

How to Ensure a Positive Adjustment to Shanghai for Your Family

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An international assignment can be a great bonding time for your family and can be very rewarding. Here are some strategies for acclimating smoothly and keeping your family intact while enjoying the adventure.

Communicate

The first thing to acknowledge is that there are aspects that are going to be stressful but that you have each other for support. Open communication will help reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation. Talk to your kids and your spouse about their experience and allow them to express their feelings about what they're going through. Understand that everyone adapts in their own way and some people adapt easier than others. Be prepared to tolerate a potentially negative reaction to the move by your child. If they do have a hard time it's important to validate their feelings.

Keep in Touch

An overseas move takes you physically away from the people who supported you prior to the move. This is a definite loss. You can help mitigate this by maintaining your connection with your support network back home. Skype, email, and blogs are great ways to keep connected. Children also should be encouraged to stay in touch with their friends back home.

Maintain Routine

Maintaining routine in the new environment can help everyone keep their balance. An organized and predictable home environment helps children to feel secure and safe. Try to keep some aspects of your former family routine intact. Whether it's reading at bedtime or family meals, try to continue to do these even though you may feel like you have too many boxes to unpack.

Similarly, if your child was playing soccer or taking karate lessons back home, continuing the same activities here in Shanghai can promote self-esteem and offer social opportunities. With a little effort you can find some version of most kids' activities here through organizations that offer activities for expatriate kids (Active Kidz, Multisport, Sport for Life, and Dulwich Community Programs are just a few.)

Exercise

Exercise is not only a great way to maintain physical fitness and health, but has also been shown to ease symptoms of anxiety and depression, reduce stress, and improve sleep. Exploring your neighborhood on foot can help improve mood while also reducing isolation. Alternatively, ride a bike, take a yoga class, or go to the gym.

Schedule Date Nights with Your Spouse

Going on an international assignment can add lots of stress to a marriage. Your marriage is the foundation of your family. Date night is a great way to foster communication and intimacy with your spouse while exploring Shanghai's bountiful dining options.

Establish a New Support Network

It is important to reach outside the family and develop a new social support network in Shanghai. A support network can help with completing daily tasks (giving advice on where to shop, etc.) and provide emotional support. Having friends reduces stress and isolation. The expatriate community of Shanghai is fortunately large and well-developed, and there are many opportunities to meet new and interesting people. Your kids' school, the working spouse's work colleagues, your housing area, exercise classes, and religious organizations are all great ways to meet people. In addition there are numerous organizations like The American Women's Club, Brits Abroad, The Shanghai Expat Association,

and the Community Center. These organizations all plan numerous activities including interesting tours and classes and less formal coffees and nights out.

It's especially nice to get to meet people who arrived around the same time as you because there is a developmental cycle of expats (like an informal college campus) and people who arrived the same time as you will be more or less in the same phase of adjustment and also similarly eager to make new friends (whereas expats in their 3rd year may be preparing to move on and be less interested in making new friends). On the other hand, you can gain very valuable information from more seasoned expats. They can tell you the ins and outs of life in Shanghai. Don't be afraid to ask lots of questions.

It's also nice to get to know some Chinese people; you're in China after all! One way to meet Chinese people is to participate in activities outside the expat housing areas and expat organizations.

Keep a Positive Attitude

Draw the strength from the stable foundation you've built with your family to savor the good new experiences and weather the frustrations. Remember the reasons the assignment was appealing to you in the first place. Keep in mind that everyone has bad days (there are Shanghighs and Shanglows). On your bad days remind yourself what a great opportunity it is to be living in a foreign city and then make fun of your experience on your blog.

In China things can often take longer than they did in your home country. Sometimes basic tasks like going to the supermarket can become so much more complicated in a foreign environment. Take a deep breath and remind yourself it will get done eventually.

Remember that you're a guest. When you're a guest in someone's house you need to be respectful and accept certain things the way they are (these 1.3 billion people have a 5000 year head start on you).

Take Advantage of What Shanghai and China Have to Offer

Now that you're grounded and hooked in, take chances that step outside of your zone of comfort and familiarity. Learn about your new environment through classes, tours, etc. The community center and other organizations offer a huge array of classes ranging from Chinese painting to cooking and flower arranging. There are also numerous tours designed to increase your understanding of Chinese culture and how to find what you need in Shanghai (market tours,

subway tours, museum tours, etc.) China has a fascinating history and Shanghai is a wonderful international city with great shopping.

Learning Mandarin can also be very beneficial and rewarding. It does really help your confidence when you have basic communication skills. The process of learning the language may be intellectually stimulating as well.

Engaging in pleasurable activities has been proven to boost mood. Even when the move makes your “to do” list very long, it’s important to schedule in some leisure activities. *City Weekend* has a listing of lots of different activities throughout Shanghai.

Working toward a goal can be personally satisfying and can boost self-confidence. If you’ve left behind a job or other responsibilities this can be a great time to try something new. You can learn a new skill, pursue a new career, or seek out volunteer opportunities. I know an accompanying spouse who recently got certified in both yoga and TCM while in Shanghai.

A recent article in the *American Psychologist* illustrated that international assignments have a lasting ability to increase the participants’ creativity. Congratulations on being one of the few who can take advantage of this opportunity. Look for pathways to unleash that creativity and to turn this period of uncertainty and challenge into personal growth. This is the opportunity of a lifetime!

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