

# To Move or Not to Move. . .

## A Decision-Guide for Families Contemplating International Relocation

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### Why We've Prepared this Guide

This guide draws on decades of experience and research to acquaint you with the accumulated wisdom of those who, like you, were offered (or whose spouse or partner was offered) an opportunity to live and work abroad...and who answered "Yes!"

Decades ago, when a job abroad was offered to someone by his employer, he almost always accepted it because it usually meant higher pay, a step up the hierarchy ladder, or an overseas adventure...or all three. The impact on his family rarely was considered.

It took a long time, but now we know how important it is to take into full consideration the needs and concerns of all family members. We know this because of the anecdotal accounts of distress, and of early returns home, that began to surface. We also know this because of the accumulated reports by social scientists who have studied the expat experience. The reports describe in detail the substantial impact on *all* family members of living and working abroad – frequently beneficial and memorable, but occasionally detrimental.

Now we know how to support potential expats as they consider the factors that might make this a good time – or *not* a good time – for the family to undertake an international relocation. We know how important it is to explore how relocation might affect each family member. And we know the importance of having realistic expectations about living abroad.

### How This Guide Can Be Helpful

This guide will facilitate your decision-making about whether or not, within the near future, to relocate internationally. Equally important, it will facilitate discussions between you and your spouse or partner about this life-altering decision. If you have children who would be coming with you, you might also wish to involve the older ones in thinking things through.

#### **The purpose of this guide is to help you to...**

- adopt more realistic expectations about the benefits, and the challenges, of relocation;
- listen accurately and compassionately to each other's views, and *for* each other's emotions;
- ask more targeted questions and have a better sense of how and where to find answers;
- create a "clearing" in your own life, and in your family's life, for making an informed decision;
- decide *whether now is a good time in your lives* to embark on an international relocation.

*What, for you, are the largest **unknowns** that must be explored before a decision can be made?*

*What do you currently see as the biggest non-career-related **benefits** from this relocation?*

If you have no children, or if they already are independent adults, please skip this section.

## **Thinking about Children**

For starters, in general, children tend to be more adaptable than adults. Because they're so much younger, they are less set in their ways, less wary of unfamiliar experiences. In the long run if not necessarily quickly, it's easier for them to fully adjust to new circumstances.

*If your children know that you might relocate, what emotions are you picking up from them?*

*What do you see now, as the potential long-term benefits for your children if you do relocate?*

*What do you currently see as the most difficult challenges for your children if you do relocate?*

*To what extent (if any) do you see your children contributing to your decision-making process?*

## **Concerns Your Children Might Have**

Your child definitely will have concerns about the possibility of a relocation. Except for very young ones, a major move is a huge unknown. Younger children have more circumscribed, concrete worries: "What's going to happen to my gerbil? Can we take along all of my dolls?"

Older children's concerns are broader and can carry an emotional wallop. For teenagers, a move can seem catastrophic, for this is the age when they are forming deep relationships with friends, including with boyfriends or girlfriends. They may have difficulty imagining that they'll be able to live without a daily dose of *these* friends. Many worry about being able to make new friends after they move. If they're immersed in the college admissions scene, they might see a move abroad as jeopardizing their chances to get into the schools they especially favor.

Some concerns might be affected by factors other than family preferences. For example, airlines have rules about animals on board; some nations have long quarantine requirements. Some concerns might be overblown: Colleges, for example, are experienced in dealing with applicants abroad, and international living might make your child a *more* attractive candidate.

Friends? Well, these days there are many options for keeping in touch with friends who are separated by time and geography. Opportunities for visiting back and forth can be explored. (By the way, experience shows that many children make friendships abroad that gradually eclipse the ones back home.)

If you can take your children to visit the likely new city or town, some of their – and your – concerns might become resolved, replaced by more realistic concerns – *and* by awareness of new opportunities. And/or you might have acquaintances with children who currently live, or recently lived, there and can share their experiences and insights. In addition, your company might be able to put you in touch with people who can help you address specific concerns.

