

# Raising Children Abroad

## Inspiring a Generation

It's no surprise that Londoners – both native-born and those who are amongst the thousands who have adopted the city as their own – are still basking in Olympic glory. Expatriate families whose postings to the UK, by some fortunate twist of fate, coincided with the London 2012 Olympics were handed a big 'added-value' benefit to their assignments. Many re-arranged their usual summer holiday travel routines to enable their children to be in London in order to participate in what many have described as the best Olympics ever. Those who heeded the

doomsayers and fled have been heard expressing their regret at their exodus from the golden Olympic City.

'Inspiring a Generation' was an 'inspired' choice of slogan offered by LOCOG (the official Olympic organising committee) that authentically captured the emotion and excitement that touched many of us, including our children, and also permeated the Olympics and the Paralympics. Starting with the ingenious torch relay, expatriate families and their children living in every part of the country had the opportunity to witness first-hand the passing of the Olympic flame. While Danny Boyle's creative and wonderfully eccentric Opening Ceremony was quintessentially British, many expatriates in Britain were nonetheless able to appreciate its depiction of the value our host country places on iconic institutions such as the NHS and Great Ormond Street Children's Hospital, Shakespeare, the Industrial Revolution, and an aging Paul McCartney. Some expats here were called upon by relatives overseas to explain why everyone in Britain was so worked up about Boyle's production with its rising Victorian chimneys, and nurses, doctors and children jumping on hospital beds. The significance of having David Beckham (who failed to make the cut for the national football team yet was an early champion of the London 2012 bid) escorting the Olympic flame in a speedboat down the Thames, and why a 5-second clip of HRH and Daniel Craig made the Jubilee-saturated public adulation of the Queen even stronger, were concepts whose subtleties were appreciated by expats living here that did not necessarily resonate with the wider world. In understanding the nuances of these wonderfully British Opening and Closing Ceremonies, expats were made to feel as though they had reached another stage of 'belonging and acceptance' here in Britain. The warm welcome provided by the Olympic Gamesmakers and Ambassadors was noted by many expatriates who tend to subscribe to the stereotypical image of the Brits as reserved and 'stand-offish'. The volunteers were inspiring, as was the public's insatiable appetite for the Olympic and Paralympic athletes themselves. To have witnessed all this as local residents gave expats a place of privilege. The Olympic legacy is yet to be judged, but there is every reason to believe that London 2012 will live up to Lord Coe's promise to 'Inspire a Generation'.

Reflecting on this powerful statement, I have thought about the experience of our 'third culture kids' (TCKs) – defined as children who are spending a significant part of their developmental years outside of their passport country/ies or their parents' passport country/ies because of a parent's occupation.

Is it too much to say that this experience of international mobility can 'inspire a generation' of TCKS? I think it can, and it does, if everyone involved is looking at it with the right perspective.

Over the years working with expatriate families as an educator in international schools, I have encountered many people who regard the whole 'children' element of international mobility as a chore, even dare I say, a 'problem' on a tick list of tasks that must be managed to enable the international move, normally precipitated by a strategic decision to move Employee XX abroad. Everyone agrees that the objective of most international transfers is to get Employee XX relocated and productive asap, and then the list of 'to do's' follows: sort out remuneration package, apply for work permits, deal with spouse – normally the wife, though this is changing (will she/he even want to come?, does she/he need a job?, must we provide a spouse incentive?), children (find schools, heavy ticket cost or do they go 'local?'), pets, find accommodation, furniture (ship, or store and hire locally), etc. How many parents or employers or HR/relocation professionals ever begin thinking about the transfer of a family away from the familiar and known home patch to a country like Great Britain as, 'Wow, here is a life-changing terrific opportunity to inspire this child to change the world'? How many expat employees think, 'a key goal in my career development strategy is to get an overseas posting so my children can have the life-changing experience of living in a new culture?'

And yet for the child who, granted, is a significant factor in the 'to-do list' (the accommodation has to take into consideration the needs of the child – bedrooms, play room, garden, the cost of the school which and health-care factored into the remuneration package, locating the school often influences the housing options), this experience can be amazing and life changing and the making of them! And part of this is down to approaching the experience with the right outlook.

Research tells us about the advantages gained by the Third Culture Kid experience. TCKs often develop unique characteristics and qualities that potentially give them great advantage in the world they will inherit. TCKs can learn to adapt and manage change, they become open-minded through their exposure to many different and new ways of doing things. TCKs can become tolerant and non-judgmental by meeting people of diversity whose customs and thinking they may not totally agree with but that they can nonetheless understand. TCKs can become excellent bridge-builders and negotiators as they learn to see many points of view. TCKs can become excellent communicators, particularly if their

international childhood exposes them at an early age to languages other than their own, and if they have the good fortune to become bilingual or multilingual there is research that shows that this leads to strong cognitive and reasoning skills, greater economic advantage with better incomes, and a better chance at avoiding the onset of brain-degenerative conditions such as Alzheimer's in old age! TCKs can become more globally-aware and politically-astute having been raised in different countries and interacting with people from many national systems of government. TCKs can become highly sensitive to the misfortune of others, and research shows that many go into aid work, diplomacy, or become teachers.

Of course, this is not always the case, and there are challenges to address: learning to make friends and to say goodbye to beloved people and places, changing to new schools and curricula, adapting to new cultures, languages and ways of doing things, living far away from grandparents and family members, losing the familiar, and a struggle to 'fit in' with others from your own country.

But conventional wisdom suggests that the more we know and understand about TCKs and the more that we equip them with the

skills to manage their transient and portable childhoods, the better chances the positives will overcome the negatives and result in possibilities for an adult life that they may have never otherwise imagined or foreseen. 'We' means it is a collaborative effort, parents, educators, sponsoring organisations that are responsible for the transfer, and anyone supporting the family in the process. The late Dave Pollock who devoted his life to the study and support of TCKs, once described TCKs as the 'prototypes of the citizens of the 21st Century'. (He said this during the last quarter of the 20th century.) He recognised that the unique skills and characteristics that TCKs develop would enable them to cope in a future world where one of the few predictable features would be the increasing pace of change.

The number of children living these international lives is growing incrementally each year. If local international school enrolment figures are anything to go by, the number of internationally-mobile children in the UK continues to increase despite the current economic climate. It is exciting to reflect on how our expatriate children who were fortunate to witness first-hand these summer Olympic and Paralympics will have been inspired. Their

understanding of the importance of sport, and their attitudes and empathy toward the disabled may have been transformed for life. The unleashed public enthusiasm for unconditional celebration of the successes of athletes of other nations, even 'enemy states', may serve our young TCKs as they inherit a world that faces inevitable future conflicts. There is no doubt in my mind that, if the TCK experience is properly supported, the experience of a childhood abroad will continue to 'inspire a generation'. ■

*Mary Langford is a London-based independent education consultant with more than 30 years' experience specialising in the area of international school placements and supporting families, TCKs, and school with the transition process. Her Master's research at University of Bath centred on how international schools respond to internationally-mobile pupils.*

*Mary is presenting a seminar on Third Culture Kids - Raising Portable Children, at The 2013 Corporate Relocation Conference & Exhibition on Monday 4th February 2013 at Hotel Russell, Russell Square, Bloomsbury, London. This is free to attend. To register please email: helen@theamericanhour.com.*

  
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