

Would you let a foreign family 'adopt' your nine-year-old for six months?

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Six weeks from now, my nine-year-old son, Jonathan, is to embark on an adventure that I already know might horrify many parents who have a child of a similar age.

Not only will he change his surname, but he will be calling two complete strangers Mummy and Daddy. For six months he will be 'adopted' by a new family who will introduce him to others as their son.

He will go to a new school, have to converse in a different language and on top of that, while he's been brought up as a vegetarian, he will be expected to eat meat. For we have signed up to a French exchange trip with a difference.

Apart from an occasional phone call - and they are not encouraged - for six months Jonathan won't have any contact with myself, or his father or his younger brother Kit, seven, and two sisters, Libby, five, and Anna, two.

Cruel - or the making of him? We very much think - and hope - it will be the latter.

Admittedly, it is heart wrenching to think that for all that time it won't be me kissing Jonathan goodnight, but another woman.

And I can't deny that initially I, too, was shocked by the thought of such a young child going for such a long time to live with a family he has only met once before.

A number of friends, when I've told them of our plans, have looked pretty shocked, too. 'I could never do that,' they say, looking at me in disbelief.

But then the very idea of this trip is that Jonathan immerses himself totally in the French culture.

And as a foreign languages teacher myself, I believe that the only way to become fluent in a language is to totally embrace it - and that, when it comes to learning a new language, the younger you are, the better.

My husband Bob, a computer programmer, and I heard from a friend

about these 'extreme exchange trips', which are organised by a Frenchman named Jacques Pinault, a former teacher, and his British-born wife, Katherine, who live in France.

They have a small team of people who help do the background checks and to match families. Their organisation has been going since 1978 and they arrange around 15 extreme exchanges per year between families in the UK and France.

Our friend's 12-year-old had done one and enjoyed it so much that his brother was about to go.



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Life Swap: Katy and Bob Salmon with their son Jonathan, (front right) and french exchange guest Mayeul D'Harcourt, both aged nine

Although the exchange organisation is for children aged nine to 14, when we went along to a meeting we decided Jonathan might like it when he was a bit older. After all, he has never even been on a trip away from us before. In fact, the most time he has spent away has been the odd night with friends for a sleepover.

But in the end, it was Jonathan's decision to go this year.

I can imagine some people thinking we are forcing our child to grow up and become too independent too fast. Or worse, that we are the ultimate in pushy parents.

But we would never encourage one of our children to do something he or she didn't want to do. He came with us to the meeting and he thought going to live with another family in France sounded incredibly exciting.

No sooner had the meeting finished, he was begging us to be allowed to go on an exchange as soon as possible.

My husband Bob, 38, and I weren't sure, especially as Jonathan is just nine. But then research shows that by the time children are 11 - when most formal education in a foreign language begins in the UK - hormones are already kicking in that make children less receptive to learning to speak in a different tongue.

By the time they are well into their teens - and the exchange programme only goes up to 14 for this reason - children are often too embarrassed even to consider going to live with a strange family so they can learn a language.

Also, it's clear that short holidays away aren't enough. It takes at least three weeks for the brain to begin to even think in anything other than English. Which is probably why in the UK so many of us fail to ever grasp a foreign language.

So, as Jonathan is a mature child anyway, we decided to be matched with a French family.

The organisers, who charge approximately £1,500, visited us to ensure that they were happy for us to have a French child to stay in our home. Due to my job as a teacher, and Bob working with the Cubs and Scouts, we have already cleared criminal records checks.

We are reassured that the organisers do turn down some families if they aren't absolutely sure they're suitable - and they personally visit everyone. If they don't have a family that is right for you to be matched with, you might have to wait.



In France there is no system as we have here to do criminal records checks, and I know some parents might say they would have concerns about this. But having spoken to Jacques and his wife, I feel confident that they have thoroughly checked out the family Jonathan will be living with. Also, having met the parents for a couple of days, I don't have any worries that he will be as well cared for as if he were their own son.

French families are keen on exchanges. The French put a lot of store in their children speaking another language and being independent. But it seems the British aren't so keen on letting their children go for six months. Consequently, there is a shortage of British families willing to do these sort of exchanges.

However, after filling in lots of forms, which included questions about our lifestyle - for example, how we discipline our children - we were fortunate enough to be matched with a family in Paris, a couple called D'harcourt: the mother is at home with the children, and the father is a management consultant.

We don't smack our children, and neither do they. That said, we are strict. We have high standards and if, for example, any of our four children misbehave, they will miss out on a treat such as being allowed on the computer.

As a family we always eat together and sit at the table for meals. But still there are differences between us and the French family we have been paired with, and I worry how Jonathan will cope with them.

The most obvious one is that for ethical reasons we are vegetarians. While we eat dairy products, we don't eat any meat or fish. But our French family loves meat and fish and Jonathan has already said he is going to eat their food.

In September a nine-year-old boy called Mayeul, from our matched

French family, came to live with us at our home near Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire. We had already swapped family photos and because of all the questionnaires, we felt totally confident that he would enjoy his six months with us.

His parents accompanied him to our house and after staying the weekend, they said goodbye. When they left, I immediately took Mayeul off to distract him, making playdough.

I expected Mayeul to be homesick but I was amazed at how well he fitted in. The children warmed to him straightaway. He didn't even go home for Christmas, which his parents were pleased about, as they wanted him to experience a typical British celebration. At first he could hardly speak any English - although I speak French, we didn't speak any French with him at all - and now he is very fluent.

A couple of times, he's been tearful when his parents have rung. It might seem cruel, but the organisers advise you only ring every fortnight or so. Then you are told to keep phone calls short. You should keep the conversation light, and talk about how lucky they are to be away.

I spoke to Mayeul's mum and reassured her he was fine - and he was.

The organisers, who are always on hand to mediate any problems families might face, told us that even if a child is homesick, he will usually get over it in a week or two.

It will be heartbreaking if our son Jonathan is crying on the phone with homesickness. But he would have to be continually upset over a longer period of time before we would consider bringing him home. We would always encourage him to stay over there.

For the past five months, we've got used to saying we have five children. It might sound odd, but Mayeul has called us Mummy and Daddy, and he

took our surname. When we introduced him, we always called him our 'French son'.

People are amazed he is with us for so long, but it has gone by very fast. He got on really well with Jonathan, so we feel our son will have a friend over there now that it's his turn to go to live with Mayeul in Paris.

During that time, apart from those odd phone calls home, Jonathan won't speak any English, calling Mayeul's parents 'maman' and 'papa'.

He will also celebrate his tenth birthday in France, and we might not even speak to him that day. All we will be allowed to do is send him a parcel. I think it will be harder for us than him. Already I feel sick that I am going to miss him terribly.

There is also the possibility that Jonathan will come home literally a changed child, both in his character, and for example, if he wants to eat meat. I confess if he no longer wants to be vegetarian, he would have to learn to cook his own meat.

I am sure some children wouldn't be able to cope with going away from their families for six months. Then, some families couldn't cope with having another child to live with them for as long too, and there are times when I question what we are doing.

However, we believe we are giving Jonathan the gift of being able to speak another language, which will be really useful for the rest of his life. Yes, there is a risk he will hate every minute. But, in my view, it's a risk worth taking.

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Foreign adventure: Bob and Katy Salmon will let their son Jonathan go live with a French family for six months