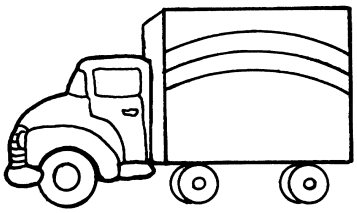
Helping Children with Moves

"I went to thirteen schools in twelve years in four countries on three different continents." Comments like this from adult TCKs are not uncommon. Your children's experience may not be this extreme, but moves are probably a fact of life for them, too. Sooner or later most families in ministry overseas wonder how they can help their children with moves.

Lifelong Learning Skills

The initial tendency is to think mainly in terms of the negative outcomes associated with leaving family and friends and all that is familiar and comfortable in order to go where most people will be strangers and everything will seem so different. But moving can present opportunities to build lifelong learning skills, skills that give individuals the ability to gain from all of life's experiences.



As parents seek to help children with moves, it is good to remember that many of the positive characteristics noted in adult TCKs have a direct connection to the fact that during their childhood they moved between several countries and cultures. Flexibility and adaptability, cross-cultural skills, a broad world-view, wide range of interests, and the ability to break out of one cultural framework and respond empathetically to another's point-of-view—all can be positive outcomes associated with moving.

It also helps parents to remember that children are resilient—more so than we may realize. When Mom and Dad convey a positive attitude about moving, coupled with a strong conviction that each family member is an important part of the ministry, then children are better equipped to "take it in stride" and accept moving as part of God's will for their lives.

Separation From and Going Toward

The issues in moving can be thought of simply in two areas: "separation from" and "going toward." There are strong feelings associated with being separated from people, places, and things (including pets)—leaving what is familiar and comfortable, loved and enjoyed. Encouraging children to appropriately express these feelings and letting them know that you care and understand will help them deal with the emotional impact of such feelings.

Going toward that which is new, unfamiliar, and strange often generates apprehension, anxiety, even fear. Parents who realize that adjusting to new and different people, places, and things is a significant transitional event for all can do much to prepare their children to handle the adjustments in a healthy, maturing way.

Making Change a Positive Experience

Probably the most effective thing you can do for your children is to build a strong and resilient family. With that as a secure base, children are equipped and supported through whatever changes come. In her paper describing "Characteristics of Resilient Families," SIL counselor Larrie Gardner includes the following:

1) Commitment—to God, to each other, to family responsibilities, and to joyful living
2) Communication—listening to every family member; openness to discuss anything
3) Coping Skills—toleration for and acceptance of change
4) External Resources—the ability to build new friendships and to adjust to new expectations.[1]

A family that is strong in these ways will be able to support children through moves. These families have the best chance of building in their children the healthy characteristics of resilience for life.

Open, Honest, and Positive Communication

An atmosphere within the home for open, honest, and positive communication may often be the key in helping children with transition. In preparing for a move, ample opportunities should be available for family members to express concerns, fears, and opinions, and share other feelings as well. Some parents may need to focus on their own listening skills, ensuring that they are hearing what is being said and felt beyond mere words. Equally critical is the ability to communicate, not only with words but with gestures and body language, that you understand and support your children through a potentially troubling time.

"Realistic expectations" is key here. Overemphasis of the positive can lead to disillusionment; overemphasis on the negative can blind children to the positives. Children absorb much from the words and feelings expressed by parents. Healthy attitudes toward a move are more likely when parents model a realistic, balanced attitude.

Learning to Say Good-bye

Healthy people need to learn both to say good-byes and to form new attachments. Of course there is grief in saying good-bye, but as one person commented, "If I'm not sad when I'm leaving, maybe it wasn't worth being here." Parents can help children learn to say good-byes by acknowledging the sadness as a part of love, by encouraging them to resolve any difficulties in relationships (i.e., asking forgiveness and forgiving others) before leaving, and by making sure they do say good-bye to the people, places, and things they are leaving behind. If appropriate good-byes are not said, it is much more difficult to form new attachments in the next place.

Planning a Move

Timing is an important part of planning. Of course it is not always possible to plan a move at the ideal time, but when a move can be coordinated with school schedules, the transition

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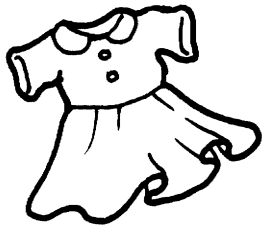
1 [1] Gardner, Laura Mae. "Characteristics of Resilient Families," Counseling Department (WBT, 1989).

for school-age children will be easier. Achieving closure in one area (the end of a school term) helps in adapting to a new cycle elsewhere (the beginning of a new school term).

Preserving is another part of planning. In moving from the familiar to the unfamiliar, it is helpful to preserve those things that provide stability and security: continuation of interests and hobbies, access to favorite toys and books, opportunities to communicate with friends via phone and internet, and continuation of family habits and traditions. Give children the opportunity to participate in this phase of planning by letting them make decisions about what they feel is important.



For adolescents, friends are extremely important. Parents should consider how they can help, such as maintaining or reestablishing contacts from the last furlough. Clothes are also of considerable concern to teenagers, and the investment in clothing to help them "fit in" appropriately may be a wise one.

You as parents have undoubtedly participated in considerable transcultural training and are familiar with the importance of understanding culture shock. Children often do not have the opportunity for exposure to such training. Wise parents will plan ahead to ensure that their children are given orientation and age-appropriate skills for dealing with a new and unfamiliar culture. Parents need to remember that their children may find the parents' home culture as unfamiliar as the parents found the host country. The parent's "home" is not necessarily the kid's "home."

Planning ways to maintain good physical and mental health should not be overlooked. The stresses and fatigue associated with travel and adaptation to new places should be considered in setting schedules, arranging for meals and lodging, and deciding what each child should carry.

A Sense of Continuity and Mission

The lives of many TCKs are testimonies to the fact that families on the move need not result in fragmented or unstable adulthoods for the children in the future. Through all the transitions, dependable constants can give continuity and even provide opportunity for strong bonding within families.

Parents who, in a meaningful way, share with their children their own motivation for ministry establish a purpose that provides continuity through all changes. Parents who show unconditional love for each other and their children give their family an ongoing gift that bonds them even when change is frequent. Parents who seek to interpret society to their young children with wisdom and sensitivity can consistently do that wherever transition may take them. As a result, change adds excitement and variety rather than problems.

Fostering a positive thirst for learning can also make transitions an asset. Perhaps it is helpful to realize that the greatest valuables in life are not tangibles but intangibles, not

houses but homes, not things but relationships, not repetition but growth, not predictability but purpose. Fortunately, such intangibles can easily be taken to new locations.

In the final analysis, helping children is a matter of providing consistent teaching of long-term values, conveying positive attitudes, and modeling good parenting skills. With God's help and the support of partners who join parents in praying personally for their children, the challenge of transition can be turned into a blessing.

Resources

International CHED has a family communication game entitled *Transition Is a Family Affair: Some Ideas for Prompting Discussion Around the Dinner Table*. Activities are designed to help parents and children discuss in a nonthreatening manner feelings about changes and moving. Available from *https://iched.org/publications*.

—International CHED Staff

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