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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.”

Youth Compass - engaging Third Culture Kids of all Backgrounds

“Try to integrate yourself as much as possible into the society in which you live in, but not at the cost of not being yourself” is the advice that one TCK teen offered who has 3 passport countries and has moved 5 times in less than 17 yrs. The first challenge in following this advice when living in cross-cultural environments as a child or teen is determining what is “being yourself.” Secondly, is that the version of yourself that you would truly like to be?

Youth Compass works with international teens that are growing up between worlds. The same experiences that transform many Third Culture Kids into cultural brokers often leave them without a homeland. They have not fully embraced their parents’ culture(s), nor have they fully embraced the cultures of the countries in which they have lived. Home is everywhere and nowhere. Home is where parents are or where life is not out of a suitcase. Home is an emotional state of belonging rather than a geographic location. As a result, many TCK teens yearn for a place to belong – a place where they don’t have to explain why they have an American accent, but use British spelling and have never lived in either country; why they understand the miscommunications that have led to international conflict, but are lost when it comes to homecoming pep rallies or Eurovision.

Youth Compass was founded 10 years ago by a group of expatriates in London to meet this growing need for a place to belong and a place to explore identity. This need is greatest among those that do not have an organizational infrastructure to build community, such as the sons and daughters of international business people, families working with small non-profits and start-ups and those who move without a sending organization. Youth Compass provides good adult role models who assist TCK teens in navigating life, regardless of their background. Through regular activities, opportunities to serve others and open dialogue on ethics and belief, many teens find a community.

For many teens, the idea of an open dialogue like this is a new one. They have either grown up not discussing the presence or absence of a Supreme Being at all or they have been told what they are to believe or not believe. Many have never really had the opportunity to truly explore what they believe and why – to ask difficult questions and explore whether or not such a Being exists and the potential impact on their lives. Most TCKs are not going to accept something because someone says it is so. They want to discuss it, dissect it, explore it, test it and determine for themselves whether or not they believe it is true. The cross-cultural environments in which they live accentuate the already growing idea that truth is relative and personal. To maintain that some things are always true no matter where you are or who you are is quite a statement that challenges the post-modern approach to life many of them carry. However, knowing that there is a constant in the middle of change – that there is something that can be relied upon in the midst of transition, no matter what language, country or culture – establishes an extremely powerful anchor with which to secure their identity. Youth Compass adults encourage every teen to explore what they believe, recognizing that it is a core element of understanding and defining themselves and not one to be ignored or postponed to a later stage of life.



Youth Compass also recognizes that being part of a community is also about shared experiences: having fun and making a difference. CLUB is a weekly or biweekly activity that takes place in our communities

that is a chance for teens to have fun, play games, hang out with caring adults and explore questions of belief. There is no shortage of laughter and all teens find a place to belong. We also have opportunities for serving others through making cookies for the homeless or cleaning up the city.

Youth Compass is committed to challenging international teens to give to those less fortunate. Whether it is renovating a community centre, building a park, or helping families start vegetable gardens to provide for



themselves, we believe that serving and cultivating an attitude of service is essential. Through our annual Project Compassion service trips and local events throughout the year, students have a chance to make a real difference in the lives of people who can never repay them. This year, we took teens living in 6 cities throughout Europe (with 22+ nationalities) to Albania, where we built medical clinics in collaboration with local doctors, so that they no longer had to provide medical services to these villages out of their car. It was a fantastic opportunity to make a tangible impact in the lives of others and get to know each other at the same time.

Youth Compass currently has YC Communities in Frankfurt and Düsseldorf, Brussels, Washington DC and Southeast Asia. A YC Community is made up of adult leaders and the teens they serve. In most of these cities, we have a volunteer board that is responsible

for the work of Youth Compass in their community and is actively involved in PR, fundraising, governance, etc. We also have at least one staff person who is focused full-time on developing relationships to support teens and program activities for them to participate in. We also have volunteers that work directly with youth and those that are behind the scenes. In cities where there is not a current YC Community, we still often have individuals or groups that participate in our regional events, such as Project Compassion or our student leadership weekends. This summer we are offering one week summer transition camps in Southeast Asia for TCKs on the northern hemisphere school schedule. We are also in the process of setting up new volunteer-driven communities in two other regions.

Our vision is to be in every international community in every major city around the world and have a network of volunteers providing support and discussion on faith to every TCK teen worldwide. Not only that each teen would have such opportunities, but that as mobile families relocate, they will have the continuity of Youth Compass that connects them to a broader community that receives them when they arrive and supports them wherever they go.

