

United States Department of State

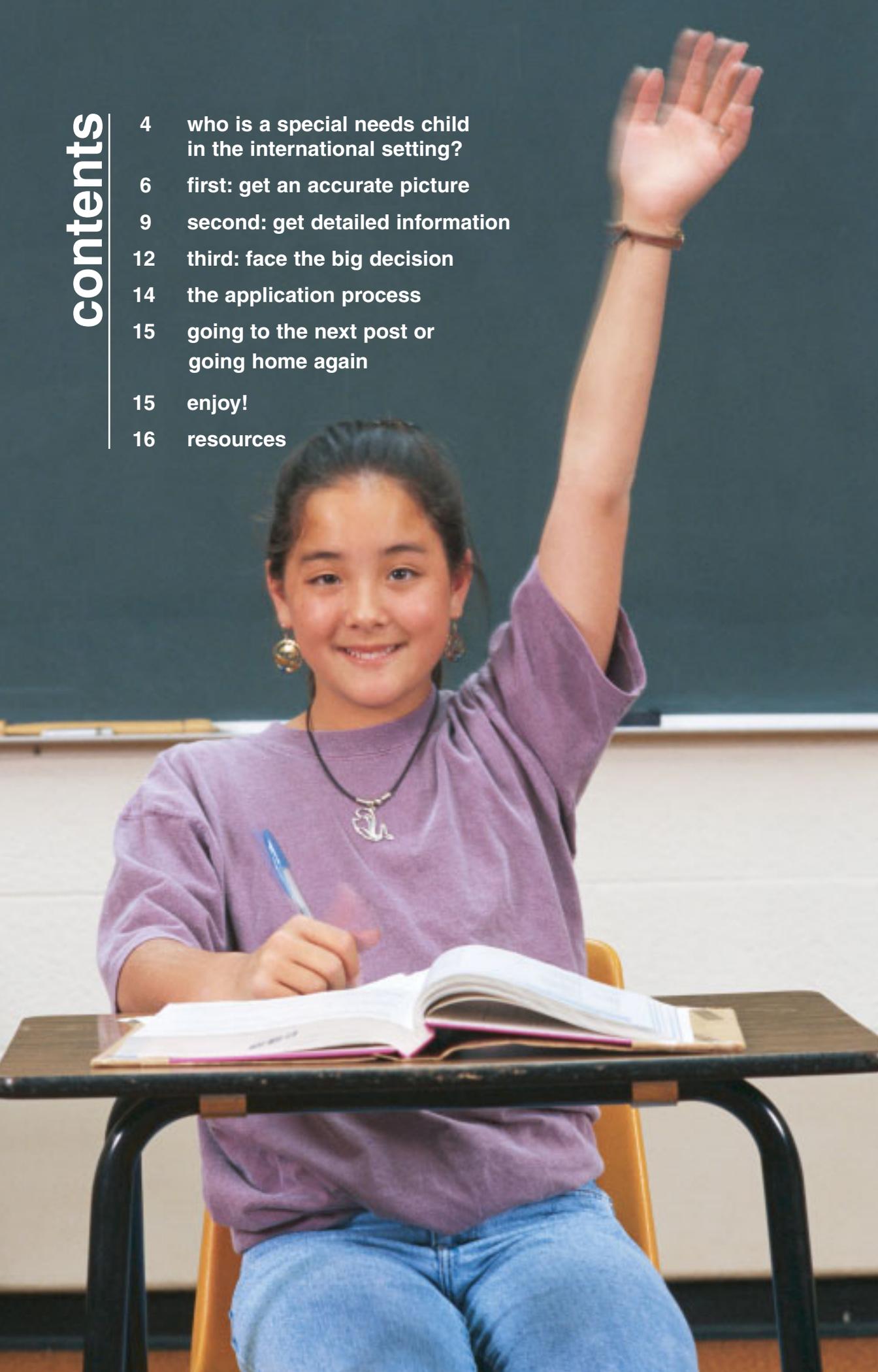


Transitioning to an Overseas Assignment with a Special Needs Child



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Every year, hundreds of U.S. families with special needs children have to make career-related decisions about *whether* to go overseas and, if so, *where*. This booklet is designed to help you think through such decisions and, once you decide whether, when, and where to go, to facilitate the transition for your child to the most appropriate school setting possible. You need first of all to decide what is right for your family and then you need to become pro-active in facilitating a collaborative relationship with the educators overseas who are going to be your partners in this venture.



