

The Advantages of Teaching Overseas With a Family

NOT LONG AGO I accepted a Fulbright teaching assignment in Estonia, but rather than going for a year by myself, my wife and two young sons accompanied me. One day, my four-year old son had an insightful question: “Daddy, why do Estonians walk so fast?” Being on the “daddy-spot,” I made up an answer as fast as Estonians walk. I said: “They walk fast because it is cold.” I admit, not a creative answer but an answer (which I found out in time) that was partly true. However, my son’s question deserved a more thoughtful answer. His question, which was asked soon after we had settled in Estonia, and how I discovered the more “complete” answer, led me to think of several advantages of traveling and teaching overseas with a family.

It’s Always an Adventure and Never an Ordeal

From airport connections to a fire across the hall in our apartment building, children help you to choose to see traveling and living overseas as a world of wonder rather than as a world of problems and obstacles. It is the questions that kids don’t ask that really highlight this perspective. They don’t ask “Why is it cold?” or “Why is it dark?” in the middle of a Baltic winter. Instead, they say “Wow, that’s pretty cool! The cold makes you do things faster,” and “I like it here because I like walking around in the dark with all the lights.” It definitely helps to be around people (okay, very little people) who think that the combination of cold and dark makes the world a faster and brighter place when living through an Estonian winter.

Cultural Exchanges Happen Instantaneously

The questions and answers of children seem to “break the ice” and make everyone feel at ease. Because my wife and I allow our oldest to choose the clothes he wears, he is sometimes asked about his apparel. Our first cultural exchange occurred the moment that we stepped out of the van from the airport when an employee of the university that I would be working at questioned my son about his green cape and blue-green leotard like clothes: “Cade, are you Superman?”

Cade responded as seriously as a four-year-old can: “No, I am Super Why—with the power to read.” Cade then went on to tell my new colleague all about this PBS (Public Broadcast System) character and all his friends and their spelling and reading adventures. My colleague has not forgotten it, and I don’t think he ever will. From casual acquaintances at playgrounds to waitresses at our favorite local Italian restaurant, I could fill this entire page with similar stories. Different and new ideas seem to be taken much easier by people when it comes from the innocence and sincerity of a child’s words. Who feels threatened by a cultural exchange when it is initiated or prompted by a child?

It’s Easy to Become Part of the Community

Children bring the community to you and you to the community through their schools, playground romps, and doctor visits. In my pre-children travels, my connections with area communities were mostly through my university contacts and experiences. They were all interesting but I wouldn’t call them deep or broad connections. From befriending other parents at parent-teacher functions to sharing “life stories” with Estonian grandmothers at playgrounds, children simply draw you into the community outside regular university-community links. However, even university life is more enriching and fulfilling personally as well

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The Kukk family
in Tartu, Estonia's
botanical gardens

as professionally. In a country where the government is trying to foster more births with very progressive maternity leave policies, I found that having kids is a commonality I share with many of my Estonian colleagues. Colleague-to-colleague discussions are much more dynamic than in the United States because they often include a wide range of personal (e.g., ideas about parenting) as well as professional topics.

Learning as a Family: With Each Other and From Each Other

Learning a foreign language and trying foreign foods is much more fun and entertaining with kids. My four-year-old son and I teach each other something new about Estonia at the end of each week, be it a song or a new word, and my two-year-old simply absorbs it all to the point that we have started playing a game of who has learned more. A family that travels together learns together. From new food to a new language, kids will try something new because, hey “why not?”

The Cure for Homesickness

Wherever Mom and Dad are is where home is for children. My kids, of course, do miss their grandmother, baby-sitter and favorite foods, but they are very happy to be anywhere that their Mom and Dad are. How

do I know? When my two and four-year-old boys spontaneously go up to my wife and/or me and ‘dance-hug’ us while saying “happy day” and “I like Estonia because I get to do cool things,” my wife and I are pretty sure that they are doing okay in the homesick department. The other benefit is that their happiness and contentment helps my wife and I ward off homesickness. My wife and I quickly discovered that as long as we have them with us, home is with us. Traveling with kids has given me a new and very different meaning of ‘mobile home.’ You can take ‘home’ with you wherever you go.

Children Slow You Down So You Can See the World More Clearly

Traveling with children lets you see the world from the ground-up and at a much slower pace than without them. They walk a little slower (to the point of meandering sometimes) and that has helped me to see things that I would normally just walk by. Their questions make me see buildings and people’s actions as something to notice and learn from; the questions, in essence, challenge you to make you see more of what is in front of you. They also provide fun ways to interact with and learn from students about them and their culture. My boy’s “Why do Estonians walk so fast?” question

led me to ask my class of 119 University of Tartu students how they would answer him. As a class, they seemed to revel in talking about an Estonian trait and they came to a consensus on two answers: (1) because it is cold (score one for Dad) and (2) because “walking is a waste of time to get something done so we just get it over with as fast as possible—it is really based on the rational use of time.” As a political economist, that second answer seemed to me to be a reflection of Estonia in general. The country is forging ahead so fast in so many political economic activities it is as if every Estonian is making up for the lost Soviet era by going as fast as they can; a culture of speed. A few weeks after we discussed Estonian speed walking in class, several students stopped me on the street (as they were ready to pass me) to tell me that they discussed my son’s question with friends at a party and that the two answers given to me “are good.” I find it ironic that I have a better understanding about the Estonian culture of speed because I slowed down to spend time with my boys.

I haven’t, of course, discussed the possible future advantages for my kids that are all related to traveling overseas such as the ability to speak multiple languages because I wanted all of those colleagues with kids who are considering teaching overseas to go for it. Don’t listen to those who might say you are crazy to take your kids overseas while teaching or working. I’m certainly not saying that there aren’t any negatives to having children while working overseas; there are, such as a profound amount of luggage. However, I believe that the positives definitely outweigh the negatives. One of my close friends feels as though a child’s thoughts and words sometimes make them appear as little insane adults. Maybe, just maybe, when it comes to traveling and living overseas, kids make it all sane for the real adults. **IE**

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