

Expat Brats:

Fact or Fiction?

Will an upbringing abroad turn your bundle of joy into a spoilt monster or a well-adjusted adult?

Expat brats (noun) – *overprivileged, overindulged, terribly behaved, spoilt little horrors that exude all the self-esteem and precociousness of Paris Hilton on an ego trip.*

The popular stereotype of the expat brat certainly isn't a reputation to be envied. It's the oft-cited aphorism, which has long provided a label-all for those being raised and educated away from their parents' homeland. But is the term an accurate reflection or is it the upshot of a generation misunderstood?

While the perks and privileges of expat life (cheers to a greater disposable income and cheaper home help) undoubtedly give parents a bigger opportunity to pamper and pander to children, brats it need not create. Why? Because when it comes to expat brats, people often neglect to consider their unique upbringing. When venturing abroad many expatriates cite the opportunity to broaden their perspective as one of the plethora of reasons behind their move, but

this opportunity is also afforded to their children who often reap the benefits well into adulthood.

As early as the 1960s, expat children have been given the title Third Culture Kids (TCKs) – undoubtedly a much more favourable term than expat brat. The title relates to how expat children integrate their parents' own cultural upbringing (the first culture) and the new culture of their resident country (the second culture), creating a unique 'third culture'.

According to sociologist Ruth Hill Useem, TCKs possess a valuable vault of cultural understanding, which can be accessed to adapt to numerous situations. "Growing up in the third culture rewards certain behaviours and personality traits in different ways than growing up in a single culture does, which results in common characteristics. 'Third Culture Kids' are often tolerant cultural chameleons who can choose to what degree they wish to display their background."

This theory is also supported in David Pollock and Ruth Van Reken's book, *Third Culture Kids: The Experience of Growing Up Among Worlds*. They site that instead of observing cultures, TCKs actually live in different cultural worlds. As a result, Pollock and Van Reken argue, these

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children develop a sense of belonging “everywhere and nowhere,” which will stay with them throughout their lives.

For many TCKs, returning to their parents’ native country isn’t a visit home but rather a visit to their ‘passport country’. This can often cause some sort of identity crisis, because nothing beyond their passport can define where they come from.

It’s an experience 20-year-old Emily Dundas can relate to after recently returning to the UK after living in Bahrain for 15 years. “When my family came back to Britain it wasn’t just the grey, cold and dismal weather that was a challenge,” she says. “Making friends and socialising with people who seemed to lack education in other cultures and religions was difficult.”

But while Emily feels somewhat of a misfit in her new home, she believes her expat upbringing has not been to her disadvantage. “I may be an expat brat to some, but I think I view life from a pretty amazing platform. My upbringing abroad has made me stronger and given me the ability to pick up skills of communication that my peers who grew up in the UK may never attain or understand.”

TCKs may live a privileged lifestyle, with exotic vacations, home help and private schooling, but the long-term benefits of this upbringing are exceptional and more far-reaching. In an era where skills in intercultural communications, linguistic ability, mediation, diplomacy and the ability to manage diverse challenges are critical, TCKs are probably better equipped than others. According to Ted Ward, author of *Living Overseas*, TCKs are “prototype citizens of the 21st century”.

This kind of cultural sensitivity however, is not necessarily a given. It depends almost entirely on the social interaction of the TCK and their parents with their host country. In expat communities, such as those in Dubai, people are often inclined to stick to socialising with their own nationalities; they send their children to schools that follow specific Western educational models and shop at Western stores. Accordingly, their children’s assimilation with their host country’s culture and people can be stunted or even non-existent.

This lack of integration is where Dubai-based mum of two, Claire Orchard, believes the expat brats can be sorted from the TCKs. “There is some very odd preconception within the expat community

THE TOP 10 PLACES TO GROW UP IN THE WORLD

Good schools, high literacy rate, health care, low crime, quality affordable housing, a desirable climate and quality of life – are the main factors determining how attractive a place is to bring up kids:

1. Norway
2. Iceland
3. Australia
4. Ireland
5. Sweden
6. Canada
7. Japan
8. United States
9. The Netherlands
10. Switzerland

in Dubai that Emiratis don't like mixing with expats. This is wrong. It helps to have local friends to ask for advice, but more importantly, to teach you and your kids about the UAE's culture and traditions. We want our children to understand where they live, to understand the world is full of rich diversity, not to see Dubai later in life as merely an extension of Essex."

For some, cultural integration may seem too simple a line to draw between the common stereotype of the expat brat and the more desirable qualities of the TCK. Can the benefits of living in multicultural society transcend the effects of a sheltered upbringing and privileged lifestyle? Does it prepare the child leaving home for university or the 20-something trying to make their own way in the world for those realities?

Benjamin Brightley, who was raised in Dubai but now lives in the UK, isn't so sure it can. "I can't say I've ever identified myself as an expat brat, but when I came to the UK for university I had a rude awakening. I felt like I had no idea about anything, from how hard working for my own cash would be, to how I could be affected by crime or any of the factors involved with independent city living." The harsh realities that took Brightley completely by surprise were merely day-to-day occurrences for the rest of his classmates who'd grown up in a less-sheltered fashion.

As an expat, imparting a sense of realism to your children as they grow up may seem almost impossible. International news and parental stories may provide an idea outside the expat bubble, but such an idea is often only abstract and is scarcely comparable with the reality they're existing in.

The need for realism was the driving force behind restaurateur, Germaine Giles' decision to return home when she starts a family.

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"I just want my kids to have a sense of reality," she says simply. "I want them to grow up knowing what it's like to have to wait in the rain for the bus and to grow up in a house where they have to do their share of the housework because there isn't home help. I put a lot of my own personal ambition, drive and success down to growing up in that kind of environment. I want my kids to be aware of how hard you have to work to succeed and I worry that expat children too often assume that the privileged lifestyles they enjoy are some kind of entitlement."

While an appreciation of TCKs may not serve to explain away the temper tantrums, riotous behaviour or blinkered view of the world many expat children possess, it may help to place these children in a better position later in life. After all, the 'Third Culture Kid' offers us not just a politically correct term for expat brats, but perhaps also a way to see their exceptional take on the world, and something even to be envied. ●

PERSONALITY TRAITS OF A TCK

- TCKs are four times as likely as non-TCKs to earn a bachelor's degree
- Education, medicine, self-employment and professional positions are the most common professions for TCKs
- TCKs are unlikely to follow their parents' career choices, work for big businesses or the government
- Divorce rates are lower among TCKs than non-TCKs, but they tend to marry when they are older
- Teenage TCKs are more mature than non-TCKs, but ironically take longer to 'grow up' in their 20s
- TCKs may lack a sense of where home is but are often nationalistic
- TCKs are characteristically welcoming of others into their community

● Source: UN Human Development Index

SUPPORT FOR PARENTS IN DUBAI

www.expatswoman.com – an up-to-the-minute information resource run by expat women and mothers. The site features information on education, daycares, summer camps and activities for the kids.

www.easyexpat.com – a comprehensive expat website offering advice and information on everything from the economy to customs and health care. It has a particularly thorough and informative school section.

www.dubaikidz.biz – an online directory of things to do with kids in Dubai. It also offers a monthly newsletter, information on children's clinics and 'Mum2Mum', a directory of meetings around Dubai for mums and their kids.

www.expatsexchange.com – an interactive site that offers advice on such subjects as 'Flying with a Baby'.