



Choosing an international school should not be a headache

Julia was both excited and stressed when her husband told her the big news: Eduardo's company offered him a great promotion but they had to move from Madrid to London. The new job and the benefit package were excellent, and they agreed that it was also an amazing opportunity for their children (aged 12 and 8) to learn a new language and live abroad.

While confident about overcoming the challenge of adjusting to a new country, language and culture, they were concerned about finding the right school for their children. For them, the happiness of their children was the number one priority. In our global society, expat families moving around the world face the same challenge.

Before your visit

It is important to realise that you are looking for an international school not just for your children, but for the whole family—the community will become yours as much as theirs. If you are excited and positive, and make your children part of the process, they will be excited too.

Before you visit your new location:

1. Ask colleagues for school recommendations. Trust what they say, but understand that their choices fit

their circumstances. You will need more than their opinion to make an informed decision.

2. Find out about the work commute and transportation options to determine the areas where you may want to live. However, it is important that you do not choose a house before the school. A long commute to school every day is in no one's interest.
3. With this information, use the internet to research and identify your shortlist of schools.
4. Refer to website, prospectuses and contact Admissions departments for information about the curriculum offered, accreditation by international organizations, availability of places, etc.
5. Most schools offer a good education but to find the elements that set them apart, look at their social media channels. There you can discover “the life of the school,” real and authentic content about activities, fieldtrips, concerts, sports fixtures, etc. What happens outside of the classroom can be as important as the learning within.
6. School reviews can help you determine the reputation of a school, and it is normal to find a mix of opinions.

Schooling is a very personal choice, and everyone's perspective is different. While a series of bad reviews should certainly be a “red flag,” do not be discouraged by the odd negative review.

7. Current parents are an excellent source of information about any school. Read what they have to say and ask the Admissions department to provide contact details for some of them.

What to ask during your school visits

Even if you think you have determined which international school will be best for your family, confirm your intuition by visiting at least two of the schools you are considering. Choose a regular school day, when the campus is alive with students moving between classes, interacting with the faculty and each other.

Areas to consider include:

1. *The culture.* Many international schools reflect a national identity such as American, British, etc. This may be clear from the school's name and/or curriculum, or it may be less obvious.
2. *Diversity.* The opportunity to have an international experience is a gift that

will stay with your children forever. Ask about the diversity of the student body to ensure that they will be joining an internationally-minded community.

3. *Curriculum.* Your anticipated length of stay and factors such as your children's age and character, previous school experience, language and so on will influence which curriculum you prefer (e.g., American, British, International Baccalaureate).
5. *Language Support.* Find out what assistance the school offers to help international students improve their skills in the language of instruction, so they can cope with the subject content as soon as possible. While parents are right to be concerned about how their children will cope with learning in a different language, it is surprising how quickly most students adjust with the right support.
6. *University destinations.* The universities that graduates attend will indicate the academic level of the school.
7. *Facilities.* A campus tour is about much more than ensuring that the facilities are appropriate for the learning experience. Whether a school is brand new or boasts historic buildings, as you walk around you may get an immediate "gut feeling" about whether your family will be happy there.
8. *The Admissions team.* This department should communicate the essence of the school and make your tour around the campus pleasant and informative. They may introduce you to teachers and the Head of the School. With notice, the school may also give your children the chance to experience a few lessons and/or meet students in their grades. Ask for contact information for current parents with children in the same year

groups. A conversation with these parents can provide essential information about the school and reassure you about your decision.

9. *The sense of community.* You are choosing a school for the whole family. How the parent community integrates with each other and the school is especially important for expat families as they adjust to a new country, culture, and language and make new friends. Some international schools offer excellent parent support networks to help make the transition period less stressful. A parent association that proactively supports spouses who do not work and promotes involvement in the school community will have a positive impact on any new expat family's experience.

If you ask some parents why they chose a school for their children, they might say it was love at first sight. A school might "tick the right boxes" but it was their intuition that told them it was the right place for their children. Asking the right questions will help you find a school that not only provides an excellent academic experience for your children, but also provides a community in which they will be happy and develop as caring global citizens.

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