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“A third culture kid is a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside their parents’ culture.”

Supporting Children in a New Country

Easter is fast approaching and many families are looking towards the end of the Northern Hemisphere school year with a major transition after that. For many this will be the definitive end to the overseas assignment, possibly linked to the completion of school with its final exams or graduation and the associated leaving events. The end of school for the eldest often means that younger siblings need to leave as the whole family must move. There will also be younger families en route to their overseas assignment with children looking towards the end of a school year in the “home” country, a move during the long holiday and a new school year in the host country. Although some of the ideas outlined here are useful for re-entry, this article will focus on their needs and the help we can give beforehand, during the move and on arrival.

In Advance

It is important to prepare children, even young ones, for a major transition experience. Increasingly such preparation is recognised as good practice and is becoming the norm. This shift is encouraging, but there is still a need to ensure that we consistently include children’s orientation alongside our programmes for adults. Larger agencies tend to have their own programmes in place with TCK staff committed to this role. In smaller organisations though it can be more problematic because of a lack of staff: in such situations it is worth looking at the family transition courses organised by specialist TCK support organisations. Programmes of this type are most developed in the USA, but a number of other countries also have such courses available. Although a smaller organisation may not have as many specialist personnel, there are some advantages in that it is normally easier to build a family ethos, with more bonding and a sense of belonging for the children.

The major content of any preparation for children should include the following elements

- The need for cross-cultural work
- Why us for this work?
- Joining the organisation – building relationships
- Transition – general understanding of the issues
- Transition – specific information about the country and destination

a) The need for Cross-cultural work

Children need to know why we are committed to cross-cultural work and the needs of the world around them. It is good to have some sense of the history of how this has been worked out at different stages in the past, starting at the beginning.

Children should know that such work is far from finished with so many needs still in our world.

It is good to include here an understanding of belief systems as a universal human desire to make sense of the world and find meaning and purpose.

b) Why our family?

It is true that everywhere in the world is needy in some way, so why not stay in the home country? It would keep things simpler for the family! The children need to understand the parents’ conviction that they should work in this new country. There are challenges everywhere, but we can only work in one place at a time. We can also trust that we will have the resources and abilities that we need if the family is doing the right thing. The agency and parents together can encourage the children to share this vision of the adventure ahead.