### **Concerns Your Children Might Not Be Expressing**

At least as important as your children's stated concerns are those that remain unspoken. After the children know that relocation abroad is a possibility, you might find them becoming more emotionally volatile. You might be on the receiving end of uncharacteristic negative outbursts (after all, *you* are the one who initiated this idea). These emotions are normal. Child specialists are more concerned about the child who says, "everything's fine" than the one who goes through a period of upset!

*How can you begin to unearth, and respond to, your children's unspoken concerns and fears?*

*Might your children more readily share their feelings via artwork, dance, music, drama, or poetry?*

*How might any of your own unspoken anxieties about this decision be affecting your children?*

*To what extent do you feel it is appropriate to share your concerns and fears with your children?*

### **Concerns You Might Have on Behalf of Your Children**

Parents contemplating any kind of relocation naturally worry about how the change could affect their ability to care for their children. This is especially true if a child has special needs.

Health care for their children is at the top of most parents' list of concerns, including both routine pediatric care and the availability of emergency services. (Inevitably, health insurance becomes a major topic, too.) Another item on every parent's list is education, which has many facets that can make its resolution rather complicated.

Often, there is no quick way to find answers. Each family is different and has different ideas about the type of school, curriculum, and educational ambiance that would be good for their child. Phone calls, web searches, and other explorations can point you towards educational options. Networking with parents who are already living where you may be moving, and have children in the schools that seem appropriate to you, can help you begin to understand the pros and cons of each option. Perhaps nothing is better than visiting these schools to observe, ask questions and speak with parents whose children go there or recently went there. Gradually, you'll put together a picture of each option that will help you decide.

Some parents worry that moving to an unfamiliar home, school, community, and culture will prove overwhelming for one or more of their children. This might be true of a few children. But most children do not remain "overwhelmed" for very long, so these concerns tend to dissipate. This is especially true if you're able to talk with your children about the details that affect them, and the emotions that they're feeling. They'll also be shaped by *your* evolving emotional state.

*Regarding your children's **healthcare**, what are the most important questions you need to have answered before you make your go/no-go decision? What is a key step to finding the answers?*

*Regarding your children's **education**, what are the most important questions you need to have answered before you make your go/no-go decision? What is a key step in finding the answers?*

*Regarding your children, what is **another matter of high importance** that you need to resolve before you make your go/no-go decision? What is a key step in finding the answer?*

### **Hopes You Might Have on Behalf of Your Children**

If, up to now, you haven't thought much about the benefits that your children might gain as a result of living and going to school in another country and culture, that's understandable. But now that we've thought about some of the possible concerns and challenges for kids moving abroad, it's worth mentioning that decades of experience and research reveal important and lasting benefits for children of living in another culture.

We'll have more to say about this at the end of this guide, where you will find a list of "Benefits for All Family Members of a Long-Term Expat Assignment." Meanwhile, try to recall conversations you've had with people who grew up in two or more cultures. With few exceptions, they credit many of their valued skills and qualities to their rich international experiences!

*What is an admirable character trait that might be strengthened by your children's living abroad?*

*What is a skill or ability unknown to your children now, but that perhaps could be acquired abroad?*

### **A Resource for Children's Support If You Decide to Say "Yes"**

For over two decades, GROVEWELL has been conducting specialized programs for children as young as 5 years old. These "Youth Programs" are very well received by parents and children alike. To learn more about this opportunity, visit <https://www.grovetwell.com/expatriate-competence/> and click on the option about "Programs for Spouses and Third Culture Kids of All Ages."

## Your Spouse or Partner

Anecdotal accounts and research consistently reveal that the employee's spouse or partner is "the key to the success of the international assignment." At the same time, the spouse faces many well-known challenges that the other family members don't share.

Consider these facts: Employees (i.e., the assignees) will have a new job to keep them busy and provide ready-to-develop relationships with colleagues and others. School-age children will have a school to keep them busy, where they'll gradually make new friends. But an assignee's spouse or partner very often has no obvious place to go each day, and few ready-made opportunities to initiate new relationships.

The subsections directly below are addressed to "you," meaning the spouse or partner.