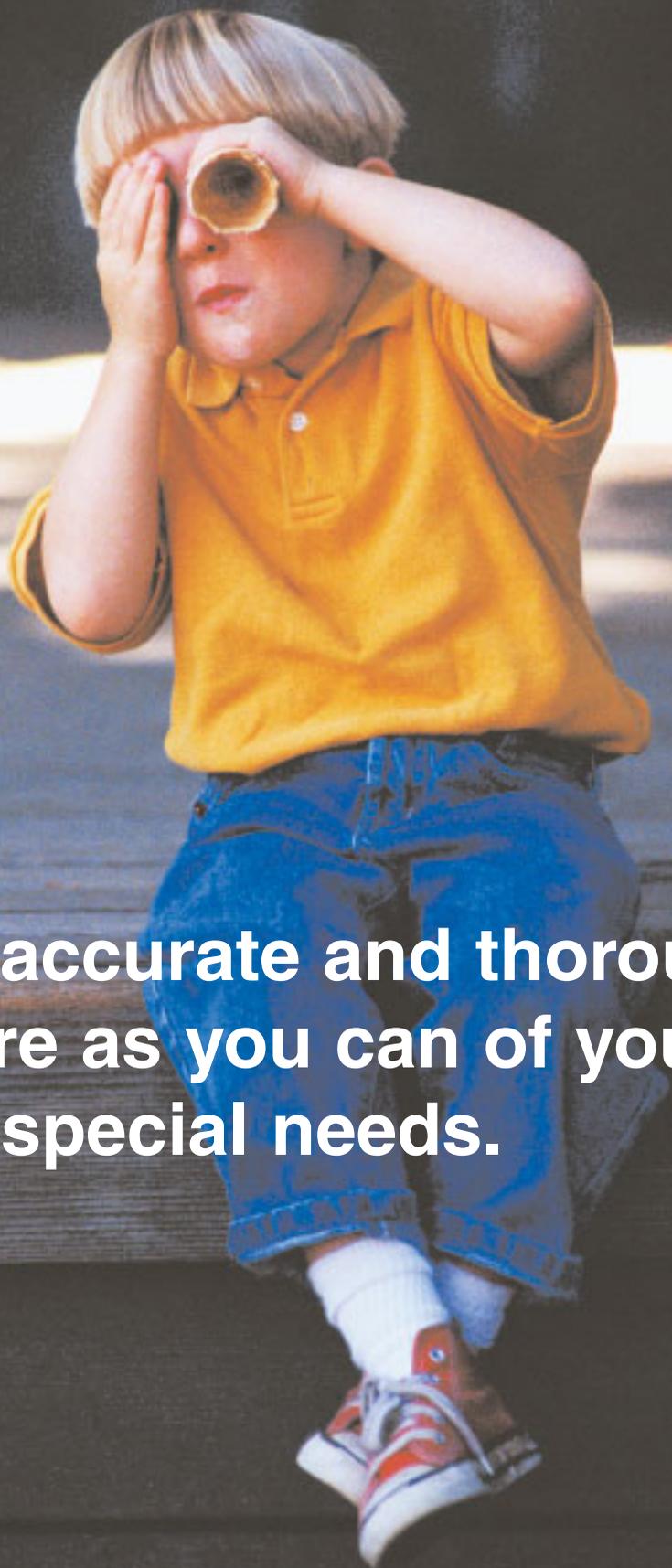
**Who is a
“special needs child”
in the international setting?**

While there is no official definition of a “special needs child,” and while independent overseas schools are under no obligation to assess your child’s special needs in the same way you do, you should be looking at what you know about your child and what it takes to keep him or her healthy, growing well, and successful in school. If your child has problems with learning, behavior, mobility, vision, or hearing; or requires specialized medical care or occupational, physical, or speech therapy; or needs any but very minor adaptations in the regular school routine – then you have a “special needs” child. This group also includes gifted children who need educational adaptations because they are academically more mature and advanced than their age peers.

Most U. S. government and private sector families abroad place their children in independent schools – often known as private schools – that are not governed by the laws of the United States as to whom they must

accept or what services they must provide. While you are not limited to American or international independent schools (you can consider host-country schools as well as schools of other countries and even home schooling), American and international schools are most likely to be able to discern whether they will be able to serve your child appropriately with adequate educational services. Only a few schools will provide specialized services such as speech, occupational or physical therapy, but a number will have learning disabilities specialists, especially in the earlier grades. Also, many teachers and other school personnel have participated in professional development to enhance their knowledge and skills in working with special needs students and their families. As a result, there are now many schools abroad that can serve well some students with mild to moderate special needs, especially at the elementary level. However, children with severe special needs will be difficult to place.





first | Get as accurate and thorough
a picture as you can of your
child's special needs.