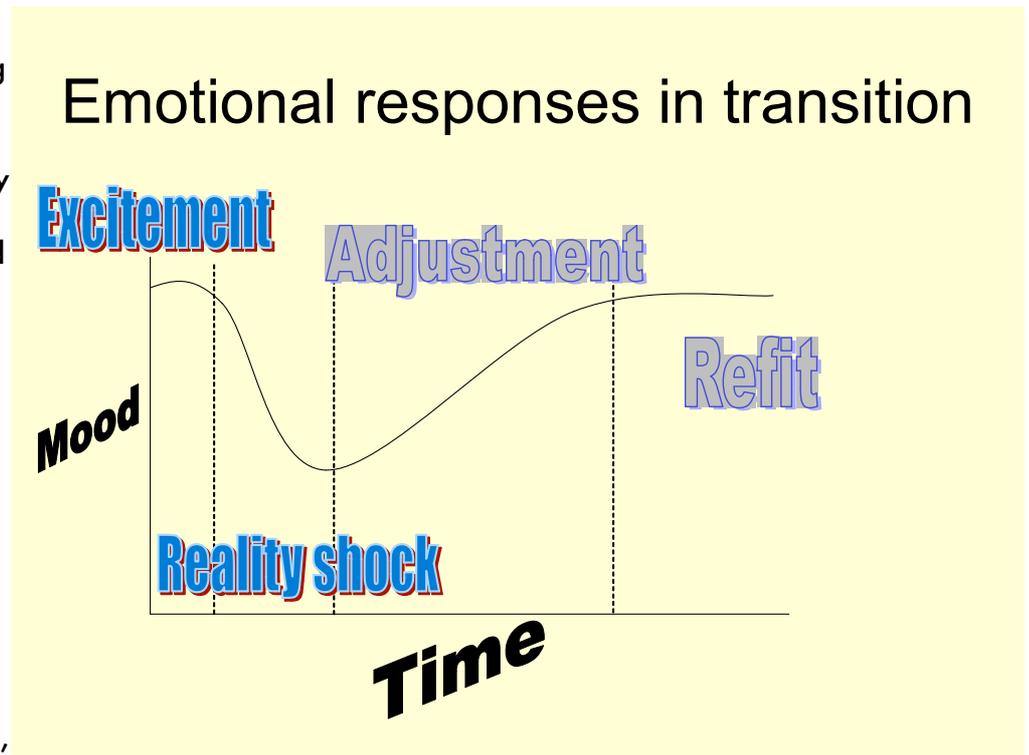
c) Building Relationships

Many of our children are very loyal to the agency the family works with – in fact they usually view it as not just an agency, but more of an extended family. This loyalty may well extend to active support or even long-term membership in adulthood. There is no doubt that relationships built early on in preparation for service, and maintained over the years, are hugely significant in the children’s lives. It is well worth spending time showing the children round the buildings and grounds of the agency’s centre, and introducing different people as well as running the children’s programme. All of this helps foster a sense of belonging in the long term.

d) Transition – general information

We like to look at a number of different illustrations here. One is a transition graph, as below

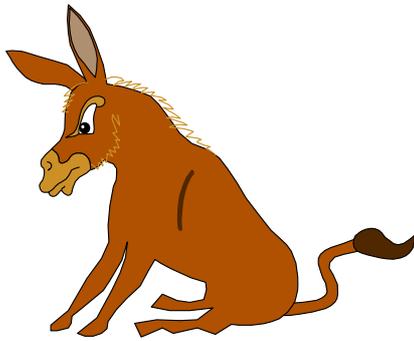
This would be wasted on young children, but the older they are the more they can understand the ideas in it. The children may well have already experienced some of this if they have moved from home during the training period for their parents. It is helpful for children (and adults!) to know that these reactions are normal. An early phase of excitement – a honeymoon period or tourist phase – is usual, where all sorts of new discoveries are being made and so much seems fascinating. This cannot last though as the reality of actually living in this new place, rather than just visiting it, sets in. This time of reality and culture shock can be very disturbing and is a time when a lot of support is needed.



It is impossible to put scales on to the graph above. We are so different that no-one can decide for us how high the peaks and troughs of the mood will be. For some children there may be little apparent change, whereas others may well feel that graph doesn’t go low enough – for them it should drop below zero! The timescale will also vary enormously. Some children may seem to make a smooth transition in a short time, maybe a few months, but others could take years. Generally the older the child the longer the transition will take. Also children with little experience of transition could take longer, although multiple transitions in some can lead to transition fatigue with insularity and poor adjustment as a coping strategy. The good news for the children is that adjustment normally does take place and that eventually there will be a feeling of belonging as they become familiar with their new home. No-one will be able to do this for the child, although there are things outlined in the “after arrival” section that parents and other adults in their lives can do.

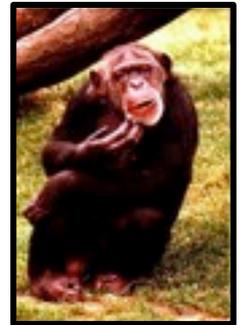
Another illustration is with animals – each animal shows us something of our reactions as we go through transition. If these reactions are understood and channelled in the right direction they can be helpful.

The chameleon tries to blend in wherever possible. The child watches, learns and then copies behaviour and practices that help them fit in. This can lead to him or her becoming a silent observer and mimic who can deny a part of their identity in order to be accepted. But there is a positive side – we all need to be ready to learn and adapt. The important thing is to know when it is right to do this and when it is better for the child to be who he or she is normally is and not simply copy others.



