

Third Culture Kids: Repatriation

The phrase, 'going home' evokes strong and very individual 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 nomadic parents happen to be living at that moment.

Third Culture kids are raised in a culture that lies somewhere between their parents native culture and that of the country where they are based. They develop some sense of belonging both to their host and passport cultures, but do not have a sense of total ownership in any culture, hence when asked the question where are you from, they often respond with a question. Do you mean where I was born or 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 TCK's 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, some examples are: using public transport, managing money and having a holiday job.

A recently repatriated 15 year old TCK from Islamabad to Ireland describe his reactions to repatriation. 'Everything was different the culture and the people. 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/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 personnel responsible for their repatriation understand that these emotions are very real and frightening and should not be allowed to go unrecognized.

How to help them re-adjust

Although in recent years there has been much wider publicity of expatriate issues, still too few international companies are making positive inroads and realizing the importance of acknowledging and including spousal and family issues when making expatriate decisions.

Research by the Harvard Business Review, March-April 1999 found that a fully loaded expatriate package including benefits and cost of living adjustments can be anywhere from \$300,000 to \$1 million annually, probably the single largest expenditure most international companies make on any one individual except for the CEO. Their research also found that between 10-20% of all US

managers sent abroad returned because of job dissatisfaction or difficulties in adjusting to a foreign country.

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, not included in this is are the ongoing negative effects to the company, of lost business, bad public relations, and dissatisfaction among employees in the foreign posting.

Therefore it is imperative that human resource personnel pay equal attention to the services and support they offer to expatriating personnel as they do to repatriating personnel. 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.

Do not be disillusioned, repatriation more commonly referred to as reverse culture shock, aptly described by expatriate author Robin Pascoe, 'repatriation is like when you feel you are wearing your contact lenses in the wrong eye, everything looks almost right'.

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

1. Provide information and supporting manual to both the parents and teenagers before they leave on their posting. Having already well researched the country and the school the teenager will be attending, in particular highlighting services the school may provide such as counsellors, voluntary activities available etc.
2. Provide questionnaire to be completed pre-assignment, detailing education, interests etc., and following up on this information during the assignments and several months before repatriation to check that information on file is still current. For example whilst overseas they may have been following the International Baccalaureate system and wish to continue on their return. Research educational facilities in the area they are returning to, providing a list of options, specialist subjects, costs etc. enabling them to build up a portfolio of options.
3. Provide guidelines for returning potential university students, approximate costs of tuition, accommodation, entitlements etc.
4. Set up a support network for contact between families/adolescents who have recently repatriated to those who are in the process of. Repatriating.
5. Provide list of useful books, websites and contacts of expatriate coaches and other professionals. .
6. Pay for or make a contribution towards the cost of a repatriation program for the TCK.

Companies would be well advised to remember that 90% 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 advanced in laying foundations for the guaranteed success of their future expatriate workforce.

Athena Group International provides families and their children with a comprehensive repatriation program. Our Youth curriculum is designed for ages 5-8, 9-12, and 13-18. All programs are up to 6 months in length, providing both parents and youth with ongoing support as they begin the process of repatriation.

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