

PREPARING TCKS FOR OVERSEAS

“Expatriate breakdown tends not to be a phenomenon of expatriate employees themselves but rather of their spouse and children” (1998 study)

Issues facing kids on cross-cultural transition

1. Handling change

Which age group do you think finds change most difficult – 3-5, 6-12, 9-13 or 14-17?
Studies have shown it is the youngest and oldest – 3-5 and 13-17. Both is at a stage when they are grappling for independence but when dependence is also important and stability is important.

The two-year-old son of a young couple in language school was playing with some small cars in front of the house. He began crying for no reason that could be detected. There were no signs of injury or bites and he was not running a temperature. Since this same type of things had happened several times before the parents began to review the situation. They had just recently moved overseas. The house was new. The climate was different than what they had before. Hidden vocabulary and ability to speak were above average for his age – in English, but the house girl spoke only Spanish. Church services were in Spanish. The parents spent all morning in language school and studied much of the afternoon. They owned no car so travelled by public transport. The diet was different.

The only logical solution was for the mother to be with him instead of going to school. She would take classes in the afternoon by a tutor. The change worked wonders. An agency representative agreed with the change saying, “You’ll get the language later, but you may never make up for this time that you need to be with your son.”

“Before one year of age children seem to adjust well. They aren’t speaking yet and consider all adults as much the same. Then again after the child is in school, adjustment seems to go smoothly. Therefore the critical time is between one and five years of age. This has been verified over the years.”

Teo Van der Weele, a Dutch cross-cultural worker says: “Parents receive many years of training before going overseas. Children, however, are often just going along. They are left to figure many things out for themselves.”

How many of you had preparation on family issues before coming overseas and how many of your children received any personal preparation? And yet we know that children’s issues figure highly on the list of reasons for premature return.

It is very important that we understand our children and their individual needs.

Our attitude to the last move colours our attitude to the next. Children who have had a positive experience are more likely to embrace the change. Good memories give courage and hope for the next move. Stress and loss are cumulative. Helping them to review how they handled major changes in the past will enable them to plan how to handle the next move.

2. Communication

Communicating with children means telling them what it is going to be like, counteracting wrong impressions. I knew a four-year old who was going to Kenya– “it will be all jungle, lions and tigers”, he said. Actually he was going to the concrete jungle of Nairobi. Not only did he need to be disabused of that idea, when he went to the zoo with his class and was allowed to put a snake around his neck, he had to be told that it would not be safe to do the same thing in Kenya. It is important to be honest with children and give them realistic expectations of what it is going to be like – whether that be when you move overseas or when you make visits back ‘home’ – remember for most of your children they are leaving home not going home when you return. It means allowing them to ask questions, taking them to libraries, using the web, doing investigations on what lies ahead. It also involves listening skills and learning to read children’s non-verbal language, particularly that of small children.

3. Expressing emotions

It is important to allow children to express the emotions they feel, however irrational those emotions may seem – “I suppose we’ll fly around in a plane for ever and ever and never have a proper house again”. Using puppets and stories helps with young children who find it difficult to define their emotions and use the ‘I’ word. The book ‘Harold and Stanley say Goodbye’ is an excellent resource. Some children may feel guilty about having negative emotions when mum and dad are all excited about the new move. It can be helpful in a pre-assignment programme for the child to have a stranger in whom they can confide. Confidentiality is then important and having the child’s permission to talk to the parent about any anxieties.

4. Having a voice

Many TCKs speak of a ‘delusion of choice’, feeling like victims. Decisions were made which profoundly affected them but in which they had no say. The older the child the more they need to be involved in decision making and be given options. It was one of the positive parenting points identified in the 1992 CART/CORE survey of 10,000 adult MKs. What mechanism exists in your family, agency, and company for children to have a voice?

Listen to what one TCK says: “As TCKs we frequently find ourselves in situations that are the result of someone else’s decision. So often other individuals have made the decisions.. individuals we can’t even see. If you grew up in the military, it may have been the generals; if it was thin the diplomatic corps, it was some person in an office somewhere. If you grew up in an international business like IBM (I have Been Moved) it was the CEO in some huge corner office. If your parents were Christians, it was one step higher – God.”