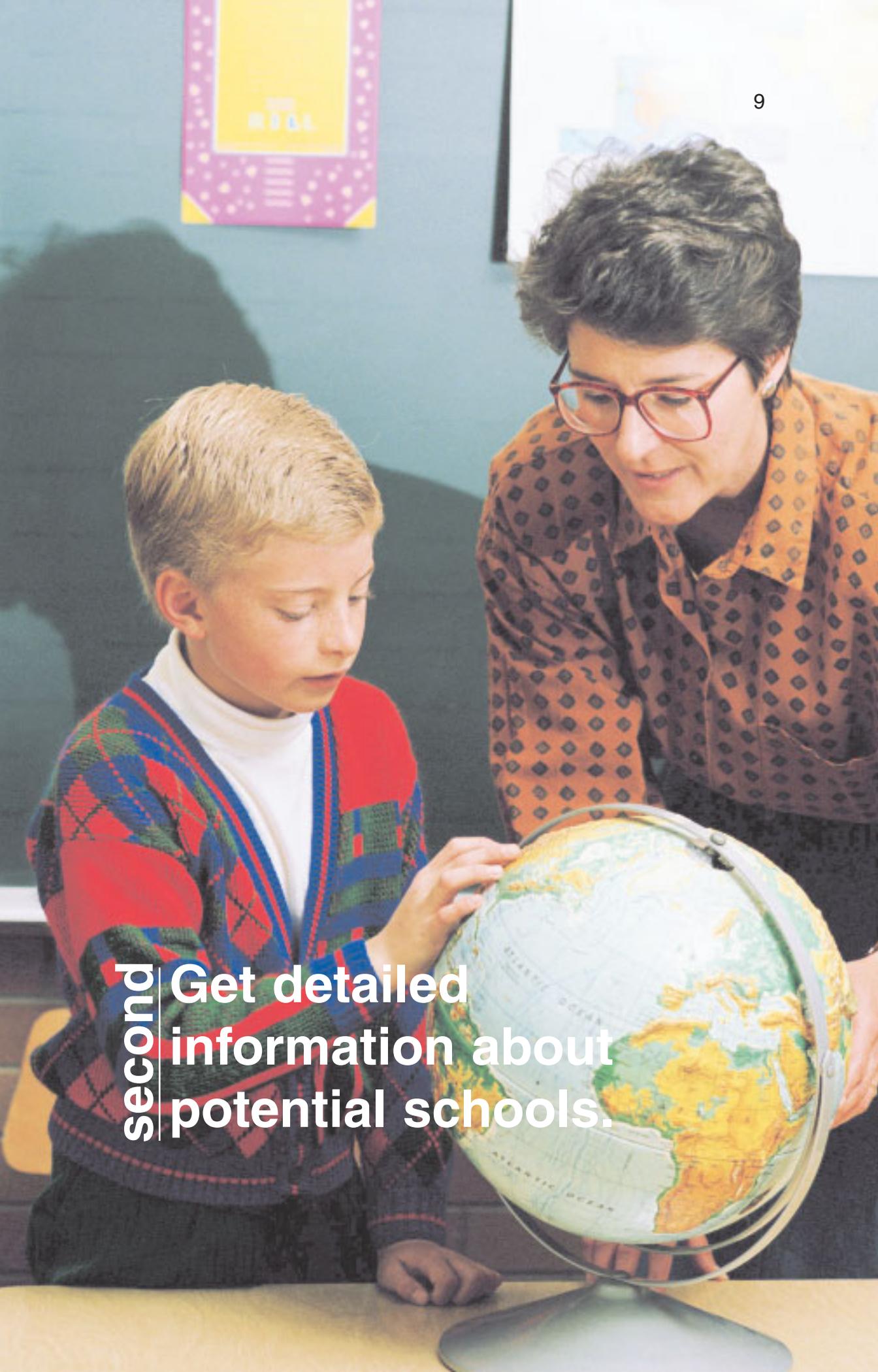
The basic rule: Develop for yourself a complete picture of your child's strengths and weaknesses, and the supports needed for him or her to be successful. Then, be up front with everyone – stateside and abroad – about your child and about your own expectations. Clear communication will lead to the healthiest situation for all concerned, especially for your child.

