The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

A Warm Reception

By The Moscow Times

June 02, 2011



One evening last week, a Russian friend stood in our dining room and looked through the window at my sons on the terrace outside.

"I like to think of myself as being pretty broad-minded," she said, "but I'm really uncomfortable with what I'm seeing right now."

I knew exactly what she was going to say next, and it wasn't that my children are badly in need of haircut — which they are — or that they were still up and out of bed at 8 p.m. on a school night. Still, I didn't want to embarrass her by assuming that she fit a lazy cultural stereotype, so I asked what it was that was upsetting her so much.

"They're in short-sleeved, short-trousered pajamas! They have no dressing gowns, no socks and no slippers! Aren't you worried that they will get a cold?"

And there we have it. One of the biggest differences between Western European and Russian styles of parenting: the number of layers of clothing children should wear. I would go so far as

to say, in fact, that this is less a cultural difference and more a cultural divide, and in my humble opinion, the babushkas have a great deal to do with it...

Nowhere is this divide more obvious than in the classroom. My sons go to a school where there is a mix of Russian and international students, and the amount of clothing that a child wears can be directly attributed to his or her parents' nationality. Those with one or more Russian parents — or, more crucially, grandparents — are still wearing their snowsuits to school in mid-May, whilst the rest of us throw caution to the wind and put the kids' padded jackets in mothballs substantially earlier (although it has to be said that this year that moment came somewhat later than in years past).

Non-Russian teachers find themselves in the tricky position of speaking to their melting students' caretakers and requesting that the children be sent to school without their snowsuits and hats when the rest of the kids are already bounding through the doors — often, it has to be admitted, shivering in the chill of the early spring mornings — in shorts and lightweight jackets.

I get the reason for this caution on the part of Russian parents, I really do: A cold or flu could easily lead to something more threatening, and without the healthcare safety net that many of us expats take for granted, this is a possibility any loving parent would do almost anything to avoid.

However, times have changed. Access to healthcare has moved on, as has the advice parents receive (in the West, at any rate). Certainly, in the low temperatures of a Russian winter, we all — no matter our country of origin — wrap our children in layer upon layer, and woe-betide the child who steps outside without a hat. But it doesn't seem so necessary once the temperatures rise — it was 15 degrees Celsius when my friend made her pronouncement — assuming that the children live in a warm, clean, secure home, are well-fed and have plenty of exercise.

But getting back to my friend. How to deal with her concerns without causing offense? "I know this is a key issue for many Russians," I said, "but the thing is, the kids are used to this; you can see for yourself. They're not cold, and they're perfectly happy. And they are never sick." She looked at me with disbelief. "Seriously," I continued, "in the 18 months that we've lived here, we haven't — touch wood — had to make a single visit to the doctor." Still, she looked suspicious. And then I hit on the one fact that I knew couldn't be disputed and which she might accept as good reason for my seeming carelessness with my children's health.

"And don't forget, we are British, after all. Fifteen degrees Celsius? For us, this *is* summer!"*

**Not quite true. A real British summer day needs to be at least 18 degrees Celsius. Those few points on the temperature gauge make all the difference...*

Clare Taylor can be contacted at ClareTaylorMoscow@gmail.com should you wish to contact her regarding paid writing work or free chocolate reviews. No children were chilled in the making of this post.

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