

Facebook: an obstacle or aid to expatriate children?

Facebook is a great tool for expatriate families. You can stay in touch with family and friends around the world and across time zones. It also gives family and friends a glimpse into your experiences living in a new country and culture.

Social media can be especially helpful for expatriate children by providing an important source of emotional support as they get to know a new country, culture and language. However, social media and social networking sites can also become an obstacle if your child becomes too fixated on the events and activities he or she is missing back at home. Your child may continue pining for a former life instead of embracing new opportunities in the host country.

Finding community on Facebook

Friends are considered a key element contributing to our happiness. Expatriate children who attend international schools can soon make new friends, but it can be hard to integrate outside of school due to language barriers, cultural differences and (possibly) safety concerns.

On Facebook, it doesn't take much effort to find "friends" and once formed, the "friendship" does not require close connections or even require people to be from similar cultures. A [2011 study](#) found that having a large number of Facebook friends may actually have positive effects on our well-being: "with Facebook visualizing and displaying the 'friends' connections, a large number of Facebook friends could remind users of their social connections and boost their self-esteem."

Another study reported that Facebook evokes positive emotions that can help both adults and children through difficult times. So if your kids feel lonely or alienated in the host country, spending time on Facebook revisiting photo albums or the posts from both old and new friends can provide much needed emotional support.

Smoothing your child's transition

As a rule, younger children integrate into a new community much more rapidly than older children. You can, however, help ease your older child's transition in a number of ways. Try these tips:

- **Limit the time your child spends on social media for the first few weeks.** Looking at familiar people and places that you left behind can trigger increased feelings of homesickness. Stick to email at first to update family and friends, and try to keep that at a minimum.
- **Always speak positively about the change.** Children will quickly pick up from you that you find the experience exhilarating or terrifying. There is nothing wrong with making comparisons but do this in an educational way, not in a, "I wish things were like home" way. This will help the children to see the change as an adventure and something to be excited about.
- **Maintain a sense of normalcy for your children.** Sign them up for their favorite activities – karate, dance, Scouts, soccer – as soon as possible. It will help them make new friends quickly – friends they can add to their Facebook page, in their new environment.

- **Encourage your child to take pictures and post them on his or her page when exploring your new city and country.** Friends back home are bound to post positive comments and ask questions. This can boost your child's enthusiasm for their new location.
- **Embrace new holidays and traditions.** For example, Chinese New Year, Diwali or Cinco de Mayo is all great ways to help your child assimilate into your new host country. In addition, Christmas is celebrated in different ways around the world, which can make the holiday even more exciting to your child, as now they can share their new experiences with friends back at home!
- **Seek help.** If you think you or your child can benefit from additional support to improve resiliency and self-confidence during the transitional process, call your Expatriate Employee Assistance Program and ask to speak with a counselor.

Every child and every situation is different, so be patient. It just takes making one new friend to make a child feel more at home in their new location.

If you have any questions about this topic, or if you wish to discuss a personal situation you may be experiencing, we invite you to contact your Expatriate EAP (EEAP). Contact details can be found on your EEAP brochure or you can call your local operator and request to place a collect call to Canada at 905-886-3605. You will be put in touch with our Care Access Centre who will arrange for help closer to home.