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From the Expat Blog: The Parenting Challenge of Managing a Child's Sense of Privilege

As children experience luxuries overseas, making sure they don't become entitled



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“You have to be joking,” was my children’s collective response when we moved back to the U.S. and I broached the subject of chores. During three years in Africa, their clothes always magically reappeared in their closets, ironed and folded military-style, all toothpaste gunk almost instantly vanished from their sinks, and putting their dirty plates in the general vicinity of the kitchen was the only effort asked of them after meals.

There is so much in an expat child’s life that screams entitlement: They’ve traveled more of the world at a young age than many adults; they often get to live in lavish homes in ritzy neighborhoods; they get to stay at luxury hotels; they often attend the finest private schools, hobnobbing with that country’s elite.

And yes, they may grow up with a round-the-clock domestic helper who picks their socks up off the floor and carries their backpacks to school. How can we, as expat parents, keep them out of the inevitable expat bubble?

“Expat kids are spoiled, absolutely,” says Miranda Kohler, who lived in Singapore and Sydney with her family of four before returning to their native Canada. But whether they have a sense of entitlement, in her experience, is different and depends on the parents’ general approach to materialism. It is a matter of teaching them the ability to appreciate what they have.

Living in a less-developed country can be eye-opening to children. Perhaps what makes them realize how privileged they are is seeing throngs of people lining up for crowded and unsafe taxis in the scorching sun. Or perhaps it’s the women balancing buckets of water on their heads while carrying babies on their backs.

“It is very easy, particularly if your children go to an international school and socialize only in the international community, for the city or country you are living in to lose its identity,” says Dominique Pohleli, whose South African family of four has lived in Istanbul and Nairobi for several years.

Her solution? Avoid international schools, which are often carbon copies of each other. Instead, find good local schools for your children to attend so that they become immersed in the local culture.

While it's true that many expat children—particularly those of families moved by multinational corporations—grow up in a privileged environment, it's also true that their lives come with tremendous potential for personal growth. “I am constantly reminded of how fortunate I was to have lived abroad when I interact with some of my friends in the U.S., some of whom have only ever left their state a few times,” says Ryka Sehgal, a University of California, Los Angeles, sophomore who grew up in Singapore and only recently relocated with her family to her passport country, the U.S.

Personal growth can also come from the humbling experience of having to start from scratch in a new school, sometimes repeatedly. You experience what it's like to show up at a new school midyear and stand out like a sore thumb; to speak with a funny accent or not understand the language at all; to show up in the summer uniform because that is what your parents bought you, when of course the winter uniform is what everyone else is wearing; to have to compete in a sport you've never even heard of and you're doing it all wrong.

When it came to domestic workers, Ms. Pohleli says she never allowed her children to take household help for granted. “Our rule in the house was, and still is: Keep your room tidy, otherwise it doesn't get cleaned.”

Her children are responsible for setting the dinner table and clearing up, putting the dishes in the dishwasher, and feeding and walking their two dogs as well as cleaning up the garden.

Your biggest challenge may not be getting your children to do their chores, but keeping your helper from doing them first. The housekeepers we've been fortunate to employ all took their jobs seriously, and it was a matter of pride for them to oversee an immaculate house, including the children's bedrooms.

If, like me, you capitulate to your housekeeper while living abroad, at least make sure your children understand that this life of privilege won't last forever. “While we were a bit reluctant to have to wash dishes, sort laundry, and make our beds, we knew it was a privilege to have lived the way we did,” Ms. Sehgal says.

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