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# off duty

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THE MILITARY LEISURE TIME MAGAZINE



## A KID'S VIEW OF PCS

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OF MILITARY LIFE AFFECT CHILDREN?

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# ON THE MOVE **again**

by Eric & Jonathan Minton

## Editor's note:

**The last time *Off Duty* addressed the issue of PCSing, one young reader wrote to ask why nobody ever talks about moving from the kids' point-of-view. She was right: Adults don't ask children what they think often enough. So this time we assigned Eric Minton, our most frequent contributor, to tackle this issue from the kids' perspective. Not only is he the son of an Air Force chaplain, but the mother of his two sons is an Air Force captain. Jonathan Minton, seven, the co-author of this article, and his five-year-old brother, Ian, most recently moved to Elmendorf AFB, Alaska, in 1993, when their mother PCSed from Langley AFB, Virginia. All the quotes in italics are Jonathan's words.**



Collectively, Eric Minton and his two sons, Jonathan (right) and Ian (left), have 14 PCSes under their belt.

**I** felt embarrassed when I moved to Alaska. I felt sad that I had to move because I thought, "No one will like me, because I'm going to be new to my class, and I don't talk right, and I don't dress right, and I don't know what they mean when they say they want to play *Sonic the Hedgehog* because I'd never seen that show before." But I've seen it now.

A pregnant military wife once asked my mother how a career of moving affected her three sons. I, the youngest, was a college senior by then. Mom reassured her friend that we turned out well. Hunched over and slobbering in my best Quasimodo imitation, I told mom she should let me meet the woman.

Joking aside, I feel in retrospect that I gained from a lifetime of moving. We PCSed six times, to as far afield as Alaska and Turkey, from the time I was two in North Carolina through my high school graduation in New Jersey. The experience gave me educational breadth and social skills I may not have learned other-

wise. It certainly taught me perseverance and the value of friendship.

Children, however, don't look at their lives in retrospect. Their experience is now. More importantly, that experience is theirs alone. Any kid may not react how his or her parents expect. But experts do agree on one thing: when it comes to moving, your child needs time and space—and an attentive ear—to vent his or her feelings.

"If there's anything that's detrimental, it's the family that says 'Suck it up, it's tough, but this is the military,'" said Anne Tarzier, deputy director of Relocation Assistance Programs in the Department of Defense Family Policy Office. "Moves are loss and grief processes. If people do not deal with the loss or grief, they don't achieve reconnection."

*I didn't like leaving Virginia at all because I had some friends there and they were my best friends. I liked (the movers) because you know you can't pack all your stuff in one plane. They had to pack some of my toys and I got to bring my Aladdin toys and I liked that. I didn't like to move, but when mom said that it snows in Alaska, I said that I did want to go. We did go.*

Ian, Jonathan's brother, was just shy of four years old when he moved from Virginia to Alaska. After the movers had unpacked in his new home, Ian exclaimed, "I got my bed back. We got our table back. We got our chair back." For him the transcontinental move was an inconvenience. "I couldn't find nothing," said Ian, now five. "I couldn't find my Power Rangers underwear."

How much anxiety pre-schoolers experience depends on what attachments are severed. A child who

spends most of his days with a babysitter will have more trouble adjusting to a move than a child with a parent who stays home.

The parents' demeanor is also important in how a child at any age reacts to a move. "Children will adapt to a move the way they see their parents adapt," Tarzier said. "If mom and dad are stressed by the move, they can guarantee their kids will be." Even making extra efforts to incubate the child sends a message that something is wrong. "Kids are not stupid, and they can smell avoidance a mile away," Tarzier said.

know those friends yet."