The donkey is the opposite of the chameleon, stubbornly refusing to blend in. "It was better in...." or "They can like me or lump me as I am" would summarise this attitude. Harking back to the better days somewhere else or adopting a superior attitude cause real problems in relating to other children. However, there are times when it is right to make a stand like this – especially when faced with norms of sinful behaviour around them such as ingrained lying, cheating at school or bullying.

Sometimes children feel like the confused chimpanzee in transition. Everything is, or seems to be, new and unfamiliar which can be a disturbing and frustrating experience. If confused the best thing to do is ask for answers – ask parents, friends, teachers and other trusted adults.



It is not unusual to see regression in behaviour like the little puppy. Children may well go back to familiar toys or possessions that they had left for a while or behave in a more babyish way. Perhaps clinging more to parents and hiding behind them. All of this is a normal phase and shouldn't give rise to alarm, but rather elicit support and understanding.

Like the hedgehog there can also be periods of retreat away from the difficulties of adjustment – reading, watching DVDs, playing solitary games, anything really that avoids the challenges. In moderation this is not bad, as we all need time to rest and recharge, and adjustment to transition increases that need. It is only a problem if it becomes long-term habit in children who were previously very open and gregarious.





Lastly, children will not sleep as much as the sloth, but the challenges of transition are tiring!

The other illustration we use is that of RAFT. With children we normally use the simpler English version of
R = Relocation, plan for the practical details and find out what you need to know

A = Apologise – make sure that no unfinished business is left behind

F = Farewell, say it in any culturally appropriate way

T = Thank you – to those who have blessed the child... teachers, friends, Sunday school staff

This is just the briefest of summaries as the RAFT concept is well-known and thoroughly outlined in a number of publications listed in the references section.

e) Transition – Specific Information

This elaborates on the R part of RAFT. Children need information about where they are going. This doesn't just mean details about their country, but also about the exact location they will go to. Questions like What will our city be like? What can we do there? What do local people eat, and will we eat like that? What about my school? Where will we live? Where are the nearest places to play if we don't have a garden? What is the weather like and what do we need to wear? Etc and etc....

Not every question can be answered in advance, but as much as possible it is good to put realistic preparation and expectations in place.

When Moving

In the turmoil of packing, travelling and unpacking there will be very mixed feelings. Excitement yet sadness and apprehension, grief at what is being left behind combined with anticipation of what is ahead. This is all normal, as are swings from one extreme to the other over a short time.

Through this stage it is good to keep to daily routines as much as possible, maintaining meal times and bed times. Wherever possible allow time for physical activity to let off steam and frustrations. It is a recipe for trouble if children are cooped up day after day in a house or flat with parents who are uptight about all the practical arrangements to be made. If plans for the day can be made with a reasonable chance of success, then it's worth doing so and keeping to them.

It is good to share feelings together to reassure children that their feelings are normal. Parents shouldn't unload all of their anxieties on to the children though, as there needs to be a balance between avoiding pretence that everything is easy and being strong to support the children.

In the moving process it is good to allow the children to make decisions about what they will and won't take with them. This is not the time to discard prized possessions that you wish they didn't have. Even if it is junk in the parents' eyes, things that are important to the child, and are feasible to take, should go in the baggage. Making these kinds of decisions helps involve the children in the process and gives them some sense of keeping control over aspects of their lives.

After Arrival

So, the family has made it...arrived at the new home in the new country...what next?
What can parents and organisations do to help children make the transition?

The lessons from the animals can really help here. When children regress or retreat, this is normal and it helps for parents to understand that. With good intentions parents can put too much pressure too early on their children to adapt, go and make friends and wonder why it doesn't happen more quickly. In the early days and weeks it is worth looking out for things of interest, taking plenty of pictures before everything becomes too familiar to be remarkable any more. Objects can be collected, experiences shared to introduce a sense of adventure into learning the new culture.