### You, The Spouse: What Will You Do?

You might have very young children to take care of, and/or older children to pick up after school and go places with. Some expat couples deliberately use the opportunity of being abroad to begin or expand their family. But even if these activities are likely for you, it doesn't often solve the main problems, which largely revolve around loneliness and difficulty becoming usefully – and socially – engaged with other *adults* (if not necessarily gainfully engaged).

Here are several potential opportunities that have been tried with success by many of the spouses and partners who have preceded you abroad. You will notice that, inevitably, there is some overlap among these categories. Do any of these opportunities interest you?

- Working full- or part-time, depending on the laws of the country you would live in.*
- Formal studying, such as pursuing a degree or certificate at a local university.*
- Professional or personal self-development, such as being mentored by a local expert.*
- Volunteering or internship possibilities, which could also result in professional growth.*
- Developing a long-desired talent, such as photography, playing an instrument, etc.*
- Becoming involved with an organization that supports the expatriate community.*
- Becoming involved with a religious, cultural, or social organization of some kind.*
- What other opportunities might interest you?*

When expat assignments fail (meaning that the family returns home early) or the assignee becomes noticeably less productive at work, the most common underlying reason is dissatisfaction of the spouse. This is especially true among spouses who had a fulfilling job back home or were engaged there in other adult activities. So it's especially important that your go/no-go decision-making carefully considers the new opportunities and changed roles that await *you* abroad.

## On Whom Will You Rely?

The assignee will have a ready-made support network on the job, people to whom he or she can direct questions, requests, complaints, and with whom he or she can develop relationships.

You also will need people on whom you can rely – people other than your spouse or partner. Here are several potential sources of support that have worked well for those who have preceded you abroad. Again, there is inevitably some overlap. Do any of these support opportunities interest you?

- Local national acquaintances and new friends (who can be valuable “cultural bridges”).*
- Other locally based expatriates, from your home country and from other countries.*
- Organizations specifically for the support of expats, which can be found on the web.*
- Locally based clubs such as university clubs, which often have a wide range of facilities.*
- Local social, religious, sports-focused, or volunteer organizations.*
- Support opportunities for spouses and partners provided by your company.*
- Family and friends back home (although they might not understand the local culture and could therefore offer advice that isn’t appropriate within your local context).*
- What other support opportunities might interest you?*

## You, the Assignee: This All Started With You

Your company offered you the option of working in another country and culture. You were open to this possibility, perhaps even excited about it, so you’re now considering with your family members whether you should actually do this. But this process isn’t only about them. It’s also about *you*. Is now a good time in *your* life to relocate abroad?

We’re not going to address your professional and career concerns here. If you thought that the job abroad was a career setback, you wouldn’t even have considered relocating. This guide addresses concerns to which many expat candidates often pay too little attention.

The subsections below are addressed to “you,” often meaning you *and* your spouse or partner.

### You, the Couple

If your relationship as a couple is strong and tested, then in all likelihood an overseas experience will strengthen these bonds. However, some couples openly – or maybe not so openly – hold somewhat unrealistic expectations about their move overseas. They assume that the adventure of relocating to a new country will rekindle their romance. In a similar frame of mind, some

newlyweds think it will be wonderful to begin their lives together in an exciting new location. These assumptions are not upheld by either anecdotal experience or research into expatriation.

The explanation is simple: Living and working in an unfamiliar culture introduces individuals to unforeseen challenges, many of which are perplexing, frustrating – *and stressful*. If a relationship already is under stress, or is a relatively new relationship, adding multiple additional stressors will not be a good way of strengthening or repairing it. Take a long overseas vacation instead.

### **People Beyond Your Nuclear Family**

Your nuclear family is extremely important, but it's not your only valued human tie. You have an extended family. You have close friends (with whom you might be closer than you are to your extended family). Regarding these people, ask ***“Is a close friend or extended family member...***

- now relying on my frequent in-person assistance?”*
- currently in precarious physical or mental health, or likely to become so?”*
- imminently facing a crisis of a kind that would require my in-person support?”*

If either of you answered “yes” to any of the above, then take this situation into account as a significant factor in your go/no-go decision-making.