Another TCK, who had grown up overseas, found out while in the States that his family would be reassigned to a new country (not by choice). He had these words to say: “I’m sick of making friends and always saying goodbye. You made me do this in the country I grew up in, and then you dragged me to the States to a school that I hate; at least now I have friends, and now I’m going to have to leave them. Even if I make friends in the new country we’re going to (which you told me I would do here in the States and I didn’t), I will have to say goodbye to them again.” (Among Worlds, Summer 2001)

5. Supporting children in transition

- 2-5s
 - Predictability – young children need continuity of environment - positioning of furniture
 - Recovery time – allow time and space to adapt to the new situation
 - Build in time at bedtime – time for stories and sharing feelings
 - Avoid surprising your child – prepare, reassure, talk
 - Support mum – if mum is settled the child will settle sooner
 - Guard time with them – time for extra hugs and smiles
 - Discover ways of calming your child – do you need to give more warning of changes, time to absorb the instruction, time to get to know the new acquaintance, time on his own to calm down.
 - Use stories – make up stories, use role-play, bible stories of TCKs, familiar stories
- 5-7s
 - ‘You’re special to me...’ – finish it for the child and help them to finish it to say to other significant people they are leaving behind
 - Spending pocket money – for little goodbye gifts
 - Cards – making/buying cards to send to special people for goodbyes
 - ‘I remember when’ – reviving good memories
 - decisions – selecting treasures and special toys to take
 - Feelings – 6 year olds can be withdrawn – what might they be feeling? Find ways to help them express their feelings
- 8-10s
 - Goodbye events – parting is painful, give opportunity to mark the occasion with events and visits
 - Journaling – encourage the child to keep a diary in word or pictures of what is happening and how they are feeling
 - Messages – ‘I think you are...’ notes of appreciation to special people
 - Acronyms – taking the letters of someone’s name, e.g. M A R Y and finding a word for each letter
 - Is this an extrovert or an introvert? Introverts often manage better because they take time to watch before doing

- 10plus
 - Don't show off – observe but don't be shy for too long
 - Watch what people wear and how they socialise
 - Listen, suck in what you hear
 - Learn what the bad/good words are
 - Don't overreact
 - Be willing to make friends with those less popular
 - Keep a portfolio of you work for the next school

Families are making frequent moves between culture – some once a year. We want to look at how they can build bridges during their time away that will sustain relationships, ease transition and support them during their time overseas.

Let's start with cultural considerations:

CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

Everyone has to decide when they go overseas how closely they are going to identify with the local culture – the closer you identify the harder it is to reenter. Moreover, the more rigid the culture the harder it is. And as we saw yesterday it is not just one culture with which we are interacting, there is the expat culture, school culture etc. What do we need to bear in mind when making these decisions?

Lifestyle

Every culture has its own values – culture isn't good or bad it is different. What would say were the top 5 values in your passport culture? What are the top 5 values in the new culture? Children need to understand what culture is and how it affects their behaviour and their priorities.

In order to help transitions for children parents need to decide how much of their passport culture they will retain and how much they will give up, how closely they will identify with the new culture, and what effect those decisions will have on their ability to move between cultures.

I read: "We need to accept culture as a dynamic, a walk of life, dynamic and changing; to learn, and to teach the skills of learning, culture and not to fret over whether or not I want my kid to marry a national".

Dr Joseph Kim writes: "In a multi-cultural society what is needed most is fearlessness. Fear causes ethnocentrism. Fear can cause a number of problems in children. Fearlessness, or faith, causes our children not just to survive but to thrive".

Having said that, I do believe there are some areas we need to seriously consider when making these decisions on cultural identification.

Daughters

What is the attitude of the society to women? This is particularly relevant in an Islamic society. Are women perceived as inferior? What does the society do for the self-esteem of your daughters? If girls always have to cover up head to toe, they can become ashamed of their femininity.

I heard of a mum who took her daughter to the doctor on a return visit home. The doctor asked, 'Have you been living in an Islamic country?' To which she replied yes. 'I thought so. Since your daughter came in she has not looked me in the eye, her shoulders are rounded and her chest concave. She is doing everything she can to disguise her femininity'

We need to be careful that in helping our daughters to behave and dress appropriately in the local culture, we do not send them wrong messages about their womanhood. Fathers will need to find ways of expressing affection and appreciation for their daughters when it is often difficult to do this in public.

Attitudes to possessions

We teach our children to share toys. If you are with children who have few toys, that can be a challenge. How do you prevent all your child's toys getting smashed up?

Discipline

What is the normal method of discipline in this culture – are you comfortable with that? Where are the boundaries? Are boys treated differently from girls?

Security considerations

In some societies discipline is by touching. Children need to be made aware of appropriate touching just as they would if you remained in your own country. What sort of relationship exists between house helps and the child?

Adapting to western teenage norms

If you come from a society which is quite enclosed, where children are quite protected, girls have to be chaperoned, then travelling back and forth to a western context can prove a challenge. The girl who is used to being chaperoned may initially find herself nervous at going out alone. But once she is used to it, it will be a struggle for her to return to being guarded. This is another area where good communication in families is important and good preparation for return is vital.