The agency can help with orientation of the children. A visit round the city or the area to take in sites of interest is well worth the time and effort. This will show the parents and children what the area is like as well as the places where they can visit later. Everywhere has fun things to do and doing them early on in the new place will help in adaptation. This could be as simple as a walk in the forest nearby or eating out at a good, but inexpensive local food outlet. Local staff can also help parents to understand and promote positive cultural aspects of local sports, performing arts such as music, creative arts and more to help their children bond with the country.

What agencies should never do is send families on a disorientating tour to see other team members early on. Visits can come later, when the family is ready. The vital thing is to introduce early stability and consistency of location. For the same reason it is important to avoid temporary and cramped accommodation before settling into the eventual home.

It is essential for parents to have the right attitudes, as it can be easy during culture shock to become negative and critical towards the host country. If culture shock becomes culture fatigue, this can become a habit that children easily pick up. Critical and negative children usually reflect critical and negative parents, although sometimes these attitudes can come from peers at international schools – in this case it is good for parents to be aware of this and work to counter such negativity.

Friends are probably the biggest factor in helping children feel at home. If they make friends early on then the adaptation process will be smoother. Small international communities tend to be fairly welcoming places. Again the agency can help by setting up buddy and mentor systems for new children arriving. No adults can make friends happen though; the best we can do is to provide the opportunities through early contact with other children and through such buddy systems.

References

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+ My Adventure.....; Claudia Smith; Activity Book for 3 – 5 year olds

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Pollock & Van Reken, Third Culture Kids, Nicholas Brealey Publishing (2009 Ed)

Knell, Families on the Move, Monarch (2001)

TCK Education & Welfare, Barnicoat & Bryant (2010 revised Ed) **CD**

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(All CDs available by e-mail order from SteveGill@mkea.freeseve.co.uk)

Dorm parenting – a fill-in job that anyone can do?

I was once in a large conference where important financial decisions were being made. The question arose as to whether a short term worker could be trusted with the responsibility of looking after the finances in this particular situation. After lengthy and careful debate, someone made a comment that I have never forgotten.

‘We entrust our children to short term staff.....why can we not entrust our money to them too?’

This remark settled the question under discussion. It also highlighted for me the fact that the process of appointing staff to work with TCKs deserves the same care and attention to their suitability for the role as that required for any other field of service. One might even argue that more care is needed, because children are vulnerable and, unlike adults, are unable to walk away from the care or support provided. An adult national may choose to refuse to listen to us or join in with our work, whereas a child in a boarding school dorm has no choice about accepting the care and input given.

In the modern Western world, it seems that training is required for every job, no matter how basic it might seem. Sometimes we wonder how much training was required in previous decades, and we frequently assume that ‘learning on the job’ was much more common than it is now. This may well have been true in a number of employment sectors, but when it comes to dorm parenting we are in for a surprise.

Recently we were in contact with an elderly lady who worked as a dorm mother in a small TCK school as far back as 1959. In the letter containing her reminiscences, she listed the experience and training that she had had prior to taking up the post.

‘Early on I did a course in nursery nursing and worked in private families for a while. I later on moved to a Dr. Barnado’s home...and from there, went on to a Home Office course for house mothers and house fathers. [We] had some tuition there, [and] attended classes at a technical school. I had spells of practical work in homes...’

This account both surprised and encouraged us. It was a far cry from the attitude that we have sometimes come across, whereby such schools are seen as an assignment for people who would not fit anywhere else, or who need support themselves. It has to be conceded that at this time there is no formal training available for dorm parents, certainly in Western sending countries, where there are far less orphanages than in the past. However, a close look should be taken at any potential workers’ experience in looking after children and young people. In addition, prospective staff should be put in touch with those with the relevant experience who can mentor them, give advice and answer their questions. On our annual PFO course for staff going to TCK schools and as family tutors, we always include a session on ‘what makes a good dorm parent?’ Where possible, we recruit adult TCKs, parents whose children have boarded and former dorm staff to give their input.

