

The Relocation of a Lifetime

November 1, 2017/by [Isabelle Wallace](#)



At FamilyKind, we are dedicated to providing support to families experiencing separation and divorce. A divorce or separation serves an important purpose. People have the opportunity to evolve and create a new reality for their families. In my view, how we handle our transitions in life — be they big or small — will profoundly affect the story that unfolds afterwards, and so the process of transitioning deserves special attention. Other life transitions can be as impactful to intact families.

Like many first-generation Americans, my story is very much tied to the countries my parents came from. Although I was born in the States and grew up here, my summers were spent with family in France and Lebanon. When the civil war in Lebanon made travel there too risky, we were sent to France only. When I was eleven, I spent a year in Paris. When I was twelve, we moved to London, England, where I attended middle

school, high school and college. I returned back to France for three more years of college. I grew up divided: bilingual, understanding of different cultures and no more loyal to one than the other. I identified as “international” rather than “national”.

Many years later when my son was born in Brooklyn, I was surprised to find all my baby talk, words of comfort and lullabies poured forth in French even after almost fifteen years after my relocation to New York and a relationship with my third-generation, all-American husband. My husband, who had known me as a predominantly English speaker, was bewildered. I grew melancholy at the idea of my son not understanding the divide I had integrated inside of me — of him not being able to relate to his mother. All of my immediate family — brothers, sister and parents — lived in Europe. There I was, living a New York life, yet yearning to reconnect with my roots.

And so began a three-year slow process of discussion, argument, and tension between my husband and me about how best to raise our son in order to accommodate all of our needs and desires. We had barely survived the distance that the first year of our son’s life had created in our union. My husband’s frustration at being excluded from conversation between my son and me was palpable, and my response was to suggest (not always kindly) that he finally learn the language instead of asking me to give it up. We felt trapped in an unsatisfying, stressful dynamic in which neither of us felt understood by the other. The arrival of our son had changed everything for us, and our previous way of relating to each other no longer worked. It was time for us to integrate our new reality and transition into the family we wanted to be.

We made the decision to relocate to France for a trial year so my husband could immerse himself in the language and culture and my son could attend pre-K in a regular French public school. We spent a year preparing for our move: zeroing in on where we would relocate in France, sorting through our furniture and personal effects, finding tenants for our apartment, getting my remote employment lined up, and preparing

ourselves for the loss of my husband's business. Our son was asked to sort his toys into four piles: give to strangers, give to friends, bring to France, and keep for later. He was not quite four years old, yet he participated fully, surprising us with his ability to adapt to the situation.

Our arrival in France, however, was breathtakingly difficult. We could not have prepared for the maelstrom of emotion and displacement we felt. We chose a corner of the country far from everyone and everything familiar. Hardly anyone speaks English. As the only adult French speaker in our family, almost all the administrative and everyday tasks — from registering the car, to doctor's visits, to opening a bank account, to buying groceries, to speaking with our son's teachers — fell to me. My husband accompanies me almost everywhere, absorbing the language and interactions, powerless to help in the way he wants to but present to show his support and gratitude to me for "doing it all." By the end of each day he is often exhausted, his head spinning with all the French he has heard that day. By the end of the second week after our arrival, he had an ear infection, which struck us as a wholly appropriate manifestation of his new predicament!

Our son was completely lost for the first two months. All the points of reference he'd had in Brooklyn from ages 0 - 4 were gone. The language spoken in the neighborhood, the school, the teachers, the house, the environment, new friends and how we relate to them — none of it resembled the life we left behind. We can no longer visit family on the weekends. On the playground, kids speak a kind of French he never heard before. Those first two months, he cried nearly every morning at school drop-off, terrified at the prospect of enduring another day of feeling so overwhelmed.

During those early days, I questioned — and occasionally continue to question — our decision to tackle this massive transition. What were we thinking? How will we get through? Will our family, and each individual in it, survive this seismic shift?

Slowly, the benefits of our move began to overtake the fear and insecurity our transition evokes. These benefits encourage us daily. We found a rhythm in everyday life, one that is a little more easeful than life back in Brooklyn. My husband has French teachers, friends and ways to feel useful that do not require fluency immediately. Our son has made friends at school and figured out how to relate to them and his new environment. I've made peace — mostly — with the guilt I carry for instigating this big change in our family's dynamic. It has not been a seamless process and we still experience many doubts and frustrations with our new life. However, this transition will evolve, and we have no regrets. Our son is bilingual, often mixing up sentences to utter bemusing Franglish phrases. My husband runs errands, liaises with teachers and parents at school drop off and gets by in French well enough to be mostly autonomous. And I continue to marvel at the human's capacity to withstand — and even thrive through — profound change. What more could we ask of such a transition?

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