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Europe - Special report

An English girl abroad

Elaine Carlton

DIANA GRIMBLE is an unusually talented child. She was born in the small English village of Bishopsteignton, Devon, but by the age of nine, she was already fluent in French, after spending six months of her primary school education in the town of Metz with the Veloso family.

This experience was made possible by a unique organisation, En Famille. Originating in 1978, En Famille created the opportunity for English and French children between the ages of eight and 11 to make a "long stay exchange" abroad. The organisation now has branches in Spain and Germany.

The exchange takes place before the child has had any exposure to the foreign language. "When I arrived I couldn't understand anything. We just had to point at everything," explains Diana.

En Famille works on the basis that young children have a better chance of becoming bilingual.

Liaison officer Vivienne Tourne puts it like this :

"The younger they are, the less their mouths are used to forming the sounds of their native language and therefore can adapt easily to the correct pronunciation and accent in another language."

Attending a foreign school is daunting, but it is the best way to absorb the language and culture. Children take in sights and sounds in the same natural way as they learned their first language rather than studying from a text book at the late age of 11.

Carol Jubb, whose daughter spent six months in Normandy and whose son spent six months in the Ardèche, feels that the experience is a one-off opportunity.

She said : "My children learned to understand other people and another way of life while gaining a greater appreciation of their own."

Jim Grumble, chairman of En Famille, assures parents that their young children are not missing six months at English school by studying



Unique experience : Diana from Devon (right) is bilingual after six months with the Veloso family in Metz.

abroad : "They come back more mature with an enriched education."

En Famille is a non-profit-making organisation and has very strict regulations when matching families to ensure that the exchange works at its optimum. The agreement is reciprocal.

For the first six months one family has both the participating children in their home. The "adoptive" parents agree to enrol their foreign child in school, feed the child and provide pocket money. During the second six months their own child will live with the foreign family.

The children are allowed to take their favourite furry toys but no books in their mother tongue and they cannot return home during the six-month stay.

Although the children will miss home at first, they adapt very quickly and may even wish to stay. According to Diana's mother, June : It was embarrassing when we went to pick up Diana. She hid under the chair

and wouldn't speak to us in English !"

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