We strongly challenge the assumptions that no training is needed for dorm parenting, and that it can be done successfully as a ‘fill-in job’. Prospective dorm parents should at least have the preparation outlined above, and adequate experience of working with children. They need to have a resilient love for children and young people, and a desire to serve them ‘in loco parentis’ (in the place of the parents). It is important that they grasp the huge commitment involved, and are able to understand the implications of being responsible for someone else’s children for weeks and months at time. Although the experiences of teaching or assisting a teacher in small groups, or running a youth group are helpful, these are not to be compared to the role of a substitute parent. Probably fostering comes the closest in terms of similarity of role, and there are many excellent foster parents who might equally make good dorm parents.

It is generally true that in these days there is less job security, and an observable fact that people change their jobs more frequently, retraining for different professions sometimes quite late on in life. The trend towards shorter term commitment has found its way into our organisations, where it is more and more difficult both to find experienced people as team leaders and to staff our schools with any degree of stability. Related to this, we have been made aware a few times of potential staff who plan to work for a year or so at a school, and then move on to another type of work. Sometimes this is seen of a way of getting used to the new country and adjusting in a supportive environment, while preparing for ‘real’ work somewhere else. Another scenario is where staff doing different work elsewhere are asked to ‘fill in’ at a school because of

staff shortages. The urgency of the need tends to eclipse the importance of having the right people in place. It is a far from ideal to have frequent changes of dorm parents, as it is essential for children living away from home to have stability and the chance to build long term relationships. Young people growing up abroad face a large number of transitions and are constantly meeting and saying goodbye both to their peer group and to those assigned to teach and care for them. Longer term dorm parents of the right calibre and with a calling to the work can do a great deal to add stability to the lives of the children. Conversely, a constant turnover of staff can destabilise them, affecting their happiness and emotional development.

Good dorm parents need both to love the children and be able to let them go. They must be secure in themselves, so that they do not depend on the children's love and affection as a way of feeding their own self-esteem. They must be sensitive communicators, able to build and maintain good relationships both with the children and their parents, not to mention the other members of the mission team and the national support workers.

There is an element of sacrifice in being dorm parents. They will sometimes have free time during the day, but they will be on call at night. When there is an opportunity to leave the school site and visit local people or attend an event, the dorm parents may be the ones who are unable to go. A frustrated gap-filling worker does not make a good dorm parent!

The results of a dorm parent's work may not be easily measurable. It is relatively easy for supporters to understand more direct contact jobs, but they may be unable to grasp the importance of the dorm parenting role. While most people realise that an army needs logistics and support services, the key part played by agency TCK schools may not be noticed....until they aren't there. A colleague once illustrated the point by building a pyramid of cans, each one representing a ministry on the field. The broadest tier of the pyramid, at the bottom, contained the TCK school staff, the finance personnel and other business agents. When one or two cans were removed, the whole structure crashed to the floor. To use another metaphor, our agencies' icebergs don't only consist of the parts that can be seen above the water line.

TCKs are a specialist group of their own, a people group with their own needs. They do of course have dedicated parents – so dedicated that they find themselves working sacrificially overseas. However, as every teacher and worker with young people knows, these children cannot always be assumed automatically to share their parents' values. They need to be challenged to this in ways appropriate to their age and situation. They will certainly be able to tell whether their dorm parents really love them, or whether the role is just a job, or worse still, a second best option.

One experienced couple, literacy workers who also served at a TCK school, stressed that dorm parenting should be seen as much more than merely freeing parents to do their work more efficiently. Instead we need to recognise that TCKs and their families have needs that are just as legitimate and worthy of attention as those of the host country citizens.

Gill Bryant, March 2011

Educare is a free e-magazine written for TCKs, their families, supporting agencies and anyone else concerned for TCK education and welfare. It can be forwarded on freely, but please make sure that the recipient wants it. Direct free subscription is available from SteveGill@mkea.freereserve.co.uk