Pace of life

In many communities, life works at a different rate – siestas, late night working and living can prove a problem when you go home and your children are up late in the evening and grandma doesn't really approve!

Secondly,

EDUCATIONAL ISSUES

Children struggle with changing schools and need preparation on how to make it in a new school, particularly if the curriculum and/or language are different. Contact with people already there will help with educational planning. Educational plans should also be discussed beforehand with a child over 11 and they can have a say in the decision-making. Make sure children keep copies of their work to take with them.

Factors affecting your choice:

1. Your child – what sort of child is this, introvert/extrovert, intellectual/practical
2. Your values – what is important in education for you? Does this sort of schooling meet those expectations/
3. Geographical location – what is available locally? Are we prepared to think of boarding in country or boarding back home?
4. Finance – how much will this cost me and can I afford it? Are there any trusts that could help?
5. Balance of family relationships and work – what time commitment is this for me (home schooling)? How much will we see of each other as a family (boarding)?
6. Ethos behind the curriculum – what is the ethos/value system of this school/type of education? Do I approve of that? Schools are very influential in a child's life. Which parent has not been told "But Mrs Jones says you should never...." And Mrs Jones word is law!
7. Roots – what continuity/discontinuity is this education going to give to the system back home? Will I need to supplement it with extra course? Particularly important for families who are not being educated in the mother tongue – remember the definition? Scandinavians nearly always have to face this one. Home schooling courses, on line education can help with this.

Narrow down your options and evaluate them.

Areas to be covered in a pre-assignment programme:

1. **Family history** – roots are in relationship for TCKs. Children should be encouraged to look at their immediate family, likes and dislikes, highlights of the past history, good and sad, how various members of the family feel about the move, the role of the extended family and how they can continue to be involved in their lives.
2. **Identity** – personal identity is threatened by an intercultural move. Children can be helped creatively to look at who they are and what is important to them by using a collage of pictures, drawing and writing entitled "Who am I?"
3. **Feelings** – how does the child feel about the next move? Using pictures or words to identify feelings, making a sock puppet with a sad and happy face, making a list of things they are looking forward to and things they will miss are all ways of exploring their feelings. Books can help too.

4. **Culture** – children can be helped in a simple way to understand what culture is and how it works. Using the iceberg illustration, talking about glasses, different ways of seeing things, experiencing different ways of doing things, e.g. using chopsticks, writing with the other hand, can explore this interactively.
5. **Third Culture Kids** – explaining the definition of a TCK and what that means is helpful in advance; using the ‘sunglasses analogy’ of blue and yellow glasses to see the world, defining everything as green is a simple instrument.
6. **Making friends/keeping friends** – children can be helped to think through strategies of how they had made friends in the past and how they might make new friends.
7. **Saying goodbye** – this is a painful area and children need to be helped to identify who and what they want to say goodbye to and how they might do it. They can be encouraged to take appropriate photos to put in their memory banks.
8. **Looking ahead** – children need to be helped to have a future perspective. They can make a wish list for 3 things for the next 3, 6 and 12 months.
9. **The New Country** – there are lots of ways children can explore the place they are going to. This can be made fun by creating a scrapbook, designing a cover, cutting out magazines, downloading pictures and information from the internet.
10. **God’s involvement** – for children of Christian parents, a look through the Bible at the promises God makes to us in change, the TCKs in the Bible, the image of pilgrimage can be helpful.

Aims of a sample pre-assignment programme from the USA (1)

Getting acquainted

Parents and children meet with the youth trainer for introductions and an overview of the program before beginning their separate sessions. In the child's classroom, introductory activities are conducted to learn background information that will allow the trainer to adapt the program to the child's learning style and needs. The child's negative and positive expectations about moving to the new country are clarified through a variety of structured activities.

Introduction to Culture

Using books, games and the child's own drawings, the child learns what culture is, how it influences his/her life, and how cultural differences in the new country will affect him/her. The stress is on using an "Oh that's different!" rather than an "Oh, that's dumb!" approach when confronted with these cultural differences.

Getting to know My New Country

The child learns specific information about the new country in a variety of ways. Such topics as people, geography, history, holidays, international schools and other relevant information are covered to help develop a positive impression of the new environment.

The Dynamics of Moving

Children learn, in this session and throughout the program, to recognize and identify the emotions involved in the process of moving and adjustment to a new culture, and to realize that these emotions are normal and manageable. One topic included in this session is "Saying goodbye"—the excitement, challenge, and coping techniques for leaving the familiar behind.

