

French with tears, fluency and friends.

Ten-year-olds are crossing the Channel and immersing themselves in another tongue.

Hugh Thompson on the language of success.

Rachael Knowland, aged ten, left her farmhouse home in Suffolk and went to live at Mathilde Charlot's home in Normandy for six months. She came back after spending a term at Mathilde's school in France, fluent in French and considerably more confident.

For the next six months, Mathilde was a guest at Rachael's house and spent a term at the local Debenham primary school. Both girls belong to the 50 families a year who, for the past 12 years, have been taking part in the most radical foreign exchange scheme. *En Famille* intends to link not just children, but families.

The organisation was set up in 1978 when Jacques Pinault, an English teacher from Bordeaux whose wife is English, decided that the exchanges took place too late in children's lives and did not last long enough to have an "immersion" effect. He set up an exchange system initially designed for ten year olds, but now available for nine to 12-year-olds.

Eleonora Knowland, Rachael's mother, heard about the scheme from a friend. "It seemed a great opportunity," she says. "I believe it is very important to learn European languages. The sooner you do it, the easier it is. Rachael is very outgoing and her school was approving, so the deal was on."

"We get on so well with Mathilde's family that not only have the two children

spent that first year together but they also spent all last summer together. We have been over to stay with them and next February we are all going skiing. I would like my younger son, Tim, to do the exchange, but he is not interested. Only a certain kind of child can take it."

"Rachael hated the first two months and although I had a few qualms about sending her off, we knew that if it were really bad we could fish her out. In the beginning, she preferred the school to the family because this put her under less one-to-one pressure."

Maria Hurl is the chairman of *En Famille* in England and the deputy head of Tiverton comprehensive in Devon. The organisation, which is non-profit-making, charges £300 for every exchange to cover administration, travel expenses for the agents, telephone bills and a gift to the host school. Families involved pay their travel expenses themselves and their guest's expenses.

Mrs Hearl says: "At present we have 32 children from Britain and ten from Ireland on the scheme. More French than English families are interested. The scheme is not for every child or every family. Some families pull back when they realise that for six months they will be adopting another child who cannot speak English."

"We make everyone interested fill in a detailed form to make them realise what is involved. Every family is interviewed. Some schools worry about the disruptive effect of a small child who does not speak English and may be homesick."

When Alex, Mrs Hearl's nine-year-old son, played host to Bruno from Paris, his teachers at Cowley Moor primary worried about the disruptive element the French child's extra needs would have. "However," Mrs Hearl says, "after four weeks, Bruno started to communicate. In the end the school admitted he was

a joy to have and added greatly to the class environment."

"Three-quarters of the children in the scheme go to state schools. **Some people may think that to send children of that age away for six months is terrible,** but children go to boarding schools when they are eight," she says. "The scheme insists the parents travel with their children. It is all right, if parents, after experiencing the other family's first-hand, take their children home with them, with no exchange having taken place."

One problem is that families do not always maintain contact, but *En Famille* has a scheme that tries to bring 'orphan' families together, so they keep up the connection with the other country. Mrs Knowland says: "We were lucky in that we have a lot in common with the Charlots. We are both farming families and we are very open type of people."

Betty Connors, the Suffolk representative of the scheme, says: "We first heard of it through a cousin who had read about it and sent her daughter. This girl was very allergic and we thought it would be a disaster. In fact, it was a great success."

"So we talked about it with our daughter, Rachel. It all went so well with her that my son, David, is exchanging in September with the same family."

"When I interview interested families, I make sure they are aware of what they are doing. I have five children and work as a child-minder, but I found having a child in the family who spoke not a word of English stressful and frustrating. I could never be sure that I was doing the right thing."

"When Rachel went to France, she was terribly homesick. I found out later that she hardly spoke a single word for her first six weeks in France. Now she speaks French without a trace of accent."

"Maelle, the child she exchanged with, was the opposite. She could not stop trying to talk."

"The only family with which I have been involved that was turned down was because of the school report. This is an important part of the assessment. In this case, the boy involved was very disruptive at his English school, so we did not see how he was going to cope in France."

Chris Bishop, the headmaster of Sir Robert Hit-chams primary school in Debenham, where the Connors and Knowland families sent their children, says: "**For the children who can handle this kind of separation and experience, I must be in favour.** But it is not for everyone."

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Friends without barriers : Rachael Knowland (left) and Mathilde Charlot learnt each other's language.