



BACK-TO-SCHOOL GUIDE

Transitioning schools can be difficult in the best of circumstances. Moving from an international school to the U.S. will often result in a significant cultural and social change. This can be among the most traumatic - and depending on timing - defining moments for some kids. This practical cultural guide supports parents supporting their children with the move. Please check out our steps to adjusting to a new school from this August 2019 [article](#).

This guide might feel a bit long so we've created an accessible Table of Contents here:

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This Back-to-School Guide was written in collaboration with [ResilientExpats](#) founder, Kim Adams. She specifically works on transitions for families and was invaluable in her advice! Check out her website for more.

CULTURE:

CULTURAL STEREOTYPES:

Americans can be curious, sometimes with a sense of jingoism or naiveté. For kids who've grown up overseas this can be startling if they've never before been (or have limited experience) with kids who are so direct. Kids with foreign experiences are bound to meet one of the following kinds of people:

--Curious but inexperienced - these people ask questions based on stereotypes of where you've been.

--Incurious - these people aren't interested in your story. Usually not a problem, though if you have something to say this can be frustrating.

--Experienced - these people are fun! They ask interesting and insightful questions and can share their own experiences.

--Ignorant/Naive - these people are intrigued, and think they know enough to say things that may feel offensive. It is critical to recognize that this isn't malicious or ill-intended. Try to respond with kindness and generosity without being patronizing.

To prepare your kids, discuss the stereotypes some Americans may have about the country(s) you've lived in. Help your kids develop answers to questions they'll face a lot, such as:

- Where IS that (your country)?
- What was it like (living there)?
- Aren't you glad to be home now?
- Do they talk funny?
- and many versions of this question based on stereotypes they've absorbed from media. Children may imitate accents, make squinty eyes, mock headdress, ask if "they" wear clothes at all, or assume people carry machine guns.
- Did you ride a "name-your-animal" to school?
- Did you miss holidays - Christmas, Independence Day?

In practicing their stories/answers children will also need to look for cues: Is this a time to lay low or to engage? Some people will use the questions to disparage, not from a place of curiosity. Defending another culture or idea can be difficult and isn't really the child's job. Depending on the age of the child they may want to engage and share their experiences. It can help to flag different responses they may receive (tones of voice, hand gestures, body language) to determine what course of action they want to take.

To help your child think ahead in this area, try role playing some scenarios. Pretend to be a teacher or peer, and demonstrate how the same statement could mean different things. For example,

- "Is that how you did it at your old school?"
- Rhetorical questions like "Don't you like America so much better than your last place?"

These could be truly curious invitations, or they could be mocking put downs. These might be good situations to use the Look-Listen-Learn skill.

CULTURAL UNDERCURRENTS IN THE US:

It is possible that you have painted a rosier version of the U.S. than may be reality. Also the U.S., like any other culture, evolves over time. There are some social and cultural norms your child may not have been exposed to and will find difficult to navigate upon their return. Even if they do not express these things, it's worth being on the look out for:

--[Conceptions of Race](#) - what is being said, how it is being said, and what that means for understandings of "normal." How does it compare to what your child grew up around? What does it mean for how they perceive themselves and those around them?

As fair warning, this can quickly get into history and ideas of fairness and justice. These are big, important questions (potentially the most important). Regardless of your child's age, these questions should be acknowledged and discussed. Just use age appropriate language.

(I recently finished "[We are All Completely Beside Ourselves](#)" by Karen Joy Fowler. A college-age woman reflects on her childhood and her struggles with fairness and perception. Adult readers might find it an illustrative narrative without diving explicitly into race. College-bound students may discover some stereotypes about college that they can relate to.)

--[Values Systems](#) - What Americans value and therefore provide feedback on may differ greatly from what your child is used to. Examples include Fashion, Education, Experience, Articulation, Athletic Prowess, Musical ability....

Developing identity is part of growing up. This includes how children see themselves and what is important to them. It includes fitting in.

Be prepared to talk with your children about the differences between their schools. Be honest about the struggles of blending into that new space. This is especially challenging when the school culture is very different from your child's interests.

Consider your child's tendencies, interests, values, and the school cultures s/he has been part of. Compare this to the new school culture. (Try to gain insights

from guidance counselors, teachers, website and publications.) Is there a premium on:

- Being social, intellectual, sports-loving, and "good"?
- Demonstrating rebellion by achieving low scores in school?
- Socio-economic class, demonstrated by clothes worn, transport to school, or vacation/holidays taken?

