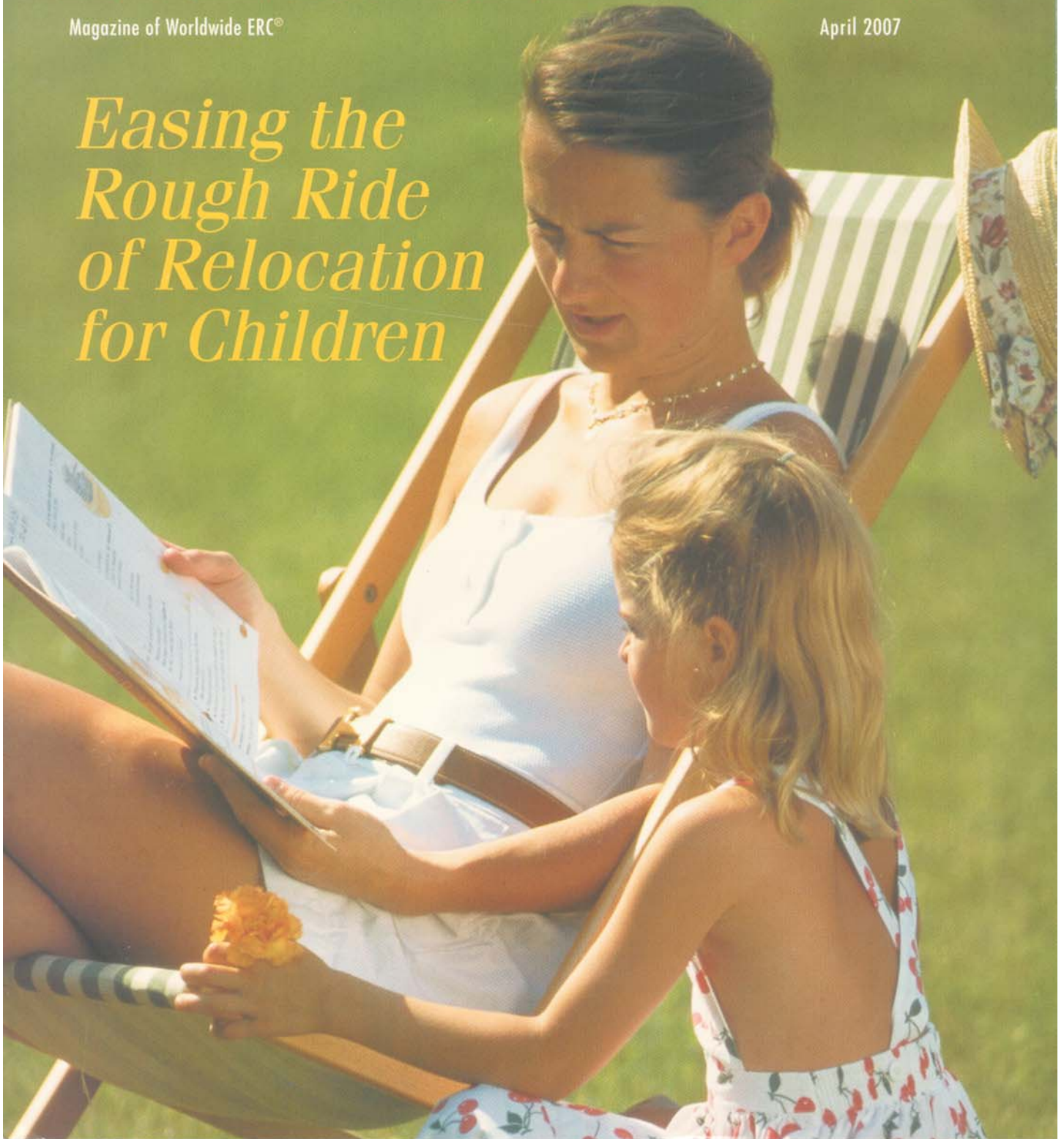


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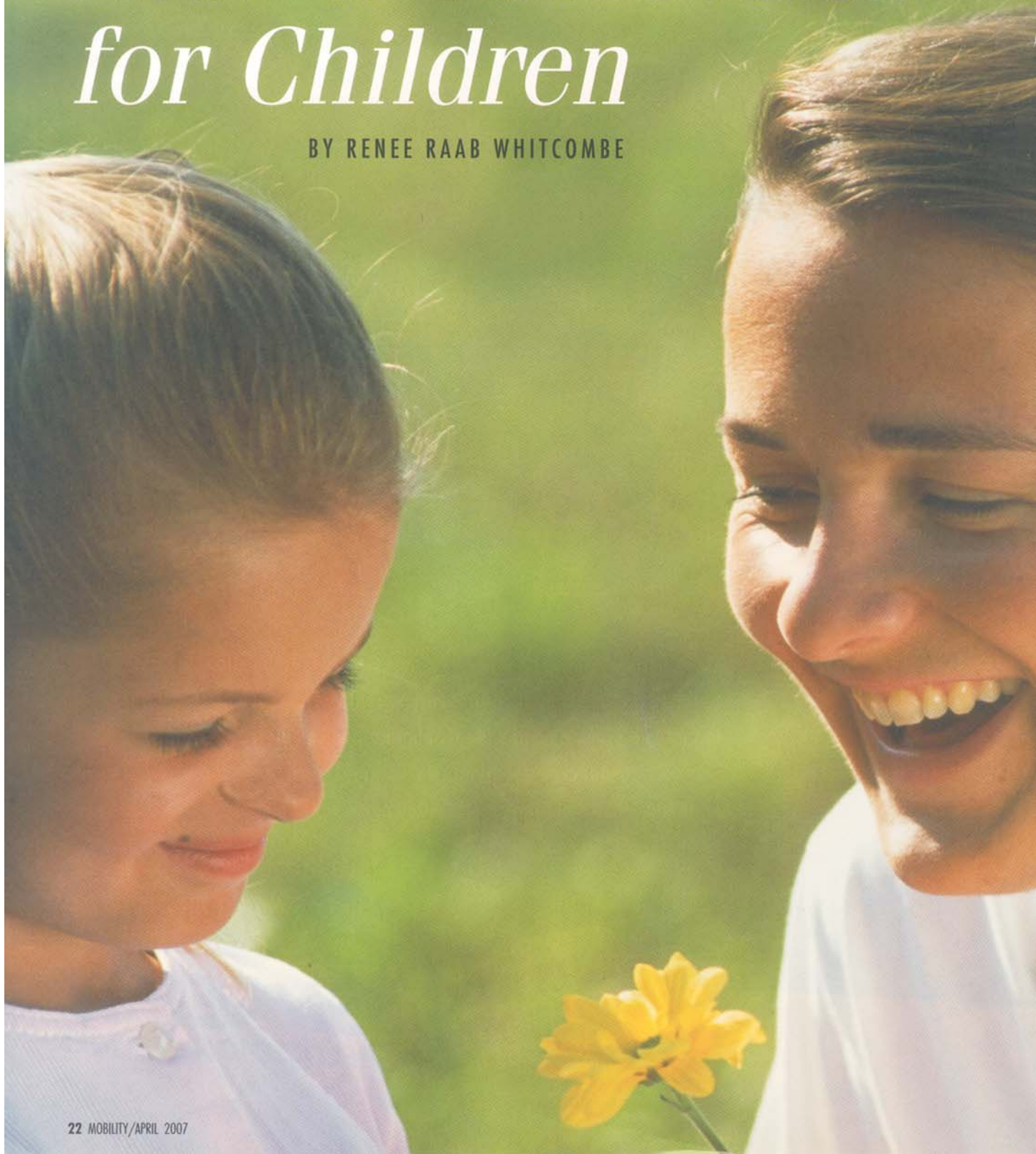
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Easing the Rough Ride of Relocation for Children



Easing the Rough Ride of Relocation for Children

BY RENEE RAAB WHITCOMBE





A relocation is difficult and stressful for all members of the family, but children in particular can have a hard time dealing with being uprooted—especially if they feel uninvolved during the process. Through interviews with several real estate professionals and other experts, Whitcombe examines techniques that will assist in helping children feel a part of the relocation and ease the burden of the transition.