*I saw a boy going to Alaska, too, and I got to bring my toys. I liked the plane. I got to walk around and that was fun. My dog came, and I liked that. My mom came, and I liked that. Ian came, and I liked that. The boy who was going to Alaska and I played with my Aladdin toys. The boy played with Jafar. He was terrific playing Jafar. I got to play Aladdin. I was good playing Aladdin.*

Jake Kohler was born at Maxwell AFB, Alabama, and celebrated his first birthday in the Wright-

The move to Sacramento was hardest for Jake, now 15. "On our block we had a bunch of kids my age to hang out with," he said of Virginia. "At that time (13 years old) you start making a lot of good friendships, bonding with your friends—friends I'll never forget."

Geyer said the 12 to 15 year age group is particularly vulnerable because of the importance of peer groups. "To draw an analogy, it's the same as leaving your first love or best buddy behind," he said.

More important than age is the child's maturity, attachments and



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"If you're trying to protect them, you're increasing their anxiety."

"Parents want to say, 'It's not so bad, look at the bright side,' but for the child making the move, it is that bad," said Pleas R. Geyer, director of child and adolescence psychiatry at Carolinas Medical Center in Charlotte. "You have to let them grieve what they've left behind, and you have to take that seriously. Yes, they are going to have a better life and they may make better friends in the place they are going, but they don't

Patterson AFB Temporary Living Facility near Dayton, Ohio. At five he was back at Maxwell, where his brother, Clay, was born. In a year they moved to Hill AFB, Ohio, for a four-year tour, then back to Maxwell for 20 months. Next, it was on to Springfield, Virginia, where his father served at the Pentagon for two years. Next, the family moved to McClellan AFB near Sacramento, California, for just 15 months before returning last December again to Wright-Patterson.

other developmental issues, he said. Many parents worry that moving during high school might scar children by disrupting their social and academic lives. Geyer contends that's a nostalgic reflex. "We always cherish our high school days," he said. However, older teens are better able to cope with losses than early adolescents, he said. "That doesn't mean they're not losses, but they should be able to handle it."

Aside from feeling loss, teens worry about joining a new crowd



ERIC MANTON

**Jake (center-left) is ready to settle down after 15 years on the move with his parents, Col. Bill and Carol Kohler, and brother, Clay.**

sporting different fashions.

"After moving around awhile I try too hard to fit in sometimes," said Jake. "In California, I wanted a friend in the worst way. When I moved here I was, like, 'What do people dress like, what is the latest fad?' After I got here I decided I didn't care, I'm going to be myself. I think it worked out better that way." When he first arrived in Ohio, Jake wore his school backpack over both shoulders, contrary to local custom. "Now I see 17 or 18 kids wearing their backpack on both shoulders."

*I hate moving because I don't like being new. If they were going to do a play and I didn't understand, they'll think I'll ruin the play or everybody will laugh at me. Some boys told me they didn't like me because I was new. I was very upset and started to cry and build sand castles on my own. Some boys liked me because I was new.*

For the first time in their lives, Jake and Clay's most recent move came in the middle of the school year. Most parents strive to time moves for the summer, but when I was growing up I preferred mid-term transfers. It was easier to be the new kid in class than just another student at the start of the school year.

Not so for Clay, 10. "It was harder

to leave my classmates and go to another school that had been together for half a year. It's kind of different."

Jake concurs with Clay. The first few weeks, he said, he was "kind of cooped up." "I had just come over a couple thousand miles, I didn't feel like doing anything at the time. The teachers are always trying to help make friends, but you don't want to

get too close to a teacher at first because then everyone thinks you're a brown-noser, and that's not a good way to start out at all."

Jake's social life begins with sports, namely soccer. So once he joined a team, he said he "bust through" in making friends. Academically, however, he hurt, beyond dealing with a different grading system and course requirements. He had already gone from a great school in Virginia to a lousy one in California, and now finds himself in an Ohio school where "the teachers are a lot better, but they're a lot faster."

In Sacramento, he said, "they're not teaching you the same algebra the whole United States is learning. They're teaching you Californian algebra, the easy route. I came here and they're doing problems I haven't even dreamed of."

