Preparing Children for Life Overseas

Note: This article is based on the first chapter of a handbook on children's education for member families from the United Kingdom. It was compiled by the staff of our UK section for Children's Education and Family Services, June 1995 revision, but still applicable today. The chapter was written for parents before they go overseas, not necessarily for parents already on the field. However, we feel the advice contained in the article may help parents as they assist their children in adapting to life in a different culture and the changes that are bound to occur. Appreciation is expressed to CHED FS UK for permission to use this material.

Raising a family in another culture is a challenging and stimulating experience for the whole family. Children whose parents choose to move to a foreign land will experience a rich variety of life and will have numerous opportunities to develop a solid grounding in their faith.

Difficult decisions await parents who plan to go abroad, especially regarding their children's education. There are times when there are no simple or easy solutions, but only what appear to be "a choice of problems." An open mind is essential if you are to view your children and your situation objectively. A dedicated heart will help you face emotionally difficult decisions. Most of all you need an overriding desire for the Lord's will for yourselves and your family and an unfailing confidence in Him.

Long-term service in another culture will inevitably result in a family life quite different from the norm in the home country. Consequently, there are certain attitudes that parents should try to teach their children as early as possible, to prepare them for what may lie ahead.

Hints on Preparing Children for Change

A child's sense of security is influenced strongly by the relationship and fellowship he sees between his parents. Field service is normally accompanied by constant change of home, travel between one culture and another, and a continuous experience of making friends, leaving them, making new friends and leaving them, too. It is important to take positive steps to develop emotional stability in our children by first paying constant attention to our interpersonal relationships as parents.

Can you answer the following questions in the affirmative?

- Do my children regularly hear me pray for my spouse with thanksgiving?
- Are all family members encouraged to pray for each other regularly?
- By my attitude, prayers, and conversation, are my children being taught in a natural and wholesome way that the well-being of the whole family is the care and concern of a loving heavenly Father?
- Have I explained to my children, bearing in mind their age and understanding, what our call and future ministry is all about?

Our children need constant reassurance that everything is under control, especially during such upheavals as pre-field deputation and packing. We cannot fully convey to the preschool child what is happening, or about to happen, but if we as parents are anxious and fearful, children will also become anxious and fearful. The very young child's assurance that "all is well" will depend largely upon the parents' attitude of trust and upon the time and attention given to the child. Remember, too, that consistent standards of discipline help a young child to remain assured during times of change.

Parents should explain to their children what is taking place. This should be done without involving young children in the actual choices being made. Primary school children in particular should not be expected to choose between the Lord and His will in some far off land and their best friends just around the corner.

The child's level of enthusiasm will only reach that of the parents, and it is important that both parents are enthusiastic. The positive aspects of life abroad such as new culture, plants and animals, together with an assurance that the child will make new friends, need to be expressed in a natural way without being overdone.

A good colored picture book about the country you are going to is a great help at this time. For school-age children a class teacher may be able to help provide opportunities for research about the new area in which you will live. If the children are older, say eight or nine upwards, they should be a part of discussions and prayer about the future, and the older they are, the more weight should be given to their views about going abroad.

Moveable Roots

The concept of "moveable roots" needs to be developed as early as possible. Children should be allowed, even encouraged, to take with them some familiar items. A favorite bedtime article may be essential for some children. It is also good to take a number of family objects which go to make up "home": a few easily transported wall pictures, the family clock, a few "ageless" books, cotton bed-covers or anything that can be set up immediately upon moving into new surroundings. These things will identify the place as "home" to the child (and to the parents!). Home is wherever the family is together. This is the concept of "moveable roots."

If something they feel is important cannot be taken, assure children that it will be cared for and looked after while they are away. Remember also that what you feel is important and what a child feels is important can be quite different! A small child cannot come to grips emotionally with statements like "He will grow out of that—we might as well just get rid of it." If it is important to the child, assure him or her that it will be looked after. Grandparents make good custodians!

When the time for actual departure arrives, consider inviting your children's friends to the airport or arrange a farewell occasion.

Never Say "Never"

Many parents embarking on ministry have very strong convictions about their families and their future life for the Lord, and in most cases this is commendable. However, avoid dogmatic statements like the following in the presence of your children: "I will never send my children away to boarding school." "I will never allow a separation in my family."

Parents of very young children do not know how they will feel about these issues when the children reach their teens and begin to grow into young adults. Later, when children are older and difficult choices have to be made for their good, parents often find that what was formerly "unthinkable" when the children were between one and five years old is now not impossible at all. But if the child has been fed on statements like "We would never send you away," etc., he or she will feel deceived if parents later begin to see things differently.

With children of nine or ten upwards, it is good to involve them in the planning and decision-making about moves and education. The best approach with young children might be to let them know over a period of time that you believe that God will provide for them with a good education. Then, when any major decision is made, sit down with the children and make it clear that you love them and want the best for them. Explain to them that you have prayed much about their education, considered all the possibilities, and feel the best solution to be the one you are sure God has shown you.

Children need the security of parents who will decide the bigger issues for them. Even though they might resist change, this overall security will provide a good framework for the decisions which they can make for themselves.

Encouraging Independence

Every opportunity should be taken to train your child for responsible independence. As members of the family, even primary school children can be involved in travel arrangements, and if possible, allowed to fill in their own forms and documents. Encourage your children to make decisions about personal needs, appearance, health and dietary habits, study and sleep habits, etc.

As early as possible, teach your children to look after themselves in terms of doing up buttons and zips, tying shoe laces, combing hair, and making beds. Many parents find that allocating a realistic amount of pocket money from early years helps to foster responsibility toward money and its use. Take every opportunity to encourage freedom and responsibility within the bounds prescribed by yourselves as parents.

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