Remember the last time you were on an airplane that encountered sudden, unexpected turbulence? Everyone knows the skyrocketing anxiety that overtakes you as your thoughts start to run to an awful place. The calming voice of the pilot on the intercom reassuring the passengers and crew that everything is under control and smooth air is moments away is a huge relief and actually restores your breathing back to normal.

Consider, though, how you would feel if the pilot said nothing over the intercom while you were gripping your armrests and wrestling your imagination with silent prayers. Fortunately, pilots do use the intercom and try their best to alleviate our greatest fears.

For some kids, moving is like flying in a plane with a pilot who neglects to use the intercom. Real estate agents working with families that have school-age children know how extra stressful moving—and the anticipation of moving—is for these clients. The preparation, logistics, and emotions are no picnic for adults, so it is impossible to quantify the heavy burden for children trying to cope with a decision that is out of their control and often comes along with limited understanding or explanation.

This dilemma presents a true opportunity for real estate agents who pride themselves on connecting with their clients and forming long-term relationships. Although no one would dispute that parents are responsible for guiding their children through the relocation transition, agents who demonstrate genuine concern for children during the moving process make a lasting impression that helps build solid bonds.

Tricks of the Trade

As an industry, relocation professionals work with 40 million Americans that move every year; nearly 7 million of whom are chil-

dren under age 9. The U.S. Census Bureau reports that, since 2003, those statistics are holding steady with no indicators of a turnaround. Given this statistic, savvy agents across the country use a variety of tools and their own creativity to illustrate a commitment in aiding a smooth move.

Genuine concern can be illustrated directly (agent to children) or indirect-

ly (agent to parents on behalf of the children). Carla McArdle, an agent with RE/MAX Preferred Properties in Vienna, VA, is dedicated to helping young people acquire their first homes by treating them like family and counseling on finances—"It's my greatest joy"—and then sticks with them for decades. At the point that these clients have children and are moving again,

McArdle's personalized touch is monogrammed towels for the family.

Kathryn Henry, CRP, director of relocation for Century 21 Golden Realty, Pasadena, CA, goes the extra mile by "presenting clients with coupons for a night of kid-sitting, so parents can have an evening out alone in the new neighborhood. They love it!"

10 Terrific Tips to Prevent Moving Meltdowns

- 1. Present the move in a positive light.** Explain the circumstances of the move (job transfer, new job, being closer to family), and let them know why relocating is good for the family. Convey genuine enthusiasm about the new home, new school, and new neighborhood, but do not overdo it with over-the-top cheerleading.
- 2. Listen—and then listen some more.** Communication between parents and children is highly important when introducing and preparing for a move to a new home. Encourage questions and candid discussion. Be sensitive to fears, sadness, or confused emotions. Let your child know you are available on an ongoing basis.
- 3. Explain the timing and process.** No matter what age your child, the whole idea of moving becomes clearer when you explain everything step-by-step. Be generous with details about what will happen to their possessions: who will do the packing, when the movers will come, how the family will travel to the new home, and how the movers will transport everything.
- 4. Involve your child in the moving process.** Allowing age-appropriate input on decisions and planning will help your child feel like more of a participant in the move. Let your child help pack his or her own belongings, allow him or her to decide which things get thrown out or donated to charity, and let him or her mark the boxes from his or her own bedroom.
- 5. Avoid moving-day meltdown.** Judge your child's emotional threshold for observing movers methodically pack, wrap, and empty your home, and plan accordingly. Perhaps it is best to drop him or her off with a friend or relative, or hire a babysitter to take him or her to the park and out for lunch at a kid-friendly restaurant.
- 6. Visit and research the new neighborhood.** Find out as much as possible about your new home and area and share the information with your child. If your child cannot visit the home ahead of the move, bring back pictures or video to help him or her envision his or her new room and the kitchen where he or she will be eating meals. Get a local map of the new area and highlight schools, parks, grocery stores, and other places of interest to children.
- 7. Stay in touch with friends and neighbors.** Help your child understand that moving away does not mean forever losing special friends and family. Buy a new address book to collect contact information. Take lots of pictures before you construct a memory book. Have a good-bye gathering (at your home, a friend's home, or a local pizza place). Send postcards with your new contact information to friends and family, and include a request for visits, phone calls, and e-mail addresses.
- 8. Be prepared for some acting-out and moodiness.** These are natural signs of stress and adjustment. Your child may be experiencing several conflicting emotions. It is entirely possible to feel excited, sad, and scared all at the same time. Going from familiar to unfamiliar is difficult, especially for a child who was not responsible for the decision to move in the first place.
- 9. Transfer routines.** As you get settled in your new home, remember to bring traditions with you. Keep places at the dinner table the same. Arrange food and drinks in the fridge like always. Resume Friday movie-and-popcorn-night as soon as possible.
- 10. Plug-in to the new neighborhood.** Seek out new friends on the block. Sign up for activities your child already enjoys (sports, art class, dance, or martial arts). Visit the new school. Get a library card. Hit the mall. A proactive approach will go far in quickly generating a sense of familiarity and is sure to help break the ice.