- ☑ Organize a portfolio for each of your children including, but not limited to, report cards and teacher comments, results of standardized testing, medical records, 504 agreements, brochures about the schools your child has attended, contact names at each school (including telephone number, e-mail and postal address, and web site if available), out-of-school experiences (e.g., tutoring, summer programs, extracurricular activities), etc.
- ☑ If your child is in special education in the United States, be sure to secure copies of all reports from assessments and your child's Individual Education Plan (IEP) to share with the school so that personnel can develop an effective educational program.
- ☑ Obtain an up-to-date comprehensive developmental assessment. Whether through the public school in which your child is currently enrolled or through private auspices, obtain current professional assessments of cognitive ability, school achievement, fine and gross motor skills, language, and in whatever other areas you have concerns about, as well as in areas of your child's strengths. Be sure to obtain and share a copy of the full report – not just a summary of scores, but a description of your child's behavior as well as scores of all the subtests (parts of larger tests) administered, and the psychologist's interpretations and recommendations. If resources to evaluate your child are not readily available in your community, contact the Department of State's Office of Overseas Schools for the names of some assessment centers.
- ☑ Talk frankly with your child's current teacher and any specialists currently working with him/her. What progress do they see? What services do they see as essential to maintain your child's development? What, if anything, could be dispensed with? What intervention is likely to make such a minor difference that it should not remain a major consideration? What interventions have worked in the past?
- ☑ If your child is receiving medication for a health problem, a behavioral problem, or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, be sure that the dosage is up-to-date.

Begin this process early so that you can arrange for continuity of medication when you go abroad, because even long-used medications in the United States (such as Ritalin) may not be available overseas.

- ☑ If your child has been designated as “gifted” by your school district, or you have other evidence that your child is academically significantly advanced, develop a similar portfolio of assessments and accomplishments. Be sure to include assessments of cognitive ability and academic achievement as well as descriptions of any previous school accommodations or programs, talent-search information, awards, and/or special summer programs. In addition, it is often helpful to include a “snapshot” of what your child is doing, being as objective as you can. This kind of information lends credibility to your request for consideration of acceleration and/or enrichment, such as a request that a child be allowed to bypass a grade, secure single-subject advancement, or receive differentiated instruction in a regular grade.
- ☑ Find out what allowances and services will be paid for by your employer (governmental or other). You may find that these are quite generous or that there will be services not covered that will affect your family’s budget. Complete as much of this process as you can before you go abroad so that the school can be prepared to receive you with services in place.
- ☑ Occasionally a child’s home school district will be able to offer limited service while the child is overseas, particularly if the parents maintain a residence there. At a minimum, you can ask for interchange between the former teacher(s) and the new one(s) about what works with your child and what to avoid. The home school district may also be able to offer software for which they hold a license, specific books, and so on that will help your child in the school overseas.

second | Get detailed information about potential schools.



Start early to accumulate as much knowledge as you can about the postings you are contemplating. Gather information about schools and about any specialized professionals you may need to call upon. You will want to find out not only about the availability of specialists – for example, pediatricians, physical therapists and speech therapists – but also whether their training is compatible with your child’s program and whether they speak English fluently (assuming that you and your child habitually speak English).

- Once you have begun a list of possible postings, start with the web sites of the American and international schools in the cities you are contemplating. There are regional associations which list the member schools in their area. You can link with a number of these schools as well as the regional associations through the Office of Overseas Schools’ web site: www.state.gov/m/a/os/.
- Look with particular care at overseas “international” (as opposed to “American”) schools. Some are first-rate and some are not. Furthermore, some follow an American curriculum and others use British or other approaches. (The latter issue may or may not be of significance to your family, depending on whether you plan to stay overseas for the long term or to return home after one tour of duty.)
- Contact the regional education officers in the Office of Overseas Schools (202-261-8200 or e-mail overseasschools@state.gov). These professional educators maintain direct contact with almost 200 American-sponsored and international schools abroad, and, indirectly, through the regional associations with many more. A special list is kept of additional independent and parochial schools that serve special needs students, though this information cannot be kept completely up-to-date. For more than 15 years, this office has helped American-sponsored overseas schools expand and upgrade their services to special needs students. The office will respond to your inquiries.
- Begin an e-mail dialogue with the appropriate school contact person (this may be the director, the admissions director, a principal, or the person who heads special services). Ask for contact with parents of current or recent students whose situation resembles your child’s and e-mail them with your questions about not only the school but also alternatives and supplementary services they may have found in the community.
- Be sure to be specific about the grade levels in which your child will be enrolled during your over-

seas assignments as you investigate available services in each school. Services are much more likely to be available at the elementary than the secondary level. Many overseas schools pride themselves on being “college prep” and, however supportive they may be to younger children, provide only rigorous academic classes at the upper grades with no assistance for students who

need help with life-skills training, such as practical math and reading skills.

