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Laurence Mackin talks to Phillip McMahon, Jenny Jennings and Wayne Jordan about bringing *Alice in Funderland* (right) to the Abbey stage – and the cast perform a few sparkly numbers . . .



Drawing from a child's experience



CIARA KENNY

The move to a new country is hard for all and from a child's perspective the wrench from home to new schools, languages and friends can be particularly difficult – but there are ways to smooth the transition

BARRIE AND Teresa McNamara left Co Kildare for Toronto in August last year with their four children, Seán (11), Eimear (10), Pádraic (7) and Róisín (5). Canada promised the family new experiences and a better quality of life, but Barrie and Teresa worried about how the kids would adjust to being removed from their friends, family, and all that was familiar to them.

"From an early stage we spoke openly with them about it," Barrie says. "We showed them where their school was on Google Earth, encouraged them to start saving Canadian dollars, and tried to engage them as much as possible in the preparations." Their eldest and youngest children were excited about the move, but the two middle kids were more apprehensive.

"They would ask why we were going, and why we couldn't just stay in Ireland," Barrie explains. "We told them we would go to Canada for a year and if they didn't like it, we would go back. We rented out the house in Ireland rather than selling it, and I think that eased their fears."

Once they arrived in Toronto, Pádraic had a hard time settling, and refused to go to school. "The teachers got to know him very quickly because he'd stand in the parking lot and refuse to go in," says Barrie. "But he adjusted after a few weeks, and now he doesn't want to come home from school in the afternoons. He has completely adapted to it."

Moving away from an established network of friends and family to another country can be a traumatic experience for children of any age, but according to Dr John Sharry, a psychotherapist and parenting columnist with *The Irish Times*, one of the most significant factors determining how a child views a move like this is how the parents perceive it and present it to them.

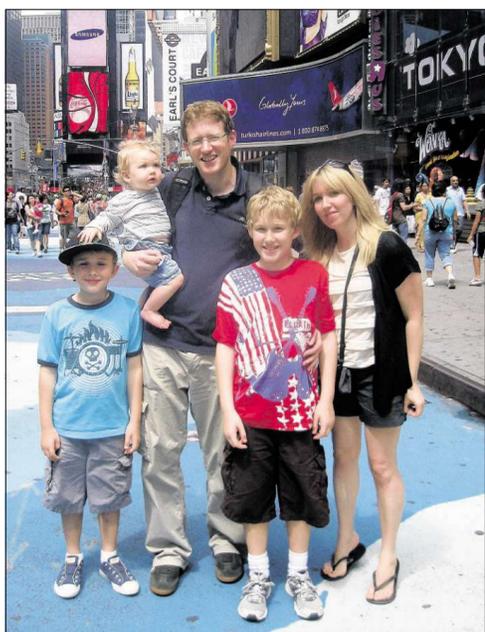
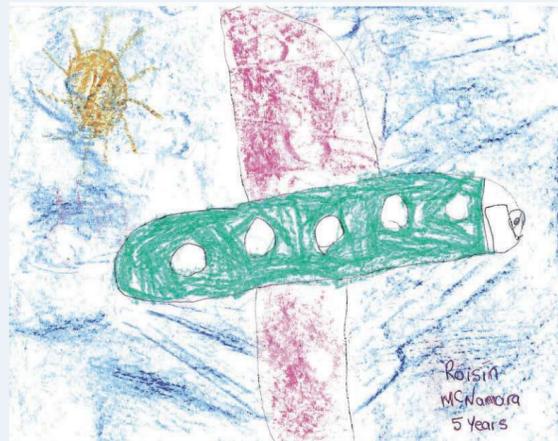
"If the parents are very positive, if they are emigrating out of choice and think they will have a better family life abroad, a child will usually go along with that," he says. "But if the parents are unhappy about having to leave, the child will pick up on the negativity and will find the move much more difficult." In the weeks and months coming up to the move, parents may be busy making practical arrangements, but it is very important to set aside some time to help children to do their own research about their new home, advise play therapist and child psychotherapist Anne Brennan.

"With younger children it is great to make a story out of it," she says.

"Take pictures of them packing, and make a storybook, including a chapter about the aeroplane. It will help them to build up to the transition." The most important thing in preparing a child of any age for the move is to discuss things openly and to include them when making decisions, and to respect how their age might affect how involved they would like to be in the arrangements. "A four-year-old doesn't need to know all the details," she explains, "but a 16-year-old might. They might be interested in participating and taking some responsibility for the move." It is also important for parents to be playful and affectionate with their children, and to reassure them. "Younger children worry about the practical things, like 'where will we get food, where will I sleep, will you be there to give me a hug at night, how will I have my bath'," says Brennan.

"It is consoling for them to know that although it is going to be a different place, life will go on." "Fitting in" will be one of the main concerns for children once they arrive, and their accents and interests may change quickly to match those of their new friends. Brenda Mannion, who recently wrote a piece for the *Generation Emigration* blog about emigrating from Mayo to Boston last year, says her sons, aged 20 months to 12 years, became "well and truly Americanised" in a very short period of time.

"They drink soda, eat candy, and play video games. Anything cool is now awesome, and sometimes I am not even sure that they know their friends names because they call them 'dude' so often," she says. "But it's still great to hear familiar phrases like, 'cop on would ya', or, 'clear off ya' big eejit,' even if the accent is beginning to sound unfamiliar." Activities that



Brenda Mannion with her husband Paul and sons Conall, Tommie and Niall

children enjoyed and were good at in Ireland should be continued if possible in their new country to help maintain a sense of continuity, Sharry advises. Participating in locally loved sports or cultural activities can help them to feel part of the community in their new home, while joining Irish social groups or sports clubs can help to maintain a connection with their Irish heritage.