Henry also gathers a comprehensive list of parks, activities, and special events taking place in or near the new neighborhood. She said that during her 21 years in the industry, she acknowledges the kids 100 percent of the time during her transactions as a way of reaching out to have a relationship with all members of the family. She also includes the children in her closing gift.

Carol A. Kelly, CRP, GMS, senior vice president of corporate relocation services at Corcoran Group Real Estate, New York, NY, said that, in general, the corporate relocation timeline moves quickly, making it a challenge to address the transferees' needs. Her staff has impressed their clients by learning about sports and extracurricular activities that matter to the kids and then setting up appointments with coaches, private music teachers, and public and/or private school admissions personnel.

"Our job is to make the move easier," Kelly said. "We try to address the whole family, but in truth we don't always meet the children before the move." Henry and Kelly agree that clients are surprised and extremely appreciative of these efforts, and many report being truly touched.

Transitioning

Jill Kristal, who has a Ph.D. in clinical psychology and relocated from London, United Kingdom, to West-

chester County, NY, with her two children in 2003, emphasized the importance of a smooth move for kids, both emotionally and socially. As the special education consultant for School Choice International, Mamaroneck, NY, she urges parents to arrange a proper (rather than dismissive or speedy) goodbye to friends, schoolmates, the neighborhood, and places that trigger the memories of childhood—playgrounds, a favorite climbing tree, or the ice cream parlor where birthday celebrations took place. She recommends using tools that promote communication about the move and provide closure, including a calendar reflecting the events leading up to moving day, a camera, a new address book, various games, and non-fiction and memory books that address moving on a child's level.

"Though most kids are resilient during periods of great change, the less- or non-resilient kids are at risk for serious emotional issues if tools, information, or understanding are lacking during the moving transition," said Kristal. "The most common of these issues are a loss of self-esteem, difficulty with peers in and outside of school, and general trust issues within and outside the family."

Although Kristal concurred that the responsibility for guiding kids through this transition lies with parents, she also said that heartfelt gestures from others involved with the

family are greatly appreciated and can make a big difference.

More than half of the real estate and relocation professionals interviewed for this article acknowledged that they focus gifting efforts and demonstrations of concern entirely on the adults. If you fall into this group but are interested in making a shift in your current style of signature service, consider starting with some caring advice. An attractive written list of tips to help clients address the needs and worries of their children will likely be appreciated (See sidebar.). Some meaningful, reasonably priced tools will come in handy. Kid-friendly information about the new neighborhood or your list of personal favorite local family activities truly is thoughtful. An ambassador program between longtime clients and newcomers is creative, easy to arrange, and helpful.

Everyone knows that life and its changes come along with some unexpected turbulence, but we never forget the pilot who offers comfort and confidence at just the right moment. ■



Renee Raab Whitcombe is the award-winning author of "Look Who's Moving To A New Home," an interactive keepsake album that helps children cope with the transition of relocation. She has also survived her own family's

cross-country relocation experiences with two children. She can be reached at +1 310 702 4466 or by visiting www.buddingfamily.com.

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