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## **Expatriate Children Require Extra Help In Adjusting**

by Cathy Tsang-Feign

*"Sure, I can show off to friends that I'll have lived around the world before I turn twenty. But what do I get? Nothing. No friends, busy parents and no place I feel like home."*

Katy, age 14, relocated to Hong Kong with her family about six months ago. Her father's job requires them to move around. This is the third place they have lived in the last six years.

According to her mother, Katy has been depressed, anti-social and withdrawn for the past two months. During a recent family trip her parents tried to talk with Katy about her feelings, but found it difficult to get their daughter to open up to them. Therefore therapy was sought.

Katy apparently feels hostile towards her parents. She blames them for treating her like merchandise. "They send me here and pay to get me fixed. But they never have time for me or to hear what I have to say," Katy chokes with tears.

After several weeks, mother was invited to join one therapy session. "Of course we care about you, Katy," Mum said. "I thought you enjoy your independence. You know your Dad and I are busy and have to do lots of entertaining. We figured you're old enough and don't want to be dragged along to parties. Therefore we give you money to go out with your friends, and we never question your whereabouts. We thought this would show how much we trust and respect you," Katy's mother explained.

"Sure, I have all the money I need so I can go out and you don't care where I am. At least I won't be in your way and you and Dad don't have to see me or deal with me. I bet you probably never notice whether I'm there or not," Katy said sarcastically.

Clearly there is misunderstanding between mother and daughter. Each tends to see things only from their own perspective. Both feel rejected and unloved.

For most young people, adolescence is the time they begin to find their own identity. Identification with peers is an important part of this process. However, in Katy's case, the frequent relocation deprives her of a stable environment where she can be part of a regular peer group. Each time the family moves, Katy has to start all over again: adjusting to a new environment, new school system and most of all a new group of peers who may or may not

accept her. She feels building friendships is a waste of effort because inevitably the family will move again. The risk of rejection has put Katy in a rather defensive state. So instead of reaching out to friends she turns to her parents for security and comfort.

Without a clear understanding of what she is going through, Katy's parents try to nourish their daughter's sense of independence, with good intentions, by "letting her be on her own". They enjoy living in different parts of the world. They expect Katy to experience the same spirit of adventure. They fail to realise the relocation has far more impact on Katy than they imagine.

Like most parents, they believe children can adapt to new surroundings much faster than adults. Therefore no special attention was given to help Katy adjust to more than just the superficial concerns of currency, customs, etc. Their social involvement and entertaining preoccupy them and leave very little time for interaction with Katy. Feeling alone and uncared for by her parents, Katy reacts with hostility and resentment. Consequently, she retreats within herself.

Katy's case is one of many among expatriate children whose families are transient. In such families both the child and parents experience hurt. One side may blame the other as unloving, while the other side feels unappreciated. Often the problem can be traced to less-than-open communication within the family. The only way to bridge the gap is through direct expression of their feelings rather than making assumptions about each other.

Special effort is needed, especially on the parents' part, to help children adjust to a new environment. Giving them time and patience is the first step. Parents need to resist the temptation of offering money to their children instead of time. In many cases, time, love and affection offered by parents can do their children far more help than therapy.

Parents and children should cherish the precious moments as a family before one side is gone. After all, that event may come sooner than one can imagine.

*The above is not an actual case, but a reconstruction based on actual cases.*

*Cathy Tsang-Feign is an American- licensed psychotherapist based in Hong Kong. She works with individuals and families on problems of stress, marital dilemmas, career pressures, foreign relocation, and other issues. She is the author of the book **KEEPING YOUR LIFE, FAMILY AND CAREER INTACT WHILE LIVING ABROAD.***

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