## Is it a good idea to teach overseas with children in tow?

When asked whether it’s a good idea to teach overseas with children, the answer is “Yes, but with reservation.” That’s not in any sense meant to discourage families from the countless professional and cultural experiences available after signing a teaching contract but merely to caution that taking children with you overseas requires even more vigilance than usual to make sure that the ‘fit’ is not only right for you but for your child/ren also.

Papua New Guinea was our first experience of teaching with a child in tow and like most places you settle in, there were ‘swings and round-a-bouts’ with living and working in this country. Prevailing memories are all positive with rich and colorful events, places and people to enjoy and explore; the images I carry around in my head, a vibrant collage of greens, blues, earthy ochres and reds, broad smiles, brown babies with doe eyes gathered over 10 years, are nothing short of precious. Having my two little girls on this journey, one arriving in the country at 2 years and the other born while in our first three year contract, deepened the experience and heightened the joy because you lived each new adventure, embraced each new situation both personally and through the eyes of your children. Not to mention the endless encounters you have with local people drawn naturally through curiosity and kindness to small children. And trust me, the acts of kindness were overwhelming..but that’s another story!

We did our homework before signing the contract and were well aware of the health and safety considerations that were just as real then as they are today. Still, we were young with a formidable sense of yearning for change and adventure; despite the risks we felt up to task of keeping both ourselves and little ones safe from harm. With the single most cause of infant mortality being malaria at the time, we were particularly well armed with research and medications to combat the scourge. Still, both daughters managed to contract Malaria and it was the deciding factor for leaving this wonderful country when our youngest daughter suffered four bouts in a six month period. We were not alone, many other parents had made the decision to accept an employment package that included their dependents. The country at the time was a melting pot of expatriates drawn by a sense of adventure, missionary zeal or the lure of a strong kina and attractive employment packages.

1 At the Port Moresby Market

What can often be a deciding factor in the choice/motivation to teach abroad with children is whether the choice is actually yours or imposed on you. Parents who willingly move to another country, have been part of the process of choosing where they live and work, have accepted the challenges and are hard-wired to overcome them with grace and humor will have a positive experience, no doubt about it! So too their children. On the other hand, parents for whom a move is imposed for whatever reason have felt obligated to move to a country they would not necessarily have chosen as a work and living environment, may not ever really settle; the same can definitely be said of their children. If you are taking children overseas with you, make sure that you, as adults are going to be happy in that situation, that you are going to make an effort to settle and enjoy a new cultural, living and working environment and that you speak positively about the move, the host country and its people. Your attitude will ‘rub off’ on your children and it will make or break the experience for them.

Teachers are often concerned about whether their child will suffer academically, socially and emotionally by taking them away from extended family, established community networks, schools and friends. This is a legitimate concern and there is no one answer. A great deal depends on the ages of the children, personal qualities of acceptance, tolerance and patience, openness to new ideas and ways of doing things, the ability to reach out to others, find joy in discovery and satisfaction in achievement. All the attitudes and qualities we would expect to find in successful international teachers, we would hope to find in their offspring to make the overseas teaching experience, a truly positive and rewarding one.

Be aware, that when you move with children, circumstances can raise stress levels to near breaking point at times. One instance, when you move from one hemisphere to another the academic year may change. This can cause problems in that your child may have to spend an additional half year at a grade level or in the case of some children, skip half a year. Children can, and do, find this unsettling and it may color their early days in a new country. Tears, tantrums, withdrawal and hostility may be outward signs of real distress. This is when, as a parent you need to dig deep. Your coping skills are being stretched to the max with settling both yourself and your family into a new and very different life. Relocation is not an easy matter; the stresses and strains of transferring a family from one place to another are considerable but even given this, you must remain calm in the face of turmoil as children will be taking their cue from you and their ability to accept situations will much depend on your ability to be composed and provide reassurance in a loving and caring manner.

Given the choice again to take my children with me overseas…would I still do so? Absolutely yes, yes, yes!