experienced career coach who specialises in working with students and women returning to work who are unsure of their career options. Having lived and worked overseas for many years, she adds a personal touch to her advice by drawing on her own experiences. Marian recently co-founded Me, Actually, a business dedicated to helping women achieve their full professional potential.*