

## 'Extreme language exchanges' grow in popularity

**Children as young as nine are decamping to the Continent to get a head start in their language studies.**

By Sarah Cassidy, Social Affairs Correspondent

In two weeks, Matthew Hodgson is going to Spain for six months. He has never been there before and does not speak the language. But this is no adventurous gap-year student: Matthew is 10 and still at primary school.

He is part of growing trend of "extreme language exchanges": instead of the usual two-week placement, children aged nine to 14 are totally immersed in a foreign language and culture for six months. Those behind the scheme believe the only way to truly become fluent in another tongue is to start as early as possible, and for as long as possible.

Matthew will miss the remainder of his final year at his English primary school and instead attend a Spanish school where he will have to do all his studies in Spanish, despite not knowing the language.

"I expect I might feel a bit scared for the first few weeks, but after that I think I will probably be okay," he said yesterday. "I am really looking forward to going."

Matthew's sister Zoe, now 13, did a similar "extreme exchange" trip, spending six months living with a French family when she was 10. "It was brilliant," said Zoe. "I was a little bit homesick for the first few weeks but after that everything was fine. I would tell anyone else to give it a try."

"I learnt so many things that will help me my whole life. I learnt how to speak French, but I think I also learnt how to get on with people and how to talk to people more. I think I came back a lot more confident."

Zoe and Matthew's mother Marie, 42, a transport engineer from Leicester, admits she still feels a little anxious about the "extreme exchange" trip, organised by the French firm En Famille International. But she is also excited about Matthew's visit because she knows how much he

will benefit. He should return fluent in Spanish and with a perfect accent.



Lucie, from France, and Zoe Hodgson

His parents also believe he will gain confidence, interpersonal skills and a friend for life in Gonzalo Sancho Larrad, the 10-year-old exchange partner who has now lived with the Hodgsons for nearly six months. Mrs Hodgson and her husband Jonathan, 44, a civil engineer, heard about the scheme – which has been running since 1978 – from friends before their own children were born.

She said: "That meant the children grew up knowing up about the idea. Zoe desperately wanted to do an exchange. We spent a long time considering it, but she was so insistent that we decided to do it. We always knew that she was happy, well cared for and doing something that she wanted to do."

Mrs Hodgson said she trusted the scheme's organisers – a former teacher, Jacques Pinault, and his British wife, Katherine – and felt confident that families and children would be well-matched. She believes languages are best learnt before the age of 11, which is when British schools usually start teaching a foreign language.

Mrs Hodgson said: "My husband and I are both appalling at languages. I do feel strongly that I am severely lacking in my life because I do not speak another language and I think it would have been a massive boost to my skills. I really struggle to put a sentence together in another language. It is a great sadness to me that I cannot speak another language.

"When Zoe went to France I had been very nervous about making the journey home without her because I thought it would just be hours and hours of feeling desolate, but it really wasn't like that. We felt so happy with the family and they had been so welcoming that we left feeling totally reassured."

Before the exchange Zoe knew almost no French as she hadn't studied it at primary school. Six months later she was fluent in the language, easily achieved A\*s in her school French exams and will sit her GCSEs early. She is also close friends with her French exchange partner, Lucie, and the pair spent all of this summer together, dividing their time between England and France.



Gonzalo Sancho Larrad, left, from Madrid, Matthew Hodgson and his sister and parents Zoe, Marie and Jonathan Hodgson  
Nick Wilkinson/Newsteam.co.uk

The scheme is always short of English-speaking families willing to participate. The host families pay for any costs incurred by the child staying with them, and also pay a £1,680 fee to find a suitable match.

Matthew's exchange partner, Gonzalo, from Madrid, said he felt "very lucky" to be able to stay with an English family. He arrived at the Hodgsons' in Leicester in September speaking only very basic English. When he returns to Spain next month, taking Matthew with him, he will be fluent in English with an almost perfect accent. Gonzalo said: "For the first weeks you are a bit scared, but then you are fine. You actually do not think about your dad and mum that much."

He added that: "My favourite food is mashed potato; I had never had it before I came here."