- If it is appropriate for your special needs child, investigate residential schools in the United States for your child to attend while other family members fill an overseas assignment.





third | **Face the Big Decision:
balancing career needs
of parents and the family
as a whole with the
needs of the children.**

This may be the hardest part for you: Should you go overseas at all?

With all this information in hand, it is time for a serious parent discussion. Even if you can obtain medical clearance to go to one or more of the posts you are considering, you need to weigh carefully the career demands you are facing in light of the needs of **all** your family members. This is a huge issue for some families, especially those in Foreign Service branches of the government in which overseas postings are essential for career advancement. If your child's special needs are such that in fact they can be met without question in the foreign setting, this won't be a serious issue. But what if they can't, or you're not sure? The situation of the special needs child occurs in the context of a family. You will need to balance the career advantages of the posting, the enriching experience and challenges of overseas living for your other children and family members with any disadvantages, such as having to put a spouse's career on the back burner.

There will be many eager to give you advice about the matter, but nobody can make this decision as wisely as you can. Let us be honest: the special needs of some children are so severe, or require such specialized care, that overseas assignments are not possible. More than likely, however, you'll be able to find a posting and school that will work – if you start your search as early as possible and communicate with all resources in a totally honest manner. You may, indeed, be surprised at what extraordinary arrangements are available.



■ The application process

Obtain application forms from the school(s) you are considering (often available on their web sites). These may include teacher information inquiry forms that will greatly facilitate the process.

The biggest mistake that families make in going overseas with their special needs children is to hide the situation from the school because they fear their child will not be admitted.

Parents hope that, once they have made the move, the school will take pity and admit a child they might otherwise have turned down. The usual excuse given for less than total honesty is that the “records are delayed in the mail” or “are packed with household goods that aren’t here yet.” Such statements are unwise. The records should have been sent with the application. (If you have any doubt about whether they were received, bring copies in your personal luggage.) In these days of faxes and telephones, all it takes is an inquiry from the new school director to the old one to obtain records and recommendations – and hidden information – almost instantaneously.

Occasionally, especially for children who have behavior problems, parents truly hope that in a new setting the problems will disappear. They seldom do. Indeed, the move may

exacerbate the behavior temporarily. If teachers are forewarned, however, they can help a troubled child make a good transition much more effectively than if they have to figure out everything from scratch.

When parents are less than forthcoming, schools are placed in a very difficult situation. They sincerely want to help families and children and often are able to do so. With enough notice, they can sometimes prepare to serve a child who needs considerable extra assistance. But creating a positive environment for a special needs child requires an ongoing, active, working relationship between school and parents, and deception on the part of parents will not start the relationship off well.

■ Going to the next post or going home again

Remember that this whole process needs to be repeated at the close of your overseas assignment. Take care in choosing where your family goes next, and give yourself as much time as possible to prepare the way. Now that you know what it takes to create an effective transition, repeat all these steps with the new school, even if it is an “old” school to which you are returning. (Often personnel will have changed while you are gone.) If you are going to a new post in the United States, remember that there may be several neighboring school districts to choose from, some of which are more generous with services or more appropriate for your child or children than others. Be choosy.

Be sure to keep a portfolio of all the documents you’ve exchanged with the school – report cards, memos after parent-teacher conferences, records of resource services, test reports, and samples of your child’s work – so that you make the next transition as smoothly as you can. Give the teachers and therapists plenty of time so that they can write summaries that can help to smooth the way when the change occurs.

■ Enjoy!

Although this sounds very complicated, if you have a special needs child, you are probably already quite accustomed to most of the steps we have recommended. Going overseas is an extension of the situation you are already used to at home. You are likely to be pleasantly surprised by the quality of the partnership you are able to create with the new school on behalf of your child as well as by the mind-expanding opportunities of an expatriate experience. Preparation, openness, optimism, and respect among parents and educators are the essential ingredients for success for everyone in your family. We wish you and your family the very best.





