Transitions: A Lifelong Process

by Lynda Shingledecker-Wheeler

Transition is defined by the Oxford American Dictionary as "the process of change from one state or style, etc. to another." Everyone makes hundreds of transitions throughout their lifetime. Missionaries and MKs are probably more familiar with this process than many other people. Although transitions may have similarities, each experience is also unique, and individuals respond to it in their own unique way.

One way to describe the transition process is by using a five-phase model developed by Dave Pollock of Interaction. The phases are Engagement, Leaving, Transition, Entering, and Re-engagement. Defining the process can help us understand the experience better and may help us move through it more successfully ourselves and be more understanding of others going through it. Please keep in mind that, although the phases can easily be named, they are not necessarily experienced in such an easily identified sequence.

Engagement describes the period of strong involvement in your present location. You have roots, know what is expected of you, have a support system, and have identified your role in relationship to those around you.

Leaving is the phase when you begin to disengage from your present life and pull up roots in anticipation of the move you expect to make. This can apply to a change of physical location as well as to a change of status or role (e.g. job change, from single to married, etc.)

Transition is when you make the actual move; your normal routine is upset, good-byes are said, you withdraw from the activities you have been involved in and move on. Feelings of personal and professional ambiguity as to your role and your relationship with others are common during this stage.

Entering involves the adjustment to your new role or environment, a reestablishment of routines and personal life or identity, and becoming a learner in your new environment.

Re-engagement is the final step. You become familiar with your environment and actively participant in it: developing new relationships, planning for the future, and being involved in ministry, work, and family life.

For missionaries and MKs, their most challenging transitions usually involve moving to the field or returning to the home country. Each change can be daunting. Along with

understanding the process, these additional suggestions may also help you and your family face changes with increased confidence and hope.

1) **Talk about the upcoming move as a family.** Understand that this transition is new for every family member. Allow each person the freedom to ask questions and to express their feelings. Younger children often reflect the attitudes of their parents so it is important to remember that you set the tone for your family. Good communication is always important and may need to be even more intentionally encouraged during times of transition.

2) Whether you are going to the field or returning to your passport country, **investigate where you are going and consider how your life will change** once you get there. Talk to those who have lived/are living there, research the country or culture through the Internet, encyclopedias, videos, or books. Take advantage of multicultural events that provide exposure to different language and culture. Make plans regarding how to integrate into the new community, make friends, learn the language, or get involved with a church. Remember that returning to your passport country may feel more like going to a foreign country to your children. Thinking through these things can help make the integration process easier when you actually arrive.

3) **Look for the best ways to keep in contact with the significant people you leave behind.** Today's technology has made communication easier, faster, and more reliable than ever before in many parts of the world. Usually it is best to establish these methods of communication before you go overseas.

4) **Try to maintain the basic elements of your family's regular routine** (e.g., mealtime, playtime, family devotions, celebrations, bedtime rituals, chores, discipline, etc.). This helps provide some stability in times of change.

5) **Plan to take some familiar things with you and allow your kids to do the same.** Pictures and knick knacks can help make your new house a home. A stuffed animal or favorite toy can help your kids adjust to their new surroundings.

6) **Give each person opportunity and time to say appropriate good-byes** to the people, places, and things that are significant to them. Be prepared for feelings of loss and grief associated with these farewells. Also include reconciliation of hurts or restoration of broken relationships if necessary. Although this may be painful, it is imperative not to leave any such "unfinished business" behind.

7) **Plan for the educational future of your children.** Investigate the school options available and the entry requirements at the school you are planning to use. Keep your child's post-high-school education plans in mind in the choices you make. If at all possible, plan your moves when they will cause the least possible disruption in your child's education. Discuss your plans with trusted educators and be open to their input and suggestions.

8) **Recognize and acknowledge God's love and faithfulness** in the midst of the changes. Transitions can provide wonderful opportunities for spiritual growth and strengthened family relationships as you learn to depend on the Lord and each other in new ways.

Changes in life are inevitable. They can be as simple as a new pair of shoes or as complex as a move overseas. In each transition it is important to remember that God is in control and that He will lead you through. Flexibility and a sense of humor are also great assets. Transitions don't seem to get easier with practice, but what you learn from each experience may help you face the next one with greater confidence and give you the opportunity to encourage others along the way!

Resources to Help Families with Transitions

Following are a few of the resources available to help families prepare for and move through the transition experience, whether leaving the home country for a field assignment or leaving the field for the home country.

Games/Activities

Transition Is a Family Affair: Some Ideas for Prompting Discussion Around the Dinner Table, a conversation-starter card game developed by International CHED and Barnabas International to help families communicate about their transition experience. One version is meant to be used in preparation for leaving and another one after you are in the new location. Available through *www.iched.org/publications*. It may be duplicated for nonprofit use.