Obviously, this is an enormous vision that requires far more people involved than we have currently, which is why we are in the process of building the YC Global Network. In order to truly provide a global flow of care for international teens and their families, we involve everyone connected to Youth Compass: alumni, volunteers, donors, students, parents, board members, international teachers and administrators, local and international churches, partner organizations and adult TCKs worldwide. We must provide assistance to parents and other adults in international communities that are willing to be involved. The primary purpose of the YC Global Network is to connect people to one another and involve them in both creating and being received by a supportive community.

Imagine a family formerly involved in Youth Compass Frankfurt and another formerly involved in Youth Compass Milan. They are both sent by their employers to Santiago in Chile. Through the Global Network, they find out about each other and together consider what they could organize with others locally to engage international teens in Santiago. Not only are they building community for themselves, but they are

also increasing the number of international teens and families that Youth Compass is engaging and supporting around the world.

A couple living in Los Angeles could help an international family relocating to the area by being available to e-mail, talk, or meet up for coffee. Even families whose passports say they are “coming home,” need reminders about how things are done as they transition. A family living in London could connect with a student going to the UK for university through Youth Compass and help make the transition to the passport country and to university a little easier, as well as give the parents a bit more peace about sending their son or daughter so far away. People who understand are an oasis in the physical and emotional turmoil of transition.

Our desire is that the Global Network helps more families navigate life together – that more students will be engaged in dialogue on beliefs and identity and that no one goes through life alone.

As an adult Third Culture Kid myself, I am very grateful for the opportunities I have had to get to know so many people in some places – to see the world and have such a rich variety of friends in my life. I am thankful for my childhood, but I cannot allow that gratitude to make me blind to its challenges. When I first learned of the work of Youth Compass, I wanted to do whatever I could to help other TCKs as they make their journey through life. I didn’t want them to be alone in a crowd or to waste the cross-cultural experiences of their childhood that have equipped them to be men and women of global influence.



Maybe you feel the same way. You have the opportunity to navigate life with international teens. It may mean being available for coffee or a cold drink once a week to connect with a teen that just needs someone they can trust to talk through life with. Without assuming they love or hate their experience, without assuming you understand their pain or joy, just give them space to process, to be validated, to explore core beliefs and identity, and to help them find a path forward. It may be that you open up your living room for a group of teens to spend time together building community. It may mean that you spend extra time being available for your own teen and their friends, who often have a greater dependency of family structure in transition.

You may help your friends and organizations to see beyond their own youth groups to an entire international school of students who need support. Youth Compass offers seminars, workshops and conferences for schools, parents, teens and others. If you would like to host a training session at your school, expatriate group, organization, etc, please let us know. You may be the one to start a Youth Compass Community along with a few other adults in your city. We have resources we can send you if you would like to get started. If you are open to moving to a new country, we do have also full-time staff opportunities in Europe, Asia and South America.

Wherever you are, whatever your stage of life, you have the opportunity to make an impact in the lives of Third Culture Kids.

Caitlin Morse – Youth Compass Director of Communications & Recruitment, June 2011

Overcoming the Victim Mindset

The idea of being a victim is widespread. According to a recent article, 70% of the British population could be classed as victims. Although this was partly humorous, it highlighted serious issues about the dangers of the victim label. One of those was the victimhood assigned to everyone in whole sectors of society such as minority groups – even if individuals don't experience discrimination. The most serious though was the disempowerment that can come from the victim status. Overcoming the victim mindset is an important concern for those of us working with TCKs. Where this is an issue a part of our role is to help where we can to bring people through to freedom and restoration.



There are probably 3 major groups among TCKs who have a victim mindset

1. Those who have suffered a major trauma – for example abuse, serious crime, violence or living with the threat of violence, death of one or both parents during childhood, or evacuation.
2. Those who have a grievance but one that has been exaggerated in their own minds, possibly fuelled by well-meaning counsellors or friends. Examples here would be frequent moves and necessary adjustments associated with the TCK lifestyle or living without the comforts and opportunities of the passport country because of non-availability or a lower income when working in the host country.
3. Those who adopt a victim mindset because they are “poor” TCKs or MKs. Again there are well-meaning counsellors and friends around who can feed this impression. Books and articles by or about TCKs often focus on those who have had the most difficult experiences and can lead to the assumption that these difficulties are universal or at least very widespread – thus making TCKs one of those victim groups.

There are grey areas between these obvious categories, such as living the teen years in high-surveillance restrictive societies, growing up playing second fiddle to the parents' career choices and the needs of others, or badly-timed moves that cause huge upheaval in the social and educational well-being. All of these are serious issues, ones that past editions of *Educare* have considered – mostly from the perspective of trying to avoid them by good planning and parenting decisions.

