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Long-term planning

Recently our Flechas team in Brazil sent a new resource to us and others around the mission called “The Strategic Swerve”. The basic idea behind this is to persuade our families to work with the sending offices to make long-term plans to ensure longevity of service in mission. This is crucial because so many families are lost just as the parents have learnt their languages, become really at home in the host culture, and are ready to enter their most fruitful years of work. The DVD looks particularly at the possibility of parents staying on the field or returning there after a longer home leave when the children re-enter for higher or further education. For many families this has marked the end of field work; whilst this may well be right for some, there are others where we should do whatever we can to help them stay in place. This is where long-term planning from the beginning can be so useful.

We would very much encourage our families to make long-term plans, and include planning questionnaires at the back of our MK manual that come to us courtesy of CHED at Wycliffe. All of our families should complete these and have full discussions with sending office staff during the processes of application and orientation. These questions involve asking parents or prospective parents to think what are the realistic hopes and expectations for their children in the medium and long term future. Big issues such as how important the mother tongue, host country language(s), and any other language of education are need to be faced from the beginning; decisions made even when children are very small can have a lifelong impact. There are several back editions of Educare that consider multilingualism (e.g. Dec 2004, March 2005) in more detail and recommend several good books, but the reason for stating this here is that decisions need to be made with the long-term needs of the child in mind. Where will they study for higher or further education? How possible is re-entry to the passport country if the mother tongue skills are limited? What kind of need is there for the mother tongue; is it essential for continuing education, or is it just needed for extended family conversation? How important is it emotionally and psychologically to the parents that the children acquire good mother tongue skills and good parental culture understanding? How important is adaptation to the host culture? Do the expectations for children change as they get older – e.g. more emphasis on local adaptation when younger and more on passport culture re-entry needs as they get older? How can these objectives be best met?

Long-term planning enables parents to think about how to avoid unnecessary abrupt changes of plan or drifting from one educational “solution” to another. We know of some families who have worked their way through several different home education programmes, seemingly shifting in a random and opportunist way without any real appreciation of the end goals. We also know of families who simply follow the

educational patterns laid down by families preceding them rather than planning their own route. Examples of this could be the rigid use of a certain MK boarding school, or of local schools up to a set age. It may be that such patterns work well for the family concerned, but it is so much better to make plans specific to each family and to make them in consultation with their organisation's educational advisers who understand the whole family situation. For smaller organisations without educational advisers there is also the possibility to consult with SHARE, AERC or Anchor (ref. Educare June 2004).

Although stressing that families need to plan well, we need to avoid the opposite danger of excessive rigidity. It could be for example that a family plans to send the children to a local school for the first 4 years to develop good local language skills and to integrate; follow this with 5 years of home education from a pre-chosen supplier; then send the children to boarding school for the last 3 years to guarantee higher education entrance qualifications. This is a good plan in principle, but there could be problems en route. The local school may prove to be too demanding socially for a timid child or the academic standards and teaching style may be detrimental. In such cases there needs to be flexibility and a plan B in place – with such young children it would make sense to be fully aware of a viable home education alternative, or maybe a smaller local private school. The home education provider's material may be unsuitable or home education may just not work well for the family concerned. Again a "plan B" is needed – alternative sources of materials, finding more support services to improve the home education experience, returning to the local school, joining with other home educating families in a co-op or earlier boarding could all be possible solutions. The key is to plan with flexibility and have the reserve options in mind should things not work out as well as hoped.

Another facet of long-term planning is to prepare children in advance for the re-entry process, both temporarily during leave times and permanently after definitively leaving the host country. Before any re-entry parents should ensure that the ground has been prepared at any receiving schools and youth groups at church. It is poor practice to allow children simply to turn up at a school they know nothing about or where the teachers only know about them as a statistic on the school register. Children need to know where they will go and in the internet age this is so much easier. The ideal is a visit beforehand to see the school and any youth groups, but this isn't always possible. If it isn't then at least the parents and children should know the school's website and parents should have corresponded with the school authorities to explain the situation. Better options for the parents now come with skype and internet phones where it costs nothing or very little to make a more personal contact. The same should be the case for any youth groups where children could be brought into Facebook or similar friendship groups to get a real flavour of what the group is doing and how the young people tick. The ideal is for the children keep in touch with friends & peers as well as the extended family throughout their time away. This is easier said than done with some children, but it is worth the effort. A good solution may well be to follow the older-style boarding school approach and timetable a session in each week for children to make an internet social network entry, write an e-mail and/or talk on skype or similar cheap phone option. Maintaining such contact is very important in its own right as so many TCKs get cut off to some extent from their extended family and passport country peers, but it is also hugely beneficial as part of long-term re-entry planning so that they don't "return" to strangers.

