

### Home from Home

*The golden rule in language learning is that children should be seen and heard; one 'family' business takes this to the extreme, With remarkable results.*

It's tough on the rest of us, but children born of Anglo-French parents are set up for life as linguists - who can honestly say he doesn't envy their lot? Yet the shortcut to success doesn't have to be the privilege of a lucky few, thanks to one well-established, non commercial organisation...

Everyone knows how quickly young children pick up a foreign language if immersed - up to the age of 10 or 11 a child's vocal chords and tongue are still supple and adaptable; there are certain receptors in the brain which are highly sensitive in the first decade of life, and there isn't the self-consciousness which comes with adolescence. Yet to teach children a second language in a school environment seems a slow and often unsuccessful graft.

To learn effectively, children need to be plunged into the language's host culture as young as possible - and for as long as possible. Secondary-school exchanges are fine for a fortnight's holiday, but the law of diminishing returns applies - the trips take place too late in a child's development and for too short a time to have any real effect.

For this reason En Famille, founded in 1978 by language teachers Jacques Pinault and his English wife Katherine, co-ordinate exchanges which last - *tenez-vous bien* - six months!

On hearing this, Monsieur Pinault admits, most parents react with something akin to horror. Sending a young child abroad for so long may sound drastic but, as the name suggests, En Famille children are welcomed into a host home with their own *rejetons* of the same age - usually 8 to 11. These new brothers and sisters will in turn come back across the Channel and spend half a year with the other family.

Children are not just bundled onto a train like evacuees; mum and dad travel with them and stop over a couple of nights to make sure they are happy and settled in the destination home. The organisation takes meticulous care to match both households as closely as possible; don't wait until your child is pushing 12 before enquiring - compatibility research is considered so important that it can last up to two years. The

matching process extends much further than simply asking what the parents do for a living or whether the child is vegetarian - there's no ignoring the question of parental discipline, for instance. A child from a liberal background will find it difficult to fit into a strict domestic regime and vice-versa. Nor must a reluctant child prodded by over zealous parents be mistaken for one who is going willingly - though it must be said that the kids are often more enthusiastic than the adults; perhaps parents don't want to see their babies grow up too soon?

Naturally, there's no knowing how any particular child will react when first lodged with the new family - some experiment with the alien language immediately; others reflect at length before speaking. There is usually a period, initially, where nothing seems to sink in. And yes, there are tears... but homesick blues are fleeting - and as time goes by, the need for Mum's 'Red Cross parcels' diminishes.

Meanwhile, back home, proud but anxious parents find it hard to keep their thoughts from the little wanderer - a flurry of excitement each time a letter arrives with a foreign stamp. Unfortunately, before too long the little tykes even start writing home in French.

Hosts have to be cruel to be kind and are instructed to turn a deaf ear if their guests try to speak in their own language. Children who know they can make themselves understood in their mother tongue don't feel the need to learn the new language quite so desperately. Books and games in the child's own language are quietly banned.

"Inevitably," says Mike Watson, a co-ordinator for En Famille, "Children mature more quickly in such a new and stimulating environment - it is hard work emotionally."

The new member of the family must be treated the same as the other children. Pocket-money, presents, trips etc. all come out of the hosts' wallet or handbag.

Apart from meeting the prospective participants, En Famille contacts the schools involved with an exchange, to allay teachers' (not unnatural) fears that a child's schooling could suffer from the disruption. In fact teachers' reports show that after an inevitable catching-up period, nothing on the syllabus poses a problem and parents have invariably found their fledgling to have improved all round in their studies.

"One positive indication that you've become bilingual is when you find yourself doing mental arithmetic in French," says Mike. By the time they return to their native land, most exchange chil-

dren can read and write fluently in their second language - much better, in fact, than the average A-level student. Endearingly, even dialect is picked up through osmosis (and more besides, if one is not careful: one host parent remarked that she and her husband had learned to be mindful of what they said in the presence of their charge because the child was soon able to pick up anything).

Even the converted, spreading the En Famille gospel, admit that it can feel very odd to find your own flesh and blood able to lapse into French at the drop of a *chapeau*.

Sometimes, when they first return, the mother tongue appears to have deserted a child completely, but these effects are temporary. What **does** last is a profound experience of the host culture and language. The cost to parents, apart from the commitment to host in return, is £420, or six monthly instalments of £70 (a sum which simply covers En Famille's expenses). This is a remarkable investment when one can expect to pay as much for many two-week 'immersion' courses during which kids really only get their toes wet. The organisation is particularly keen to recruit more English speakers to satisfy the growing demand from French families.

The En Famille method doesn't appeal to all, but oldsters may feel a twinge of jealousy at the thought of an opportunity not available in their day - if you're of an age where the police are starting to look like youngsters then your chance to become an accomplished 'gigolo' has probably passed. Nevertheless, En Famille is also a medium for parents to forge new friendships and enjoy shorter mutual exchanges of their own... after all, why should the kids have all the fun?

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