The consequences of holding on to a victim mindset are potentially dangerous, risking a lifetime of missed potential and underachievement. People locked into this can very easily identify themselves in all sorts of ways as a victim, expecting to continue as such throughout life. It may be a conscious thought or it may be gut-level feelings but the victim mindset gives a combination of identity for now and expectation for the future. That expectation holds the person back and affects their relationships at all levels.

The resentment towards what happened can result in long-term bitterness as highlighted in Matt Neigh's recently reprinted article “Bitterness, the Hidden Time Bomb.” (*Among Worlds*, June 2011 Vol 13 Number 2 p25) We encounter bitter and angry people all too often. Frequently the cause of the bitterness is a genuine grievance that has festered and gone unresolved. It may have been nursed, almost kept like an old friend at times, and possibly fuelled by others. The big problem here is that almost no-one wants to be around bitter and angry people long-term. We find ways to cope with them if necessary, avoid them when possible and wish that they were different. The bitterness and victim status reduce people to this level, damaging their relationships and continuing to make them a victim long after the original events. I have known people angry with their parents carry that bitterness to the grave damaging their own and their

family's well-being. Whatever the guilt of the parents, who probably were badly at fault in some cases, the unresolved anger ruined lives many years after they were gone.

Powerlessness to change is one other serious problem of the mindset. Breaking the mindset is vital, but someone who feels unable to change needs help to get there. The ideal helper could be someone who has been there with the victim mindset and made the break, but others can help. We are all concerned for the welfare of our TCKs and often have opportunities to bring some input that can help empower them to overcome it.

Helping someone break the cycle won't happen with well-meaning encouragement to take on the victim status out of misplaced and naïve sympathy. Some years ago I was in a large Western city with a wide range of ethnic minorities. Several of the groups were well-integrated and had been for many years. I asked about whether there had been any racial tension with one of the most established minorities. The answer was clear - only when victims' rights groups had got involved. Ironically the very people who had the intention to help had created a problem by highlighting the differences and the low-level racism present in a small sector of the majority community, making the minority feel like victims. After this group backed off things went back to normal with generally good inter-community relations.



The victim mindset needs to be recognised for the problem that it is and for the damage that it is doing to the person who has it. It is basic psychology that recognising the problem is the basic first step to progress in overcoming it. It is also basic good counselling practice that the person has to recognise this for himself or herself, not just be told. Any kind of help from full-scale counselling through to a friend giving occasional and informal support needs to include this. Such support does not deny that the person may well have been a victim and have very powerful reasons for resentment and anger. It is crucial though to help bring that person through to freedom so that the rest of their life is not ruled by those feelings.

In cases where the original grievance has been exaggerated in the person's mind it can help to bring a better perspective, but for major traumas this would be counter-productive.

Forgiveness is a vital key to real long-term freedom. Without it, the offence will not only damage the victim at the time, but for the rest of a person's life. The victim is the one who goes on suffering, usually long after the offender is gone from their life. Forgiveness is not an easy choice and is usually a long-term road rather than a one-off decision as the angry feelings can come back with real persistence. The rewards though are worth it.

If the grievances arise from the very mobile TCK lifestyle with all its changes it can be useful to focus on some of the long-term advantages. Increased adaptability, wider life experience and greater cultural understanding are just a few.

Almost no-one, whatever their monocultural or cross-cultural background, breezes through childhood without some difficulties - it is part of living in a broken world. It is good if TCKs recognise this and do not just blame the TCK upbringing for any and every problem, adopting a victim mindset along with that blame. I remember reading about a young student who had scored some of the best marks from his school in external exams. The newspapers report on star students year on year when the exam results are released,

so this was not so remarkable – except for one thing. The student was from a family of boat people. They definitely qualified as a victim group. Fleeing the home country, a long time at sea in dangerous waters, months in temporary refugee camps, reluctant admission to some Western countries usually into socially deprived areas.... all this and even more in some cases. This young student came from that background and landed into a below average school with almost no English. Within three years he was scoring very high exam results. One major reason for the success was a refusal to accept victim status with its self-pity, recriminations and long-term dependency. Along with just about the whole boat people community, he embraced the new opportunities and worked diligently to reap the rewards.

In the longer term there are also practical measures that can be taken. If childhood education was disrupted the way is now open more than ever to come back and find another way to gain qualifications. If the extended family relations were distant then it is often possible to build again and spend more time with those family members. “Lost” places from the childhood can be revisited. An adult who moved around so much as a child isn’t doomed to never stop moving: if longer-term stability of home town or city is what that person wants they can choose to stay and put down more roots.

So much more could be written, but this article is here just to raise the issues, alert us to the presence and dangers of the victim mindset in TCKs, and signal that restoration and freedom are possible. We’d welcome any contributions anyone would like to send, either privately or for future Educare editions.

Steve Bryant – September 2011



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