

IMTN: *A conversation of trainers that leads to action*

Bulletin 10 April 2018

Understanding the world of Third Culture Kids

Introduction

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Those committed to the preparation of adults for effective cross cultural life and ministry are well aware of the need for equipping the *whole person* with training that nurtures right thinking, right attitudes and the skills needed to relate and communicate well across cultures. Generally, we give far less attention to equipping the *whole family*. David Pollock (co-author of “Third Culture Kids”) contributed a lot to equip families in cross-cultural ministry and his view that rather than talking about family vs ministry we should be addressing the *family-in-ministry* emphasizes the importance of preparing and equipping the *whole family*.

In this Bulletin we raise the topic of equipping parents and carers who raise and support children who are taken across cultures. The bulletin seeks to shed light on the world of Third Culture Kids–TCKs. Our writer is Tanya Crossman who has spent a large portion of the past 13 years serving Third Culture Kids (TCKs), largely through international churches in Asia. Tanya disciplined individual teens and young adults, (mostly in Beijing, but also via skype as TCKs moved away to other countries), and coordinated retreats and conferences for groups of up to 250 teenage TCKs. The knowledge Tanya gained from a decade spent listening to hundreds of TCKs tell their own stories, in their own words, gave her insight into how they see the world. Eventually, Tanya began to receive requests to explain to groups of carers more about how to better care for TCKs. Through time spent listening to their questions and concerns Tanya began to see the importance of supporting and equipping parents. This led to writing a book, *Misunderstood: The Impact of Growing Up Overseas in the 21st Century*, which was published in August 2016.

Today Tanya spends her time equipping parents and carers of TCKs with knowledge, insight, and strategies that will help them understand and therefore more effectively serve the TCKs they interact with. We are grateful to Tanya for her insights shared in this Bulletin and for guiding us through a range of useful resources for the whole family.

A brief window into the world of TCKs

Tanya Crossman

Who is a TCK?

TCKs are a subcategory of Cross Cultural Kid (CCK) – anyone who meaningfully interacts with more than one culture during childhood, regardless of location. There are many overlaps in different kinds of cross-cultural upbringings. Many adults who grew up in immigrant families read TCK literature and feel a strong affinity with the experience. Many TCKs find themselves drawn to advocacy for refugees or minority

people groups within a wider culture. Despite the parallels, understanding the specifics of a TCK's particular cross cultural experience is important in providing effective support.

The latest revision of the classic book *Third Culture Kids* was released in 2017. It includes an updated definition of a TCK:

“A traditional third culture kid (TCK) is a person who spends a significant part of his or her first eighteen years of life accompanying parent(s) into a country that is different from at least one parent's passport country(ies) due to a parent's choice of work or advanced training.”

This may sound a little clunky, but it is very deliberate, pointing out several important aspects of the TCK experience. A TCK has cross-cultural experiences outside their passport country(ies) during childhood. This means cross-cultural interactions are formative experiences which shape their worldview. They also accompany parents who have made a choice. TCKs do not have control over where the family lives. Even if parents consult their children about a move, and even if they take the child's view into consideration, it is parents who make the final decision on behalf of a family.

Living in a constant state of temporary

An important aspect of the TCK experience is that the family does not expect, or plan, to settle permanently in their host country. TCKs grow up, and develop emotional connections, in places they instinctively understand are not truly theirs to own, and to claim. They may sense that they are not accepted by nationals as true locals, or they may feel heavy expectation from friends and family that their deepest feelings and truest allegiance should align with their passport. They may live with the reality of an insecure visa situation – knowing they have no legal right to dwell in the place they consider “home”.

Many TCKs live in a ‘constant state of temporary’. Adult expatriates may resonate with that phrase too, but for TCKs, it is part of their emotional bedrock. Transience, spatial or relational or both, is a law of life they learn from a young age and which affects their understanding of how the world as a whole works. One of the most common phrases I heard from over 270 TCKs I interviewed for my book was that “everyone leaves”. This was part of reality as they learned it during their formative years and, in adulthood, continues to colour their expectations of life.

