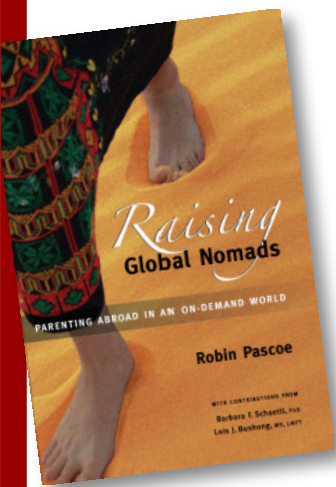


Raising Global Nomads: Parenting Abroad in an On-Demand World



A lot has changed since the early 1990s when I wrote my first book for expat parents, *Culture Shock! A Parent's Guide*. At that time, an airless, windowless mahjong room at the Lido Club in Beijing served as my office, because our living quarters did not provide me with a workroom of my own. From there, we moved back to Ottawa and then onto Seoul, finally ending up in Vancouver, British Columbia. As the “Expat

Expert” (also the name of the website I began publishing in late 1998, which attracts visitors from over a hundred countries), I have traveled to speak all over the world, from Johannesburg to Shanghai to Jerusalem: to women’s clubs, to international schools, and to business audiences. Since those early days, too, the world has become globalized, digitalized, and, sadly, terrorized. That’s the big picture that will be examined in these pages.

On the home front, my day job for well over twenty years, raising our two children, has ended. Lilly, who was born in Bangkok in 1983 and who made six international moves before she was thirteen, has finished university and started her career as an international environmental activist. Jamie, who has now assumed the more adult handle of Jay, was born in Ottawa in 1987 and made five moves before he was nine. After a year off following high school, he is now in university. Of course, I’ll be parenting forever, but my kids already need me in different ways. Naturally, I’m dealing with empty-nest syndrome and the inevitable withdrawal pains from nurturing. I feel alternately depressed and elated. My really hard work is done, and I’m feeling a lot of sadness. But I am able to look back now, to see what worked and what didn’t, and to share with readers the lessons I learned.

There is also a sense of relief that we all survived the growing years to reap the numerous positive legacies of a global life. Lilly and Jay’s view of the world, their values, the friends they made, and their feeling that they are somehow different have been influenced by the international mobility precipitated by their father’s first career as a diplomat. Even after our repatriation to Canada, their very beings continued to scream global as Rodney began a second career, traveling all over the world marketing Canadian education.

“Where’s Dad today?” my son has asked over the years when Rodney didn’t show up for supper.

“Dubai,” I would reply. Or São Paulo, or Istanbul, or somewhere equally “out there.”

Lilly and Jay are products of their early childhood experiences and their constant exposure as teenagers to the global workplace of their parents. They have also been lucky enough to continue jumping on planes to faraway places, thanks to school field trips and their father’s considerable accumulation of air miles.

“My father may be a retired foreign service officer,” an adult third culture kid once told me, “but I can never be a retired foreign service kid.”

Growing up motherless might have contributed to my personal decision to choose my children over a career, but I’m keenly aware that I had the economic luxury to make that choice. Even after repatriating to Canada, when a second income would have been helpful, I stuck with my choice because, like most global managers, Rodney was forced to step up his road-warrior activities. This required that he spend a great amount of time away from our home—and away from the children during important years. Someone had to keep an eye on the home front. I continued to pursue my writing life, but I always placed Lilly and Jay’s needs first.

I believe this was a good choice—for my family. As in all matters of culture, there is no one right way to parent well, only different ways. Global nomads are raised for the most part by parents living far from home and family; they must rely on their natural instincts, the support of new communities, and whatever resources they can find to help them make their decisions.

Every family is unique and will require different choices. Moreover, we all make mistakes. It's worth remembering, as most of us teach our children, that human beings learn from failure as well as from success. There are lessons to be learned from even our less-than-finest moments and from the experiences, both good and bad, of others.

I feel confident in delivering some good news at the outset: *Most children turn out great!* I'm always at pains to pass on this extremely positive message to expat parents. However, I immediately qualify my comment by adding that proactive parenting abroad is a necessity; children need their parents more after they have been uprooted, not less. Too many couples disappear into the hectic expat social scene or workplace soon after arrival in a new place, leaving young children with a local caregiver who may eventually become a treasured member of the family but in the early days is just a scary stranger.

By proactive parenting, I don't mean overparenting, though. Even in the insular and sheltered expatriate world, children need to learn how to lead their own lives, independent from their parents. Otherwise, they will be ill prepared to be launched into the adult world that awaits them and become global citizens.

Only recently have children's transition challenges and cross-cultural adjustments begun to be highlighted by an industry of intercultural trainers, coaches, and researchers; by organizations sending families abroad, and by the international schools expat children attend. It was tempting in the past for some parents to gloss over their children's mobility challenges (and their own, too), in an attempt to get everything and everyone moving smoothly. Kids were told to just get on with it. Now there are numerous excellent books, articles, and websites that shed light on the third culture kid experience and on what adult TCKs have shown they are capable of contributing to the new globalized world. I will be quoting from some of these sources, and I list many more in the resource section at the back of this book.

Raising Global Nomads, however, is different from these resources. It identifies many of the complexities of growing up as a global nomad so that parents can give their children the skills and knowledge they need. It focuses not only on the critical role parents play in their children's transitions but on the impact different parenting styles can have on the choices children make later in their lives. I conclude the book by celebrating the notion that global nomads, as declared by sociologist Ted Ward back in 1984, are the "prototype citizens" of the future. Indeed, the terms "global nomad" and "global citizen" go together nicely. But nothing happens by accident. Like parents everywhere, expat parents need to guide their children into happy, productive, and independent lives wherever they may choose to live in the world.

Parents posted abroad, away from their own family support systems, may be unaware of how their own behavior and actions transfer onto their children. And too often, the important part that parents play gets lost in the intense dissection of third culture kids by academics, educators, and psychologists. Parents want to know how to deal with a toddler or teenager who is acting up, not only why it's happening. For that reason, this book also explores the ways in which adult issues associated with expatriate life (the moveable marriage, work-life balance challenges, culture shock, the cellular ties that bind) affect child-rearing being done far from home.

— from *"Raising Global Nomads: Parenting Abroad in an On-Demand World"*