"Kids will settle better the more they integrate and do things that are normal for other kids their age in that place," he says. "What makes children happy is participating successfully in activities and social groupings with other children in their school or locality."

All four McNamara children joined the local GAA club in Toronto, and played their first match just five days after they landed. "It was important for them to continue something over here that they

enjoyed at home, and to meet other Irish people who have made the same journey as them," their father explains. "It gives them a link to Ireland too, when they are talking to their friends back in Kildare they can tell them about the match they played at the weekend."

Karen Hennessy, one of the founding members of the Irish Families in Perth social network, says that in many instances, children and teenagers adapt to life in another place much more easily than their parents do. "Once they start in a new school and start to make friends, they are fine," she says. "Teenagers can have more trouble settling, they would have made stronger friendships at home and may feel more resentful and upset that they have been taken away from them, but with Skype and Facebook they can keep in touch with their friends at home, and being Irish here can be a very positive experience." The McNamara kids kept in regular contact with their friends in Ireland on Skype when they first arrived, and although they are not as reliant on it as they once were, they still enjoy seeing their

friends on screen. Seán plays Playstation games with his Irish friends when they are online at the same time, and Pádraic keeps up with what his old class are learning about by following the school's Twitter account.

They miss their cousins and friends in Ireland, but their parents believe they have adapted well to the Canadian way of life. They tried snowboarding, skiing and ice-skating over the winter and are looking forward to the local outdoor pool when the weather heats up.

"I think they would enjoy a holiday back in Ireland, but would be happy to come back here again," Barrie says. "They have made that switch in their minds, Toronto is home for now."

NÍ CHALLANAIN FAMILY

"People always say that children readily adapt, but the adaptation phase can be quite traumatic, especially when another language is involved," says Deirdre Ní Challanain, who moved to Belgium from the UK in 2003 with her husband and three children, aged eight, five and two. "My son Liam (then eight years old) cried himself to sleep for the first three weeks, constantly querying why dad had to take a job at the university and wondering when we would be returning to Sheffield to all that was familiar," she says. "He was a proficient verbal communicator and suddenly he was finding himself imprisoned by this unknown language." Etain, a shy-natured child, would cry when dropped off at kindergarten, and their youngest daughter Aoife, who was bubbly and communicative at home, didn't speak to her pre-kindergarten class teacher for the first term.

But the language barrier gradually broke down, thanks to the one-to-one Dutch lessons provided by the school, and by the time the new school year rolled around the following September, the children had made plenty of friends and were more confident Dutch speakers.

"For a long time they still talked about going back to Sheffield," says Ní Challanain. "But when talk about moving to another country with another language came into play they were adamant they were not going. They were fearful of reliving the experience again."

Instead, the family found themselves in Ireland, where Ní Challanain is from, but for the children it was still a new country despite having visited regularly on holidays. "On their first school day, now 11, 9 and 6, wearing school uniforms for the first time in their lives, they started out in Schull national school, fearful of the

Drawings by Eimear, Róisín and Pádraic McNamara on their family's journey to Canada.

ART COMPETITION



Emigration illustrations

The Irish Times invites Irish children – that's anyone aged 12 or under – who have recently moved abroad to create a painting or drawing based on the experience. It could be a picture of your new home, or some aspect of the country you now live in, or it could be a picture of the friends, family or place you left behind. Or anything else inspired by the move and change of scene.

How to enter
When you have finished your picture, you should scan or photograph it – or ask your mum or dad to do it – and email the photo to mypicture@irishtimes.com. Please include your name, age and a few sentences about the picture, what it shows and why you drew it.

Technical information
Format: entries should be high-quality jpegs.
File size: Each image should ideally be 1mb or larger and not smaller than 500 kilobytes.

Terms and conditions
Available from marketing@irishtimes.com

The prize
The creators of our 10 favourite pictures will win International book vouchers, which allow you to order a book online and have it posted to you in your new home.

Share your views and experiences with Generation Emigration, The Irish Times forum by and for Irish citizens abroad, curated by Ciara Kenny

Blog: irishtimes.com/generationemigration
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Email: emigration@irishtimes.com



Barrie and Teresa McNamara with Seán, Eimear, Pádraic and Róisín

unknown," she says. "Six hours later I was greeted by three smiling children – 'it was great', 'I loved it', fabulous. There was no communication barrier."

O'NEILL FAMILY (left)

Back in 2010, Rachel O'Neill and her husband Damien decided to uproot from their home in Omagh and move to Perth with their two children, Shannon (11) and Tiya (3).

"We had a lot of preparation to do with the children, especially the 11-year-old," O'Neill says. "We have a very strong connection with our family back home, and she is very close to her granny and granddad. She used to visit them every weekend, but in the months coming up to the move, she only went once a month so she would get used to not seeing them. It was hard on her, but we told her the truth from the beginning, and tried to emphasise all the positive things about living in Australia."

Damien landed in Perth shortly after Christmas and Rachel joined him with the kids last month. "The preparation really paid off. Within just a few weeks Shannon totally settled, and she rarely mentions home now. The weather is fantastic here, and allows her to do things she wouldn't be able to in Ireland. She roller skates, and plays netball. She misses her granny, but I am really shocked at how well she is doing otherwise," O'Neill says. "Tiya still talks about the cows and the green fields and the bog from back home, but he is not upset. As long as he has his mammy and daddy around he is ok."



Deirdre Ní Challanain with Liam, Etain and Aoife