An 18 year old TCK I interviewed for *Misunderstood* described it this way:

“I lived with a mentality that ‘everyone leaves’. I just recently moved off to college and I had a really close friend get mad at me for pushing her away and trying to do anything I could to minimize the hurt I knew was coming. Honestly I still expect us to eventually lose touch anyway because people move on. That's all I've ever known.”

A 25 year old TCK I interviewed for *Misunderstood* described it this way:

“I have lived a very privileged life, but I have experienced a lot of grief. While I have never had a close relative or friend die, I have said goodbye to more people than I can remember. Investing so much time and energy in friends only to lose them, over and over, starts to wear us down. In many ways I have lost perspective on those things that do last.”

Developing a different worldview to parents

All of this goes to an important point: the international experiences of TCKs are markedly different to the experiences of their parents.

An adult who has a mature sense of self, culture, and what constitutes normality, developed in a single culture, will view any new culture with which they interact through that lens. Children have not completed that process – they do not yet have a fully developed sense of how life works. When children enter into a new culture, it is not “other” in the same way as for an adult. Rather, it becomes part of a wider pool of information from which they will form an understanding of the world.

Equipping parents to understand these differences before they leave for the field, and helping them work through the consequences over time, makes a difference in the lives of international families.

It is important for parents to consider that their choice to move their children into another culture means changing their child(ren)’s perspective on the world. This is not a bad thing – in fact, I think it is a very positive thing! – but it does mean parents are introducing cross-cultural elements into their family relationships. They may travel to the same countries, but parents and children will experience those cultures differently.

A 19 year old TCK I interviewed for *Misunderstood* shared about this difference, saying:

“I feel my passport country is my parents’ home, not mine, I refer to it as the ‘motherland’, not my homeland. My parents tried to make me eat traditional food and expected me to know the language, but it’s really hard.”

Parents who take the initiative in learning more about their children’s developing worldview do them a great service. Without this initiative, their children will end up living cross-culturally at home as well as in the wider world, and there is an emotional cost to this way of life. If home is another place a TCK must adhere to particular cultural rules (in this case, the parents’ culture) there is very little time or space left for the child to simply ‘be’ – an important tool for healthy emotional development.

Creating a safe space at home

The best single piece of advice I have for parents of TCKs is that they strive to make their home a safe space, where their children are free to express all their different feelings, opinions, viewpoints, and even languages.

Make home the one place where a child does not have to play a certain role, but can be any combination of the different cultural influences they have absorbed. Let the child’s words, both the language and the accent, be accepted without comment. I suggested one mother leave her four year old to speak in his odd mix of accents – rather than correct him constantly and start a pattern of the child adjusting to her preferences. She had worried he would be teased when the family returned to their parents’ country. But he was constantly exposed to other accents, so that is what he was adapting to in his speech. She was fighting a losing battle, one that frustrated her and put her son on alert whenever he was around her. She finally accepted that his accent was part of the price they paid as a family because of their decision to live overseas. She let him be himself at home, in whatever accent, and will cross the “teased in their grand-parents’ country” bridge if, and when, they come to it. And if that happens, he will know that home is the safe place for him to speak however he likes without fear.

Let the child’s emotional outbursts be understood as a sign of their sense of safety to express difficult feelings. Let overly negative (or overly positive) comments the child makes about any of the cultures to

which they are connected be an opportunity for parents to ask questions, and learn more about the child's individual journey.

Let authenticity be valued, not corrected, or disciplined.

For a child living internationally, no amount of instruction will stop them developing along a different path, with different attachments, compared with their development if they remained in their passport country. A parent who can accept this, perhaps even delight in their child's differences, will be rewarded with rich insights into the cross-cultural landscape of the child's heart and life.