*It was hard looking for a house. We liked the motel on base. I got to help find a house. We looked at two houses. We picked the first house. The kitchen was upstairs, my room was up and it was Ian's room, too. And mom's room was up, and the playroom was down.*

"I didn't like moving into the new house," said Ian. "In Virginia, it wasn't like this. We didn't eat up

## GOOD ADVICE FROM THE EXPERTS

Psychiatrist Pleas R. Geyer, whose mother grew up in the Army, laughs at the acronym PCS. "Change of station is never permanent," he said.

Despite this inherent facet of military life, the Pentagon had never addressed frequent moves as a family issue until a couple of years ago. It now has set up the Relocation Assistance Programs in the Office of Family Policy, Support & Services.

Through the program, each installation's family support center or Army community center has a relocation manager. These DOD-trained professionals, with access to a database linking information from all installations, will do individual planning sessions to help the whole family navigate a move, from PCS procedures to Little League contacts. These experts also conduct seminars on stress, financial management, entitlements and children's adjustments.

For first-hand advice, here are the top tips from a few experts with several PCSes under their belt.

Jonathan, seven (two PCSes): "Pack a favorite toy, pack a favorite book, pack favorite costumes. Pack them into suitcases you keep with you all the time. Because if you want to look at it, it's not with you, and you would be so upset."

Clay, 10 (five PCSes): "Don't say you have a month to get ready to go. Try to tell your kids a little before."

Jake, 15 (seven PCSes): "Don't be so overprotective with your kids. It really hurts them because they don't meet friends. It's good for a kid to go out and explore on his own instead of parents making friends for him."

Eric, 36 (10 PCSes): "It's best to tell kids of an impending move as soon as possible, but make sure the PCS is solid. The military seems to play you like a yo-yo a lot of times: 'We're going here, no there, no somewhere else.' That only creates unnecessary anxiety for children."

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## OFF DUTY ★ LIFESTYLE

stairs. I don't like eating upstairs. I would rather eat downstairs and sleep upstairs."

Most experts suggest parents involve their children in the logistics of the move as much as possible according to their maturity, as long as the adults don't set unrealistic expectations or make promises they can't keep. However, Geyer sounds a cautionary note on this important matter. "The reality is that children have no role and parents shouldn't pretend they do."

The Kohlers took Clay on a house-hunting trip to Sacramento prior to the PCS to help him adjust to the move. "That was SO BOOOORING," Clay said. "All you do is walk and look at houses, inside of houses, opening doors." He also felt that knowing what the house looked like beforehand robbed the move of some of its excitement.

Because of a soccer tournament, Jake didn't make the trip, nor did he want to help choose the house. "I'd

have no say in it. My parents say, 'Do you like this Jake?' I'd say, 'No.' 'OK, fine, we're going to get it.' That's pretty much how it is." He ended up staying with friends, playing into the early mornings. "I think it's better, when your parents are looking for a house, if you stay behind because that's when you and your friends get really close."

*I liked Virginia and I (knew I) would only be there for one (more) day. That's what I hated about moving.*


Jake wouldn't change a thing. He is close to his family, he appreciates his military experiences, and he feels sorry for classmates who have never left the state. But he's ready to settle down. "I'm at that point where I'm getting tired of making friends over and over and over.

"When we move, my mom always says, 'Jake, I know how you feel.' I know she's saying that to make me feel better, but she really doesn't know how I feel. My parents lived in the same place all their lives (when they were kids) and never moved. Maybe across the street, that's about it. They don't know how I feel."

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## TELL OFF DUTY ABOUT YOUR PCS EXPERIENCE

PCSing is a big event for service people—either you've just arrived at a new duty station or are headed back to the States after completing an overseas tour. Either way, the *Off Duty* editors would like to know how you feel about your latest PCS move, so we've made it the subject of this month's *Off Duty* Mini-Survey.

To participate, answer the questions on the Reader Information Service postcard bound into this issue, add a stamp and mail it in. We'll compile the answers and, in a future issue, report what newly arrived readers say they hope to do, and what those who've just completed a tour actually managed to do while overseas.