One final point is that all long-term plans should be made with the needs of the whole family in mind. It is all too easy to make moves that suit one or two family members that are very difficult for others. For instance an organisation may ask parents to take up a new role and move at a time that is unsuitable for the children who could be part-way through IGCSE courses or 9 months away from high school graduation. It sounds obvious that this shouldn't happen and that it is best to wait for several months to complete the graduation or sit the exams, but all too easily such moves can happen. Appropriate long-term planning would ensure that it didn't and that good times to move, take home leaves, or definitively leave the host country are identified and plans made accordingly. Whilst emergencies can force families to move at difficult times, there is no excuse for planning or drifting into badly timed moves. In cases where families are living in countries where a visa refusal or an escalation of conflict is likely it is good practice to have the alternative "plan B" ready and to prepare children as much as possible.

If anyone would like a copy of the Flechas DVD called "The Strategic Swerve" you can contact us on SteveGill@mkea.freeseerve.co.uk or the Flechas team in Brazil on flechas.wecebrasil.mks@gmail.com

The DVD gives a good introduction to long-term planning that is useful as a discussion starter for any family or to explain the need to plan to friends, supporters and extended family members.

We can mail this to you for the cost of the DVD plus P&P.

The other resources are the CHED questionnaires. If anyone would like a copy of these, just e-mail and ask as they can be sent as relatively small files.

The importance of the father for the TCK

Some issues that third culture families face are the same as those faced by any family, but with the added pressure of the cross-cultural experience. One of these is the importance of the father's role in the children's development.

This is such an important issue that quite a few books have been written to address it, including ones from Josh McDowell and the best-seller from Rob Parsons called "The Sixty Minute Father". The MK Cart-Core findings in the book "The Family in Mission" (ed Leslie Andrews) tackle this from a specifically cross-cultural perspective.

No-one was ever heard to say on their deathbed, "I wish I had spent more time at the office".

Probably the biggest challenge for most fathers, and many mothers, is the balance of time among the various areas of life. In so many cases it is the work commitment that takes over; this can be spiritualised in that it is God's work and therefore must have top priority, or it could be always put first because we are facing the needs of a lost world. It is true that there is a lost and needy world around us, but God never meant us to sacrifice our children in the effort to do His work. There is a Bainouk proverb from Senegal that likens fathers to two kinds of tree, the mango and the oil palm. The oil palm trees there give shade to a moving small patch of ground, usually some distance away from the tree itself. So it is with the father who spends too much time concerned with business away from his home. A full-grown mango tree by contrast offers a lot more shade all around the tree itself throughout the whole day. A father who looks after his family well provides a shaded haven for others in addition to the family itself. A healthy family is also open to welcome others to their "mango tree" haven.

As one church worker who had spent many years in Southern Europe was about to leave, it was fascinating to him to hear that almost all of the comments (and praise) related to the family and how he had related to his children. There were very few references to any of his sermons, Bible studies or seminar presentations – “just” recognition that he was a good husband and father and a good role model to the national church. All his other efforts would have been largely wasted had he got this aspect wrong. In a world where so many families are disjointed and dysfunctional, this sort of family is a good advert for the Gospel anywhere and a strong reinforcement for our words.

It is easy for fathers (and so many mothers too) to go on a guilt trip when they consider their failures in this area. Keeping a healthy balance isn't easy and there will be phases of life when things go out of that balance at least temporarily, maybe with urgent work deadlines to meet. The point here is not to induce any further guilt, but to challenge parents for whom excess work is the norm. When the office or work trips *always* take priority and the children suffer from the absentee father syndrome then something is badly wrong and measures need to be taken to put that right. It has been rightly said that love can be spelled “T-I-M-E”, in that we can only show our love and full involvement if we have enough time to do so. There needs to be both the quantity and the quality of time together to create a healthy family.

A piece of research done on this was released some years ago, and quoted in our MK Manual, showed the following

- It is important for relationship building that fathers spend time with their small children and that they listen to early childhood ambitions and take them seriously
- Fathers need to do things *with* as well as for their children. This is important at any age, but especially so as children go into the teen years and don't want to open up so readily as they did when younger. They still need the listening ear and wise fatherly counsel. Doing something together is a good time to talk things through for most teens; a factor that is particularly marked in boys, and one shared by many fathers.
- Conversely there is a negative effect if fathers spend no more time than is necessary with their children, or if they are, or seem to be, too busy to answer the child's questions.

None of this is rocket science! It would be recognised as common sense by almost any thinking person, but it is good to read research that reinforces that.

A related problem area comes when the father leaves almost all of the responsibilities and decision making for the children to the mother. This can be very marked in some cultures. In some more traditional Asian families there are very high work performance expectations of the working father with a parallel of high family expectations of the mother. She may be almost fully responsible for the education of the children and if they don't reach the expectations then it is her “fault”. This division of responsibility needs to be challenged by a Christian understanding of family, where a father should have a more active role.

