

## PARENT AND CHILD

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### Cultural exchange

Anne Byrne finds out about an exchange programme where children as young as eight can be sent abroad for six months to immerse themselves in a foreign culture and learn a language.

EXCHANGES with foreign students are something we usually associate with teenagers. However, Jacques Pinault, the founder of an organisation called **En Famille International**, believes that exchanges are more valuable if the child is younger and still attending primary school.

His organisation sets up six-month exchanges for children between the ages of eight and 12. Many parents, of course, may have concerns about the wisdom of sending such young children to a foreign country on their own, for such a long period of time. And, indeed, some educationists and psychologists would also argue against separation from the family at such a young age.

Although **En Famille International** is non-commercial - parents take note - there is a fee of £420 which covers the costs of setting up and monitoring the exchange.

There are also travel costs to be considered.

Mr Pinault, a teacher with an English wife, set up the organisation 16 years ago and has facilitated more than 500 exchanges. "I realised that when we learn languages at school, we do not learn properly. We go abroad after six or seven years learning a language and can't be understood. The younger we learn the better," he says.

If a family decides to participate they will be visited in their home by a local representative. Each family must then attend a meeting either in Dublin, Frankfurt, London or Paris to meet the people in charge of the matching process. A family member must also accompany the child abroad - parents usually stay a few days until their child is settled in. After that, the child is not a guest but "another member of the family," says Mr Pinault.

The Irish facilitator for **En Famille** is Harold McGahern of Co Longford. McGahern's two children, Una and Aonghus, have done exchanges with **En Famille**. They were both 12 when they exchanged, as McGahern



thinks Irish children, particularly, rural children, mature later than continental children.

He says the match-making process between the French and Irish families is exhaustive to the point of intrusiveness, but he was happy to answer the numerous questions posed by **En Famille** when he realised his counterparts would also be doing so.

The O'Higgins, another Irish family to participate in **En Famille** are also enthusiastic about their experience.

Roisin O'Higgins says: "I came across **En Famille** five or six years ago and followed it up. Our eldest daughter, Amy, who is now 15, went to Normandy for six months when she was ten. Two years later, Eoin went to Lyon and Lisa, another daughter, is currently with that same family in Lyon on a six-month exchange.

The exchange process is closely monitored by Mr Pinault and precise guidelines are set down. Parents telephone their children once a week. When a child is departing, he or she is issued with two stamped envelopes so that they can write home if necessary.

Children on exchanges go to school with their counterpart and the school must signal its agreement in writing beforehand.

For the O'Higgins and the McGaherns, the French children did indeed become part of the family and the relationships have been kept up, both by letter and by visits. Amy O'Higgins has returned to France four times since her original exchange and Violaine, her French friend, has been here a similar number of times.

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