Resources

■ Internet Resources about Special Needs

The Internet is a rich source of information to learn more about your child's special needs and available educational resources. Here are just a few web sites:

■ Resources on Specific Topics

Language Disorders

www.asha.org

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association

Learning Disabilities, including Dyslexia

www.interdys.org

International Dyslexia Association

www.ldnatl.org

Learning Disabilities Association of America

www.cldinternational.org

Council for Learning Disabilities

www.ldonline.org

A parent resource with numerous articles about specific learning disabilities and links to more information on disabilities and parent support groups.

www.chadd.org

Association for Children and Adults with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder

Mental Health

www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/childmenu.cfm

The National Institute of Mental Health

Nonverbal Learning Disabilities

www.nlda.org

Nonverbal Learning Disabilities Association

Gifted and Talented

www.depts.washington.edu/~cscy

Halbert and Nancy Robinson Center for Young Scholars

www.ditd.org

The Davidson Institute on Talent Development and Internet Resources
This site offers help for families of profoundly gifted children.

www.hoagiesgifted.org

A resource on gifted children for parents, educators, kids and teens.

www.nagc.org

National Association for Gifted Children

■ Resources within the Department of State

www.state.gov/m/a/os

Office of Overseas Schools
This site contains links to the regional education officers and to one-page fact sheets for all the schools assisted by the Department of State with links to their e-mails and web sites, as well as to education associations and organizations with useful information on transitioning overseas.

www.state.gov/documents/organization/9960.pdf

Guidelines for Evaluating Children with Learning Disabilities or Developmental Delays

www.state.gov/m/dghr/flo/c1958.htm

Family Liaison Office, Education and Youth

This site contains a variety of information specifically related to educating the Foreign Service child, including gifted education, home schooling, special educational needs, relocation, and third culture kids.

www.state.gov/m/a/als/1740.htm

Department of State Standardized Regulations

This site contains information on educational allowances available to civilian employees of the U. S. government and their families.

www.state.gov/m/dghr/flo/rsrscs/c1992.htm

The Family Liaison Office has compiled numerous links to organizations that are helpful to the internationally mobile family.

■ Miscellaneous

www.nichcy.org/

National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities

woodbinehouse.com/online.html

Publisher of *The Special Needs Collection* made up of 62 books and other products on disabilities and related topics for parents, children, therapists, health care providers, and teachers.

www.autism-society.org/site/PageServer

Autism Society of America

www.aacap.org/publications/factsfam/index.htm

Facts for families published by the Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.

www.aacap.org/publications/factsfam/83.htm

Services in School for Children with Special Needs: What Parents Need to Know discusses identifying and qualifying children with special needs for special education.

www.cec.sped.org/

Council for Exceptional Children

seriweb.com/

Special Education Resources on the Internet (SERI) is a collection of Internet-accessible information resources of interest to those involved in the fields related to special education.

curry.edschool.virginia.edu/go/specialed/

University of Virginia Curry School of Education gives information and resources on special needs.

www.familyeducation.com

Contains a section on LD/Special Education issues such as reading challenges, homework strategies, skill building activities, ADD and ADHD, including treatment and medication plans and behavior modification.

www.schwablearning.org/index.asp

Non-profit foundation that funds programs in learning differences and human services. Site addresses children with identified learning disabilities and those who struggle with learning.

www.peatc.org

Parent Educational Advocacy Training Center publishes a newsletter on special needs to which members can subscribe. The site contains numerous parent resources.

<http://specialed.about.com/cs/homeschool>

Numerous articles and links to support and enhance the education of all special needs children, especially those being homeschooled.

www.giftedbooks.com/

Publisher specializing in education books for parents, teachers, and educators of gifted, talented, and creative children.

■ Some Resources about Living Abroad

These do not deal with special needs children, but may help you anticipate some of the complexities you will be facing as you prepare for the international move and for raising children in the overseas environment.

Gopnik, A., *Paris to the Moon*, Random House, New York, New York, 2000.

A personal, good-humored account of one young family living abroad. Much of this article was originally published in the *New Yorker*.

Jehle-Caitcheon, Ngaire, *Parenting Abroad*, Aletheia Publications, Putnam Valley, New York, 2003.

