

WHAT EVERY FOREIGN SERVICE CHILD WANTS HIS PARENTS TO KNOW

Words of advice were recently expressed by three American foreign service teens at a program sponsored by the Diplomatic Outreach Committee in Washington, D.C. We pass it on for your information and reflection.

Words of advice

1. Take your kids along with you whenever you can — even if kids don't usually go to most places.
2. Be there for your kids. Just, be there. You don't have to say anything, but if you are there and if you are willing and able to listen, the family will thrive.
3. Keep your kids in the same school for the last two or four years of high school. It doesn't matter where you are, but stay there.

The teens spoke of the high points in Foreign Service living. They enjoyed the moving and the new experiences. They found it a tremendous opportunity to learn the language and the culture of the host country. The experience lasts a lifetime.

They were pleased with the close family ties travelling had brought to them.

Yet, it isn't all fun. Foreign Service life has its moments of pain — even for children.

They found it hard to leave places they had come to love and understand. Again, they mentioned the value of parents who were "there" to help them through the moves. "You can get over these pains," they agreed, "but it takes time".

The hardest move of all was back home. They had looked forward to coming back and had anticipated that it would seem like home. But the illusion stopped there. Once in school they found they were no longer that special foreign kid. Their ability to speak the language wasn't winning them the usual fanfare. They had no friends and came to the grim realization that they had no ready-made home after all. They spoke of long nights in their room crying their hearts out. Kids had clicks and they didn't belong. They talked of the ache they carried for a while and the vague subconscious feeling of loss.

In time they began to reach out. They became more accepting of their peers and their peers of them. They did what they had learned to do; they went out and made a place for themselves, just as they had learned to do overseas.

They admit it was awkward to make friends as a teenager. "Teens don't say, do you want to come over to my house and play?" They seem to realize that not only were they coming to a new country, they were coming as different people. The little games of childhood no longer worked for them.

They spoke of the uncanny way they found other international kids and how they tended to feel more comfortable with other transient children.

They also talked about the kids who don't make it and turn to drugs and booze. "Children who are doing well at home do well overseas. Children with problems at one post continue to have problems at the next post." Moving augments, rather than diminishes confusion and emotional pain.

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TEENAGE GIRLS HAVE UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

So concludes the 166 page report done by the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women. Interviews with 150 girls and boys aged 15-19 in five provinces noted that teenage girls in Canada are counting on rosy, ambitious futures without understanding the pressures of juggling marriage, children and a career.

They also have unrealistic expectations of how they would move in and out of the labor force to fit in child-bearing. Some think they can stay out of a job for ten, 15 or 20 years and move right back into the workplace without a problem.

Others expect day care to be a simple matter to arrange and housework a daily activity shared equally with their husbands.

"They have little idea of the realities of adult women today," says Ottawa sociologist, Maureen Baker, the author of the report. More than 75 % expected to continue their education past high school and more than 50 % expected to be established in a professional job by the age of 30. Only 20 % thought they might be housewives at 30, but all said this was only temporary and not particularly desirable.

"Teenage girls need a dose of realism," Baker says, "(but) we have a dilemma about how much of a warning to give because being more realistic about the problems may dampen their aspirations".

Their optimism is in contrast to September 1984 statistics which show that only 8 % of Canadian women are in managerial or administrative positions and one in five live in poverty.

