Third Culture Kids

“I’ve always known that I struggle with issues of identity and belonging. But over the last few months I’ve also started to notice that I really struggle with relationships. I struggle to make friends. I struggle to be a part of a community. I struggle feeling integrated.”
A quote from an adult who spent his developmental years away from his passport country

What is a TCK?

Sociologist Ruth Hill Useem coined the term "Third Culture Kids" to refer to children who accompany their parents into a different culture as TCKs integrate aspects of their birth culture (the first culture) and the new culture (the second culture), creating a unique "third culture".

According to David Pollock whose research into the lives of TCKs is extensive, ‘Although elements from each culture are assimilated into the TCK’s life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of a similar background.’

You know you’re a TCK when: (this list is not exhaustive)

- There is no simple answer to the simple question ‘Where are you from’?
- You hesitate and have to think when asked ‘Where is home?’
- You feel odd being in the ethnic majority.
- You have three passports.
- Your grand parents can’t understand the language you speak with your friends and neighbours.
- You believe your friends will move to another country next year.
- The thought of travelling on your own does not worry you.
- In your passport country you feel different.

Another common term used to describe these children is Global Nomads. TCKs can also be the children of cross-cultural marriages. Children of missionary families are sometimes called MK’s short for Missionary Kids.

Being a TCK is not necessarily a good or bad thing. There are many benefits as well as challenges alongside various other factors such as the personality of the child, their relational links with family and friends and their personal experiences.

Typical Traits of a TCK

- Have a more mobile lifestyle when adult

Adult TCK’s (ADCK’s) tend to repeat their upbringing in being more nomadic which indicates a confidence and ability to cope with change.

But it may also indicate a difficulty in making long-term commitments to anyone or anything. Linda Bell interviewed a number of TCK’s in her writing of the book’ The Hidden Immigrants’ and
found repeatedly that they were quick to make good friends but equally quick at letting them go when they moved on.

She quotes from one TCK, ‘I finally decided not to get close to anyone and go really slowly into relationships so I wouldn’t be hurt when we had to go.’

- Are good with languages.

It is not surprising to find that as TCK’s have been exposed to more than one language at an early age they have an ability to pick up languages relatively quickly when compared to their peers. It’s also quite common to find they will utilize this skill in their choice of career.

- Struggle to find a sense of belonging.

They either feel at home everywhere and have the ability to move and settle anywhere, or else home is always somewhere else. Sometimes this results in the adult TCK finding difficulty settling down even though there may be a longing to do so.

‘My ‘home’ does not seem to be about concrete walls, a specific spot of land, or a street address. Rather, it is every country I have visited and lived in, and every cultural and sensory experience these travels have wrought…….’

- Appear Friendly

They are usually extremely friendly and practiced at making social contacts quickly because they have got to know a wider range of people than their monocultural counterparts.

- Have issues relating to unresolved impact of leaving people & places behind.

Typically TCK’s will have had more moves within their childhoods than many people have in a lifetime. The impact of the losses involved in leaving places and people behind are often not recognized and grieved over, especially when parents themselves are also busy adapting and re-adapting.

Younger children may exhibit unsettled behaviours; tears, tantrums, problems at school and go back to earlier life stages such bed wetting or clinginess to parents.

Older children and young people may struggle with school work or relationships. Outbursts of anger may become common or alternatively a withdrawal into an ‘inner world’ which may indicate unhappiness and grief. They may also be very compliant, pleasing the adults around them but not able to come to terms with the troubling aspects of their lifestyle and how it affects their development. This often surfaces in adulthood.

A note about Boarding school:

Some internationally mobile families choose boarding school for their children. This can give them a sense of stability particularly if they have grand parents or other close relatives involved in their care whilst away from their parents. It also provides continuity for education and ongoing friendships with peers.

It can be problematic if children are sent away from parents at a very young age or if they have not got a pre-existing relationship with their carers acting in loco parentis when the school is
closed or if feelings of sadness or fearfulness are not acknowledged as part of the experience. Often parents have these feelings too. Parents are advised always to listen to their children seriously if they say they are unhappy about anything at boarding school.

Remember each child is different. It is not uncommon for some children in the same family to thrive at boarding school whilst others do not.

**What can I do as a parent?**

You can email us at PHS@interhealth.org.uk

If you are a parent of a TCK then it is helpful to understand the typical responses to many transitions for yourselves and your children. See a selection of recommended resources below.

Involve your children in age appropriate ways in the planning for future moves. Provide information for them about the next location. Encourage your teenagers to find out about the culture they will be living in, its values including dress code, types of music, films etc. Consider together schooling options, sports opportunities, and youth activities. Try to find children of a similar age within the new culture who they can link with – maybe via email or safe social networking sites.

If possible avoid moving during teenage years. A very important developmental task for teenagers is to develop their own network of friends beyond the immediate family circle. If this is impeded by frequent moves they may remain reliant on the family making the adolescent period extend into their 20’s.

**The benefits of being a TCK... there are many...you will be able to add to these!**

- Expanded world view

Typically when children have lived in more than one country they will have a wide global perspective. They can seem mature and are often more competent in some areas than their peers in their passport country, such as flying alone. They will often show a greater interest in the world and a desire to travel.

- Cross-cultural skills

As a result of growing up internationally, TCK’s generally understand about cultures and show greater cultural sensitivity. They have learnt how to fit in with other cultures or situations and they are willing to do so. They are always interested in people from other countries, often taking time to talk with them and helping them out.

**Further Guidance and Information**

Interaction International: Internationally Mobile Families
Organisation founded by Dave Pollock with the mission to “be a catalyst and a resource working cooperatively in the development of programs, services and publications to provide and contribute to an on-going flow of care that meets the needs of Third Culture Kids” (TCKs) and internationally mobile families” Christian ethos.
Oscar (UK site) is a gateway to links to various MK materials

Missionary kid (MK) camps in the UK organized by Xenos:

Mk Planet - a website run for MKs by Mks

Global Connections: TCK Forum
Online forum for “Staff of member agencies, service agencies, churches, schools, parents and ex-mission partners who are concerned with the welfare of Third Culture Kids (TCKs)”.

Books


Bell, Linda, The Hidden Immigrants, Cross Cultural Publications, Inc., South Bend, IN, 1997


Bridges, W. The way of Transition: embracing Life’s most difficult moments, Da Capo Press (2001)


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