### **Other Issues to Take into Account**

You've probably already given at least preliminary thought to how you would deal with your house or apartment, and with pets and personal possessions, if you decide to relocate.

Have you given as much thought to the federal tax implications of living and working abroad? Since the 9/11 attacks in New York, the Internal Revenue Service has dealt in a severe manner with expats, who've been loudly complaining about this for years. We suggest finding a specialist in international taxation to inform you about these matters *before* you make your decision.

Finally, look into the future as best you can. Is anything likely to come up in the foreseeable future such that you'd be hugely inconvenienced if you were on the other side of an ocean? For example, might there be an important legal, financial, or property-related problem or opportunity that would be far more easily dealt with from your usual home base? If “yes,” then perhaps now is not the best time for you to relocate abroad.

*Other people and issues that we probably should be taking into account before deciding are...*



## Previous Expats Reflect on Their Relocations

“It was an experience of a lifetime! It was truly difficult and challenging, but I wouldn’t trade it for anything else.”

“I honestly feel as if my mind has expanded. I met so many new and different types of people! I’ve seen and done things I would never have experienced if we hadn’t moved.”

“Even though I’m the primary caretaker of our kids at home, I felt doubly lonely after we moved because the kids were out all day, my spouse was traveling more than ever before, and I had no family or friends to talk to or hang out with.”

“One of the best things that’s come out of our time abroad is how much closer our family became.”

“Going to a new school was a shock to me, because the expectations of the teachers were so much higher than what I’d been used to. Several classes were way ahead of where my classes at home had been. I had to double my effort. But when I returned, I was at the top of my class!”

“As the expat, I am traveling even more than I did at home. I felt as if I was missing out on so much – my kids growing up and changing, and my being more of a companion for my spouse.”

“Sometimes I was full of doubts as to whether we’d made the right decision. There were so many changes happening all at the same time. I sometimes forgot to look at the bright side of what this is doing for me and my family.”

“I came to really like my new high school, and my constant exposure to other kids who were unlike my friends back home. It was all very exciting. I couldn’t easily return to the community we used to live in. My former high school friends now seem unworldly and boring.”

“I was really sad about leaving our dog behind. He was my best friend. It took me a while to begin making new friends at school.”

“We became very concerned because one of our kids was having difficulty fitting into his new school and making friends. In the end it worked out OK, but it required lots of angst and effort.”

“While I had heard that people there were more reserved than at home, I made some new friends rather quickly. I appreciated the fact that relationships were taken seriously, and I looked forward to deepening several friendships with the local people whom I had met.”

## Benefits for All Family Members of a Long-Term Expat Assignment

Here are some of the benefits – increased abilities – that research and anecdotal accounts often mention as a result of one’s living and working in a new culture.

### Greater ability to...

- see situations and issues from more than one perspective.
- empathize; that is, sense how an event appears and feels to someone else.
- tolerate behaviors and ideas significantly different from one’s own.
- recognize advantages and disadvantages of one’s home culture and society.
- express personal opinions in a clear yet non-threatening manner.
- cope more calmly with ambiguity and with unfamiliar contexts and settings.
- know and understand yourself, i.e., your deep values, strengths, and limitations.

*How else do you think your family might benefit if you do decide to relocate abroad?*

## A Resource for You If You Decide to Say “Yes”

For over two decades, GROVEWELL has been conducting specialized coaching for expatriates and their spouses or partners. Known as “Cross-Cultural Adaptation Coaching,” these programs are conducted by coaches who are intimately familiar with the host culture. In some cases, a half day of coaching occurs before the family leaves home, then a second half day occurs after the family has settled-in abroad. In other cases, a full day of coaching is provided after they’ve settled-in.

GROVEWELL’s coaching is distinguished by focusing on *values* as the drivers of the behavioral differences between the home and host cultures, and by addressing the coachees’ expressed and unexpressed needs and desires. Coachees expand their capacity to *learn how to learn* on their own so that, after our coaching, they can continue to adapt and begin to thrive abroad.

To learn more, visit <https://www.grovetwell.com/expatriate-competence/> and click on the options for “GROVEWELL’s Cross-Cultural Adaptation Coaching” and “Our Expatriation Process.”



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