Of course, children need careful, intentional and consistent training in biblical ethics, but parents must recognise that their TCK children will develop different cultural preferences and practices. Any biblically consistent practices are acceptable. Children also often mix cultures – they may want to eat salad or popcorn with chopsticks, watch a movie in their parents' native language with English subtitles, or speak in a mix of languages. Even adults who live abroad a long time do this. For example, my family has learned that when I visit I prefer to eat anything Asian from a bowl with chopsticks, and I occasionally insert Mandarin words in my English sentences.

If attempts at sharing feelings go unheard, children may stop reaching out. This is generally a gradual process that can easily go unnoticed, or be chalked up to “rebellious teenage years”. One family I knew experienced this in a very sudden way. I received a call at 6am on a Saturday because their 14 year old daughter had gone silent. She refused to dress, pack, or leave for a family holiday. By the time I arrived, her father and older siblings were already at the airport, and her distraught mother was in tears. As it turned out, two very common TCK anxieties were in play – a close friend moving away, and academic pressure the child put on herself. She had tried to explain, but her parents were busy trying to get ready and did not recognise the depth or urgency of her feelings. Feeling unheard and powerless, she shut down. When I related the daughter's view of events to her mother, she turned to her daughter and said. “I'm sorry. You told me that, and I didn't hear you. What can we do to fix this?” It was an incredibly powerful moment, one I was honoured to witness.

Building bridges of understanding between TCKs and those who care for them is something I am very passionate about. I am always happy to talk to carers or trainers about any questions or concerns they may have – including members of the IMTN. I can be contacted at tck.tanya@gmail.com

A few helpful resources for carers of TCKs

I recently wrote a guest post for A Life Overseas (an excellent mission community blog), expanding on this concept. It may be helpful for further explanation: <http://www.alifeoverseas.com/making-home-an-emotional-oasis-for-your-tcks/>.

Misunderstood: The Impact of Growing Up Overseas in the 21st Century – Tanya Crossman

Borne out of a decade of pastoral care, my book presents the hidden emotional lives of TCKs and explains this in the context of their international upbringings. Provides young adult TCKs with a sense of being understood, and articulates for carers the heart cry of TCKs who know no other life.

Emotional Resilience and the Expat Child – Julia Simens

Fantastic resources on why storytelling helps children process their experiences, and practical exercises to help families do this together.

Belonging Everywhere and Nowhere: Insights into Counseling the Globally Mobile – Lois Bushong

Ostensibly aimed at counselors, this book includes valuable insights into emotional impacts that can result from an international childhood. Lots of helpful takeaways for carers and also for adult TCKs.

Hidden in my Heart – Taylor Joy Murray

Poignant prayers of a teenage TCK processing transition and faith. A good read for both carers and for teenage TCKs.

The Worlds Within, an Anthology of TCK Art and Writing

A wonderful collection of reflections – in art and poetry and prose, vignettes and essays – giving insights into the emotional lives of young TCKs (both primary and high school) living the experience of an international childhood. Great for young TCKs, and an excellent talking point for adults seeking to connect with young TCKs.

B at Home: Emma Moves Again and My Moving Booklet – Valerie Besanceney

Helpful resources to engage young children (primary school) in processing a move.

Sea Change Mentoring – seachangementoring.com

This service connects TCKs aged 16-23 with adult TCK mentors who will spend a year helping the TCK through a period of transition.

A Life Overseas – alifeoverseas.com

An online mission community with regular posts on a range of topics. There are many excellent articles about caring for TCKs, including some written by adult TCKs.

Denizen Magazine – denizenmag.com

While no longer updating, this website still has a valuable archive of articles by TCKs, for TCKs. They provide rich insights into TCK perspectives, and lots of “me too!” moments for teenage and young adult TCKs.

Daraja – daraja.us

Michael Pollock’s ministry – training and equipping TCKs, carers, and organisations.

And of course, as previously mentioned:

Third Culture Kids – David C Pollock, Ruth E. Van Reken, and Michael V. Pollock

It’s a classic for a reason. This book is the best foundation for understanding the entire landscape of Third Culture Kid literature.