CHARLIE'S LITTLE ANGELS

NOT-SO-FOND FAREWELLS

Charlotte laments the transient reality of expat life and the trials of explaining heart-wrenching farewells to her little ones

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It would be a monumental waste of column inches if I were to dedicate this column to extolling the virtues of life as an expat. We all know and love the cultural and social benefits of living in the UAE, which is why we're all still here. What I wasn't prepared for, however, when I moved here eight years ago, was the sheer number of heart-wrenching farewells you have to utter with each passing year. No sooner have you settled into the wonderful warmth of a new friendship, relishing the close connections made when so far from home, than you're being invited to their garage sale – swiftly followed by goodbye drinks as pastures new beckon your 'BFF'. As upsetting as this is to adults, who have the benefit of a Facebook account to keep the friendship going, I can't imagine the heartbreak it causes to the little people. (Children, not dwarves.)

In my daughter's five years of life, she has already waved tearful adieus to six friends, and it is starting to take its toll. The other day she was contentedly colouring when she suddenly looked up, crayon poised mid-air and said, "Mummy, will we still live in Dubai when you're old and walk with a stick?" I smiled and gently said, "Probably not darling." "What about until I get married?" I resisted the urge to tell her she'd have to curb her penchant for dramatics before that joyous occasion could take place, and simply said, "No sweetheart. We might live a few other places before then."

When I thought about it, I realised all she wanted was reassurance, not necessarily the truth. In a city where the only constant is its transient nature, having a solid sense of home is incredibly important. But then how do you create a sense of stability when you're buying farewell cards as often as you buy milk?

On the flip side of this, my sister's children go to a village school in the UK where the majority of the parents are ex-pupils and most (if not all) of the children will be with the same classmates from the age of four to 18. I wonder how often that happens here, or if that's healthy either?

While the idea of sharing make-up tips at 16 with the same set of girls you shared Barbies with at six seems appealing, being able to quickly integrate with people from a variety of

cultures and backgrounds is a vital trait as an adult. And if this is taught at an early age, then surely that's all the better? (If that last sentence sounds like it's been uttered before, it's because it's been trotted out with increasing regularity when trying to justify our way of living to family and friends back home.)

A common way schools deal with the country's constantly shifting community is to mix up the classes every year, so kids are always being separated from their bosom buddies and forced to make new friends. My first reaction upon hearing this was abject horror – how could my little one cope without the company of Molly/Emma/Mischka/Zara/Finna (delete name as appropriate depending on the mood of the day). But now I've realised that it's actually teaching a pretty valuable life lesson in making and retaining friendships. You don't have to be in the same room to still be mates.

As we gear up for a new term, I don't quite know how to break it to my three-year-old son that his best friend won't be there at the nursery door with a cheeky conspiratorial grin and a fistful of warm Play-Doh at the ready.

No doubt his initial confusion will turn to disappointment, followed quickly by resignation, and he'll reluctantly move on to a new partner in grime. Three seems a little young to have to embark on this particular life experience, but in this town, it's a pretty essential skill to master. A

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