Books for Children

A Country Far Away, Nigel Gray & Philippe Dupasquier, Orchard Books, 1991. A children's book with dual illustrations on each page for a one-line text about typical childhood experiences. One illustration is set in North America and the other in a third world village. The vocabulary is simple enough for young readers. It can be used as an effective tool to discuss how life may be different in the new environment. In its simplicity the book is a powerful illustration of how much our experience influences the meaning we ascribe to words and can help us understand how easy it is to miscommunicate when interacting with those who have had different experiences.

Alexander, Who's Not (Do you hear me? I mean it!) *Going to Move,* Judith Viorst, Alladin Paperbacks, 1980. This book takes Alexander from not wanting to move to being willing to leave. It is really recommended only to those who have a child struggling emotionally with a move.

Good-bye, *House,* Ann Banks and Nancy Evans, Harmony Books, 1980. This book supplies a child with a place to write personal feelings and information about their move. There are pages for remembering the old, tracing the move, and recording the new. It includes a brief parents' guide in the back of the book.

Harold & Stanley Say Good-bye, Jill Dyer, MK Merimna, 1998. A book written at a young child's level to help them understand what it means to be a missionary and what is involved in preparing to go overseas. Suitable for preschoolers or early primary level. Order through MK Merimna, PO Box 205, Mitcham Shopping Centre, Torrens Park SA 5062, Australia. http://upbc.org.au/hosted/mkmerimna/order.html

Where in the World Are You Going?, Judith M. Blohm, Intercultural Press, 1996. An entertaining activity book that helps young children, ages five to ten, through the process of moving abroad. Older children could do some of the activities independently but will benefit more from them if there is interaction with parents and other family members.

Don't Pig Out on Junk Food: The MK's Guide to Survival in the U.S., Alma Daughtery Gordon, Evangelical Missions Information Service, 1993. The author is a fourth generation MK and mother of six adult MKs. The book offers valuable insights from experienced MKs to help others make a successful reentry to the United States. It begins with family preparation before departure and includes practical advice and suggestions about education, money, work, social adjustments, and personal issues, as well as information about available resources. Each chapter concludes with questions for reflection and discussion. *(Teens)*

Books for Adults

Cross-Cultural Reentry: A Book of Readings, Clyde Austin, Abilene Christian University, 1986. $14.95 A compilation of articles contributed by various authors addressing numerous issues and giving practical suggestions for successful re-entry to the United States after an extended time in another culture. This resource can be used as a guide in group discussions.

Furloughing with Children. A booklet produced by International CHED. It contains practical suggestions for families with school-aged children preparing for furlough. Planning ahead can help make furlough a more positive experience. Available through www.iched.org/publications.

Living Overseas: A Book of Preparations, Ted Ward, The Free Press-MacMillan Publishing, 1984. Drawing on a wealth of experience, the author gives sound advice on a variety of topics associated with adjusting to life in a new culture. Vignettes illuminate social, cultural, and religious differences around the world.

Raising Resilient MKs: Resources for Caregivers, Parents, and Teachers, Joyce M. Bowers, Editor. ACSI, Colorado Springs, 1998. A comprehensive one-volume collection of articles by different authors reflecting the most current thinking on a wide variety of topics dealing with the nurture and education of "missionary kids." One chapter specifically focuses on transitions both to the field and back to the home country. Available as an e-book at http://www.missionarycare.com/ebook.htm#resilient_mks.

Re-entry: Making the Transition From Missions to Life at Home, Peter Jordan, YWAM Publishing, 1992. An excellent resource for returning missionaries, as well as mission committees and church members, to help ease transition from field to home country.

Sojourners: The Family on the Move–A Book of Resources, Ruth & Samuel Rowen. Assoc. of Urbanus, 1990. The authors are missionary parents of three adult children. This book is not merely to be read but to be worked through as a whole family. Though written for those planning to move overseas, many of the exercises provide practical suggestions for developing a healthy family, whether moving or not. Can be found at other websites than Amazon.com.

Strangers at Home, Carolyn D. Smith, Editor, Aletheia Publications. This anthology presents varied perspectives on the effects of living overseas and coming "home" to a country that seems just as strange as the one left behind. It includes useful advice for parents seeking to help their children, especially teenagers, cope with reentry to their passport country.

Survival Kit for Overseas Living, L. Robert Kohls, Intercultural Press, Inc., 1996. A practical guide to living overseas: from cultural norms to language learning, to day-to-day living challenges.

Most books can be ordered through the Internet at *www.amazon.com* unless otherwise noted. (There is a minimum of $3.95 shipping and handling charge for U.S. orders.)