How will your student mesh with a school with a very different culture?

When talking with your child, be open about your own challenges adjusting. Also provide constructive and optimistic thoughts on how to grow from these experiences.

The movie [Inside Out](#) is accessible to children of all ages. It's about the internal dialogue of growing up, but also captures identity issues associated with moving.

--[Politics](#) - No matter where you go today politics is pervasive and polarizing. Taking a stance for one side or the other could make it hard to blend in. Or it could provide them with a sense of belonging, connection and purpose, and be a help in reintegration.

You may wish to prepare your children for ideas they are likely to encounter. Help them understand how political views can be like popularity contests. Equip them with diplomatic ways to deflect the conversation when desired. Teach them techniques to facilitate understanding between sides when desired.

SCHOOL CULTURE:

When exploring a new school, try to find out about the student body makeup and school culture. Try asking school guidance counselors, teachers, other students and parents, and community residents. You might find connections through a school web portal, or Facebook groups related to the city. Explore topics like:

--Is it a heavily academic culture, is it sports heavy, are music and arts emphasized, are there many after school activities kids engage with?

--How often does the teacher or school have a student from out of the country? What information can you provide to the teacher to help guide your child's transition? What are the challenges for other immigrants or families moving in from far away states?

--Are there other children in a similar situation (returning from overseas)? Are there any families who can help support us / can you help us get plugged in when we arrive? Could we be in contact with any classroom parents, a parent teacher organization/association, or well-networked parents?

--Are there any student leadership, mentoring or role modeling programs in the school? Can they set your child up with a mentor or buddy, and if so, can they be in contact before starting school? Perhaps a teacher could recommend a pen pal for your child.

--In a small school with 1-2 teachers per grade level, you could ask for insights from last year's teacher (who taught your child's cohort recently). Could she or he suggest a few possible friendships? Usually they'll know which kids are a good influence and/or are easy to get to know. Are they aware of community activities children of that age level are involved in?

Most schools in the US will be hesitant to share contact information, but you could ask if they are willing to pass your details on to willing families.

ACADEMICS:

LANGUAGE:

Another issue they will face is using the “wrong” words. Americans tend to be generally less accepting of “foreign” ways than international school students. There’s a good chance your kids have picked up some alternative words from their teachers. Of course you've realized that native English speaking does not mean American English speaking!

To avoid confusion and reduce mocking, try to prep your kids for some vocabulary may encounter at school:

eraser vs rubber

folder vs duo-tang

trash can, dumpster and landfill vs rubbish bin, skip or tip (waste is uncommon)

in line vs queue

faucet or spigot vs tap

parking lot vs carpark

math vs maths

test vs exam

elementary school vs primary school

recess or free period vs break

principal vs head teacher or headmaster

substitute teacher vs supply teacher

student vs pupil

grading vs marking

vacation vs holiday

planner or calendar vs diary or journal

soccer vs football

football vs American football

fries and chips vs chips and crisps

jello vs jelly

napkin vs serviette or tissue

cookie vs biscuit

tennis shoes (or sneakers) vs runners or trainers

swimsuit vs swimmers or costume

sweater or sweatshirt vs jumper
flashlight vs torch
gas station vs petrol station or garage
truck vs lorry
trunk and hood vs boot and bonnet

UNITS OF MEASURE:

Outside the U.S., most children are not taught the Imperial system of measurement. It's a silly convention, we all agree, but sadly it is what it is. Here is a list of things to consider reviewing before the school year. Some accessible activities and online resources to help students understand Imperial units are included below.

- inches, feet, yards, miles *vs* centimeters, meters, and kilometers
- fahrenheit *vs* celsius
- ounces and pounds *vs* grams and kilograms
- gallons, quarts, cups, pints and fluid ounces *vs* liters and milliliters
- dollars, quarters, dimes, nickels, and pennies - units of currency (and their relative sizes) are important to understand.

Preparation Resources:

- >Videos from [Numberock](#) are great and can be accessed on YouTube.
- >This [game](#) allows students (around a 3rd grade level) to measure in both metric and imperial standards.
- >Baking is a great opportunity to practice measurements in all formats!
- >You are probably familiar with [Khan Academy](#), which has both metric and imperial measurement videos and exercises.