

Why a Sudden Departure from “Home” is a Big Hairy Deal

By Rebecca Grappo

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following the 2011 Cairo Evacuation

As I watch the events in Egypt unfold, my thoughts are with the thousands of expat children and families who are living in Egypt as well as their Egyptian friends and playmates. Maybe others are thinking about the political implications of this open rebellion, but I’m thinking about the many families who may be ordered to leave quickly to other safe havens.

The scenario will unfold differently, depending on the family’s employer or sponsor. Some students who are dependents of diplomatic personnel may be advised or ordered to leave as soon as possible. Others families may be given the option and will have to make the difficult decision about if or when they leave, and if they should go together or separately. Single parents have their own unique concerns, too. And still others will stay put no matter what. But one thing is certain. Life has changed, no matter which scenario fits the bill.

Earlier in my career, I worked with many families who were evacuated from dangerous situations overseas, and I wrote papers and spoke to groups at conferences about contingency planning for families. My own family also experienced an evacuation under unique circumstances I won’t go into in this blog. Here are the 12 most important things I learned from those various experiences.

1. This is a stressful time for the family.

If dependents leave, then chances are the employee is going to be left behind to do a job. That means that families will be separated under duress. Children and teens are going to be worried about parents, pets, caretakers, school friends, teachers, and anyone else who was a part of their world.

2. Evacuations are emotional roller coaster rides.

No one knows for sure how long the situation will last – will they be away from “home” for a few weeks? months? what if they never get to go back? So that uncertainty is very taxing on the family’s emotions. A family should talk about how it will stay in touch throughout the separation, and reassure children as best as possible that loved ones left behind will be protected and safe.

3. Some children and adolescents may not ever get to go back, or “home” again.

Maybe the assignment was going to end at the end of the school year anyway, and the evacuation won’t be over before then. Maybe the job that took the family overseas will be eliminated as a result of the turmoil. This means that there could be a horrible sense of loss without proper closure. There won’t be any goodbye parties, or chances to do things “one last time”. This is a loss, and a form of grief may come out of it. It is important that this loss and grief be acknowledged.

4. For students who are about to graduate from high school, this is especially upsetting.

Not knowing how long they will be separated from friends is terrible. Not being able to do all those things together as a senior class is terrible. Not graduating with their class is terrible. Not being able to finish out their classes, and take the final IB or AP tests is terrible. I've seen this happen before, and even seen kids be angry with their parents about it, when it's not even close to being the parents' fault. Hey, that anger has to go somewhere....

5. There are going to be kids left behind, too.

So yes, some kids may leave suddenly. But other kids won't, and they're going to feel bereft over the loss of friends, too. All of a sudden, it may feel like they are left behind in a ghost town. It may seem a bit surreal. Parents, caretakers, teachers, counselors, etc, all need to be sensitive to their needs, too. They are going to be in need of extra consolation, empathy, and understanding.

6. In times of stress, people sometimes forget to take good care of themselves.

Caretakers need to take care of themselves so that they can take care of others. Teens as well as children respond to routines, structure, and reassurance that together as a family, everyone will get through this. Remember, too, that eating well, sleeping regularly, and exercising are all common sense stress management techniques.

7. Younger children may find the news especially disturbing.

It's easy for adults to stay riveted to the television or other media sources to watch the breaking news. But adults should monitor the amount of media children are exposed to, listen to their concerns or ask them for a reaction if they aren't sharing any. Parents also need to reassure children and teens that they are there to keep them safe. Do not be surprised if children and/or teens experience some regression, anger, withdrawal, aggression, crying, sadness, or other changes in behavior. Just as adults are affected by stress, I have also seen some children and teens become physically sick from it.

8. Parents, remember that you still set the tone for the family.

It's important to be honest about events with children and teens, but always in ways that are age-appropriate. If you can remain calm and reassuring, your children will pick up on your cues. If you are a nervous wreck, then your children can become the canary in the mine, reflecting the stress that they feel from you. Therefore, make the way you deal with your own stress a priority.

9. If you have to leave, have a plan for where to go.

No one knows how long an evacuation may last. It's best to prepare for the worst and hope for the best. That means finding a safe haven that will be a temporary home. Factors to consider are where the family might receive emotional support. Depending on the situation, it might be prudent to enroll the kids in school. If they need to be re-enrolled in school, then the system and classes need to be compatible with the curriculum the students were following before the evacuation. Kids who have learning difficulties may need extra tutoring to substitute for services they were receiving. High school kids may have online learning options from their school

overseas, but they may not. They need to say current, though, so that they don't fall behind. For kids with college plans, it's important that they stay on track as much as possible.

10. Remember to take important documents with you.

That includes school records, birth certificates, immunization records, marriage certificates, church records of baptisms, etc, for some denominations, legal records, and financial information. Make sure that banking details for how you will handle money have been worked out, and hopefully, a power(s) of attorney has/have already been prepared to allow one spouse to act in all legal and financial matters without the other.

11. Not all Powers of Attorney forms work in all situations.

It's best to check. I've personally had problems with banking and insurance institutions when the companies wanted THEIR PoA executed and would not accept the PoA I presented. Getting new ones is not easy to do in the middle of a crisis, and I found some of these institutions showed no flexibility.

12. Find some sense of control in a situation that is beyond your control.

One of the biggest contributors to stress is feeling the loss of control over your life. Allow kids to provide some age-appropriate input for some decisions. Maybe that means what's for dinner, or what personal belongings to take, or how they will decorate their room. Older kids may want to start planning a summer reunion with best friends so that they know they will meet again. Structure and routines also help to give the family a sense of order and control in the middle of chaos.

Lastly, and I'm not going to number this 13 for obvious reasons, I advise that the family remembers to pack their **sense of humor and sense of fun**. Forced evacuations or separations are difficult situations. No one understands it unless they have been through it. But make fun a priority, and find the humor in even hopeless situations. Trust me, it will ease the pain.

This crisis in Egypt has affected me personally as well. I had planned to go to Cairo in two weeks to talk about Third Culture and Cross Cultural Kids in the international school context at the Cairo American College. Under the circumstances, we have had to cancel the event, and I am personally disappointed. But my thoughts are with all the people I did not get to meet. I'm thinking of how these events will affect their personal lives. No matter what side of the prism you are on, any sudden upheaval in a community's daily life is a big, hairy deal.

I invite anyone who has experienced an evacuation, or is currently caught up in this crisis, to please post a comment. Those who have experienced an evacuation have wisdom to share that can help others. And to those who need wisdom, please pose your questions.

My thoughts are with you all.