Biblically we are to train our children in the way they should go so that they won't turn from it when they are old (Proverbs 22v6). A good father should provide this training in all areas of life so that the children can grow to a proper level of independence. This means deliberately teaching and role modelling spiritual values in all areas including devotional, lifestyle and ethics, so that the children grow up with a Christian world view

and make their own choices to follow Christ. This involves far more than taking children to church and hoping that the Sunday school will do the job; a trend that is marked in many Western churches and one that mission agency workers aren't immune to, even if in mission the children grow up surrounded by more overt Christian activity.

It is also important though to teach vital life skills (how many fathers just keep on doing things that they could and should teach their children to do?) and fully prepare their children for independence.

As the children get older they need to be allowed more and more freedom in preparation for them leaving home to go to college, university or employment. It has been noted that many of the current emerging Generation Y suffer from the "helicopter parent syndrome". This is where parents don't train their children for independence properly and won't let go of them early enough. The end effect is that many twenty and thirty something year olds are still dependent on their parents who hover around helicopter-like ready to intervene in any case of perceived need. Overall there is a lag of 5 years in terms of independence compared to the previous generation. There are a number of suggested explanations for this that are beyond the scope of this article, but the point is simply to challenge us as parents to train for independence and let our children go, sometimes to learn by their mistakes. This is not to say that we try to train our children for a situation where they won't refer to us at all, but to aim for an ideal where they seek our advice where appropriate to help them make big decisions, and one where we accept it if they decide against our advice.

When Things Aren't Ideal

Many of our people coming into mission are from dysfunctional families and therefore have no role model from their childhood to be parents themselves. This is particularly marked in many countries where there is a crisis of good fatherhood. All too often fathers have left the family, frequently before the child was born, or if they are present their influence is far from positive. As agencies we can have an important role here in helping parents who come to us. A positive Generation Y feature is that increasingly our people are looking for training and mentoring and are open to learn from honest and godly role models. We can ensure that parenting skills are taught during any orientation courses, both formally through seminars and informally through one to one and family to family time together. This needs to be done pastorally with care for the family concerned rather than in a heavy-handed, interfering way. This good practice is already in place in many of our sending offices. One of our offices makes a course available voluntarily, but the staff there have found without exception that every parent has taken this up – showing the strength of this desire to be trained and mentored. Many of the sending offices also supply good books on this as recommended reading and are always looking for the best new resources on the net or in books to supplement or replace existing ones.

In all of this I have tacitly assumed that the parents are together, and at least have an ideal of full agreement about how to go about parenting in mind. The article is written to stress the importance of the father in such united parenting. This ideal however isn't always in place and there are now many single parent families in mission for a whole host of reasons – death of the spouse, abandonment leading to divorce, adoptions of extremely needy children and more. This is a growing reality with more families broken by one spouse abandoning the other, and the greater openness of missions to accept workers coming from this kind of situation. In such cases it is well worth looking at how much of a positive impact the mission community can have on the children, something

that is particularly strong in MK schools. In such community and “overgrown family” contexts there is the possibility for children to experience positive adult role models who can help fill some of the gap left by the missing parent. We have seen some very positive examples of this in some children’s lives. Some time ago I talked with an adult TCK who came from a situation where one of the parents eventually walked out on the rest of family – spouse and children. What helped her most in her own development and in retaining her relationship with God was the loving input given by MK school staff. The trauma coming from the loss of good home family life was significantly cushioned by the input of others acting *in loco parentis* in the fullest meaning of that idea as consistently godly teachers and role models.

Although MK schools have a unique opportunity in that they have so much time with the children, this same idea can be developed in the whole mission community. Other close colleagues frequently become a surrogate family anyway and can give support to the single parent and spend time with the children to provide input and a role model.

One Final Note

I’m aware as I re-read this article that it comes from a largely Western perspective and that cultures where the extended family is a stronger force may well have different insights on training for independence. If you have any comments on that, send them on to us; we always welcome feedback on any articles in Educare.

References

WEC MK Manual – chapter 15 – request a copy by e-mail from SteveGill@mkea.freeseve.co.uk

The Dad Difference; McDowell & Wakefield; Here’s Life Publishers ISBN 1-872059-41-4

The Sixty Minute Father; Rob Parsons; Hodder & Stoughton ISBN 0-340-63040-X

Raising Resilient MKs book, article by David Wickstrom, The Importance of Fathers in MK Development. Book and article now available on line at http://www.missionarycare.com/ebook.htm#resilient_mks Copies of book available from WEC Canada; e-mail mk_tck@yahoo.co.uk for details.

MK Cart-Core with Leslie Andrews; The Family in Mission; mail order from MTI at http://www.mti.org/books_family.htm

Articles coming in future editions

- Raising children in a secular society
- The needs of Spanish speaking TCKs
- Making co-operative schools work properly

We would like to hear from you if any of these issues affect you, either for private correspondence or to send us material that could be useful in Educare itself.

We try to cover as many issues of relevance as possible and would welcome ideas or actual possible articles anyone has for future editions. Our goal is to mix more specialist issues with ones of more general interest and to keep Educare accessible and readable to as many third culture families as possible.

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