Being a Third-Culture Kid

The term "third-culture kid" was coined some years ago to describe the child who has lived as an expatriate and who has come to feel neither totally a member of his/her native country *or* the new country. Studies have shown that such children, as they grow up, often show a superior ability to make friends and to be flexible and adaptable in new situations. In this session the child learns how to fit into the new culture, new home, and new school.

Culture Shock

The child explores the typical adjustment cycle and learns what to expect in terms of the ups and downs of adapting to a new culture.

TEEN PROGRAM

The training program for teenagers combines materials and sessions from both the adult and children's programs, and is especially designed to fit the learning style, age and experience of the participant. Information and activities related to teen life in the new country are stressed, along with reassurances about the upcoming lifestyle changes that will be necessary.

Teens learn how to make friends in the new country, discuss their feelings regarding the overseas move, and learn about recreational activities that will be available. The repatriation component will also deal with what it is like to return to school in the United States after having lived abroad and what skills the teen can use to fit back into American culture, frequently a concern.

Aims of a sample pre-assignment programme from the USA (2)

Charting a Course for Myself

Outcome: Increased understanding of your role in the upcoming move as an “Intercultural Explorer”.

- A. Understand participant’s roles & responsibilities as an Intercultural Explorer
- B. Discuss how each family member perceives and feel about the move.
- C. Define their goal(s): 1) Program Goals: 2) Goals for the move.
- D. Explore what makes them **who they are**.
- E. Explore how the **concept of self** change and transform in a new environment.

Culture and Perceptions

Outcome: Increased understanding of culture and how it impacts their upcoming move to their destination culture.

- A. Understand the concept of **perception**
- B. Gain insights into how **culture** impact their perceptions and interactions with the host nationals.
- C. Define and describe the following **intercultural concepts** and relate these concepts to dealing with host country nationals.
Stereotyping and Generalisation
Reserving Judgment
- D. Define and reflect on their personal values through values assessment, debate, and case study scenarios.

K-W-L: Opening the Door for your Exploration

Outcome: Gained lots of practical information and tips on living a new country

- A. Compare and contrast differences and similarities between the host culture’s and their own communication styles.
- B. Identify their interests, questions and curiosities regarding the host country and culture.
- C. Play the role of cultural researcher. Identify local resources and use them to begin to answer these questions
- D. Gain some exposure to different aspects of the host culture through music, cooking, language lessons, short video clips or readings.

Adaptation

Outcome: Developed strategies for dealing with changes and with your feelings when you move.

- A. Identify potentially stressful, confusing, or conflictive situations that result from a change in environment.
- B. Learn ways of framing these situations in a more positive light, by viewing them as choice-making or decision making opportunities.
- C. Brainstorm ways to help each other deal with **culture shock roller coaster**.
- D. Explore ways in which their perspective will change as a result of the international experience

Sample Agenda

Day 1

9:00 – 12:00

🌐 **INTRODUCTION AND PROGRAMME OVERVIEW**
Family Session – Morning Exercise
Programme Goal and Agenda

🌐 **CHARTING A COURSE FOR MYSELF**
Welcome Aboard Intercultural Explorers!
How is everybody?
My Goals for the Move

🌐 **MORE CHARTING A COURSE FOR MYSELF (Cont.)**
Who am I?

🌐 **MINDSETS: UNDERSTANDING CULTURE & PERCEPTION**
Perceptions: Just a Matter of Perspective
Culture and Values
Reserving Judgment

12:00 – 1:00

LUNCH

1:00 – 5:00

🌐 **“MORE” MINDSETS: UNDERSTANDING CULTURE & PERCEPTION**

🌐 **DIGGING INTO OUR DESTINATION – Life in the USA**
Asking Questions & Finding Answers

🌐 **ACTIVITIES OF the USA**
Food, Crafts & Activities

🌐 **SUMMARY OF THE DAY**

Day 2

9:00 – 12:00

🌐 **TALK ABOUT COMMUNICATION**
Family Session – Communication Exercise

🌐 **SMOOTH MOVES**
Roller Coaster Ride: The Ups and Downs of Moving
Culture Shock: Symptoms, Causes and Remedies
Strategies for Adjusting to a New Culture
Living Internationally
Thinking about Coming Home

12:30 – 1:00

LUNCH

1:30 – 5:00

🌐 **“MORE” SMOOTH MOVES or ALTERNATIVE ACTIVITY**
i.e. Metrics and More

🌐 **ACTIVITIES OF the USA**
Food, Crafts & Activities

🌐 **FAMILY ROLLERCOASTER**
Family Exercise

🌐 **PROGRAMME SUMMARY AND EVALUATION**