Written by an expatriate who lived abroad for twenty-six years, this guide provides useful insights on the many and complicated issues that arise as one raises children abroad.

<http://members.aol.com/alethpub/>

Kalb, Rosalind and Welch, Penelope, *Moving Your Family Overseas*, Intercultural Press, Inc., Yarmouth, Maine, 1992.

The authors of this book are Americans who draw on their personal experiences to balance general advice and detailed suggestions as they explore the major issues in raising children in the internationally mobile lifestyle.

<http://interculturalpress.com>

Maxfield, Brenda, *Up, Up, and Away!!!!*, Foreign Service Youth Foundation, Washington, D.C., 2000.

This publication helps children prepare for an international move. It talks about the things children fear about a move, the positive aspects of an intercultural lifestyle, and advice on how to make a move less painful.

www.fsyf.org/

Meltzer, Gail and Grandjean, Elaine, *The Moving Experience: A Practical Guide to Psychological Survival*, Multilingual Matters, Ltd. , Cleveland, England, 1989.

This book gives practical suggestions for surviving the psychological stresses and challenges of moving for both local and international moves.

www.multilingual-matters.com

McCluskey, Karen C., ed., *Notes from a Traveling Childhood*, Foreign Service Youth Foundation, Washington, D.C., 1994.

This paperback is an anthology by parents, children, educators, researchers, and mental health professionals about the effects of international mobility on children.

www.fsyf.org/

Parker, Elizabeth and Rumrill-Teece, Katharine, *Here Today There Tomorrow, A Training Manual for Working with Internationally Mobile Youth*, Foreign Service Youth Foundation, Washington, D.C., 2001.

This manual is designed for facilitators to help mobile teenagers deal with relocation and cross-cultural issues that affect their identity and worldview.

www.fsyf.org/

Pollack, David C. and Van Reken, Ruth, *The Third Culture Kid Experience*, Intercultural Press, Inc., Yarmouth, Maine, 1999.

Based on both research and the personal stories of countless individuals, this book fully explores the various implications of growing up abroad as a "Third Culture Kid." The authors are considered leaders and experts in the field of TCK studies.

<http://interculturalpress.com>

Seaman, Paul Asbury, *Paper Airplanes in the Himalayas – the Unfinished Path Home*, Cross Cultural Publications, Inc., South Bend, Indiana, 1997.

An autobiographical account by a "Third Culture Kid." It recounts the author's struggle to come to terms with his overseas experience.

www.crossculturalpub.com/

Taber, Sara M., *Of Many Lands, Journal of a Traveling Childhood*, Foreign Service Youth Foundation, Washington, D.C., 1997.

A journal for people brought up in foreign countries. It is designed to help those who have lived in many cultures put together the stories of their lives. It consists of excerpts that describe experiences the author had at different ages in different countries, followed by prompts or questions designed to evoke the reader's own life experiences.

www.fsyf.org/



Westphal, C., *A Family Year Abroad: How to Live Outside the Borders*, Great Potential Press, Scottsdale, Arizona, 2002.

This paperback book is part narrative of a family's year abroad and part instruction manual for individuals and families considering spending an extended period outside their country.

www.giftedbooks.com

■ Returning Home

Copeland, Anne (Ph.D.) and **Bennett, Georgia**, *Understanding American Schools: The Answers to Newcomer's Most Frequently Asked Question*, The Interchange Institute, Brookline, Massachusetts, 2001.

This book guides newcomers to the United States, or those who have been abroad for a long time, in understanding the U.S. school system. Foreign-born spouses might find this book especially helpful.

www.interchangeinstitute.org

Eakin, Kay Branaman, *According to My Passport, I'm Coming Home*, Family Liaison Office, Department of State, Washington, D.C., 1998.

This book addresses the challenges faced by children returning "home" from another country and discusses their transitional and reentry needs. It can be accessed

at www.state.gov/documents/organization/2065.pdf

Smith, Carolyn, *Strangers at Home: Essays on the Effects of Living Overseas and Coming "Home" to a Strange Land*, Aletheia Publications, Putnam, New York, 1996.

The editor of this book is a Foreign Service spouse who understands well the full implications of the internationally nomadic lifestyle. The compilation of essays by others who have been through this lifestyle offer many insights, as well as practical suggestions for helping children – especially teenagers – to adjust.

members.aol.com/alethpub/

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A topic paper prepared by the Advisory Committee on Exceptional Children of the U. S. Department of State Office of Overseas Schools
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