

What Missionaries Ought to Know about Children's Adjustment

People living and working in other cultures may think that they do not need to give much thought to taking their preschool and primary children along. Parents may think that although the children may not want to go, they will soon adjust and be happy in the new culture.

Although this scenario is often the case, it is not always so. Children who do not want to go sometimes never adjust, refuse to learn the language, refuse to make friends, and talk about going home for years.

Parents can increase the likelihood that their preadolescent children will make the transitions to and from the host culture successfully. Following are suggestions that may increase the chances of your child having a good experience in another country.

On your mark! (Parenting)

Probably the most important factor in the adjustment of children is the relationship between their parents. Someone has said, "The best thing a father can do for his children is to love their mother." Although parents may not realize it, children are aware when problems exist between their parents.

Living in another culture is difficult for any marriage, so if you have not developed good methods of communication and resolving conflict, please take time to do so before going. Then you will be able to adequately do the following P's of Parenting:

- Presence. Parents are available for children. Of course, there will be times of

separation, but when not out of town, parents should "schedule" time with their children.

- Provision. Parents provide for their children's needs, not only financial and physical needs but also spiritual, relational, and emotional ones.
- Protection. Parents protect children by setting boundaries and by administering consequences as well as by their physical presence in times of danger.
- Permission. Parents give permission to express emotions in age-appropriate ways as well as to try new things and take risks.

Get set! (Preparation)

Although children need not be involved when the idea of serving cross-culturally first comes up, they want to have their voice heard as a part of the family when it is seriously discussed. Talking with them about it is vitally important rather than just telling them they are going. Even preschool children can process an amazing amount of information and should be included when considering the move. In addition to generally talking about the move, talk about specific things in their new culture and experience parts of it if possible.

- Talk about the food they will be eating when there.
- Cook some of the food while still at home.
- If possible eat at a restaurant that serves such food, and let the children hear the language and see the actions and appearance of the cooks and servers.
- Talk about the place the family will be living and look at pictures of it.
- If children are in school, talk about their school and look at pictures of it.

In all of this, stress positive things about the move and discuss options open to them months in advance of the move.

Go! (Packing)

When you are packing and realize that you cannot possibly take everything you planned, be very careful to let children have a voice in what you leave behind. The following "worn out" or "insignificant" items may be very important to a child:

- An torn blanket
- A wrinkled picture
- A broken toy
- A ragged teddy bear

You may tell a child to leave a cherished teddy bear behind and you will get him or her a new one when you get there. Although that sounds good, it may be the emotional equivalent of someone telling you to leave your baby at home because you can always have another one when you get there.

If you are into the popular pastime of scrapbooking, be sure to take some of those scrapbooks along. They can be invaluable for keeping memories alive. Photo albums are great as well. If you are really cramped for space, remember that in this digital age you may still have the photos in your computer or burned on a CD that can be taken along easily because it is so small and weighs only ounces.

Goodbyes are very important. We tend to say goodbye to people, but we also need to bid farewell to other things as well:

- Places. Take your child to school to tell it goodbye, then to the church, then to the park, and so forth.
- Pets. A cat, a dog, or even a fish may seem like a part of the family to a child. He or she needs to tell it goodbye and see who will be caring for it.

- Possessions. You obviously cannot take everything your children have, so let them give their things away (or sell them at a yard sale) so that they know who will have them.

Life there (Possibilities)

Once you arrive the choices may seem endless where children are involved. You may want your children to play with the national children who live nearby. However, your children have so many strange things to adjust to that the thought of playing with boys and girls who do not speak their language may be daunting at first.

You may want your children to learn the national language as children so that they can speak it without an accent and think in it like you can never do. However, still mastering the intricacies of their own language, they may find the new language confusing and not want to learn it.

You may want your children to take in the incredible scenery of the surrounding countryside or the important historical monuments and buildings in your area. However, they would rather play in the sandbox in the back yard.

The number of potential choices may seem endless, and you will have to use your own judgment. However, remember that there is a big difference between your spending time with your children and their spending time with you.

- If you are all doing something they want to do (play in the sandbox), you are spending time with them.
- If you are all doing something you want to do (seeing the monuments), they are doing something with you.

Of course, you do not have to do everything with them, but be sure that you do enough “somethings” with them. Better to end up with good memories of the sandbox than with bad memories of the monuments.

School (Preschool & Primary)

School is a very important part of the children’s lives, and you have a broad range of options open to you:

- Local Christian school
- Local international school
- Correspondence courses (traditional or DVD)
- Distance learning (internet or DVD)
- National school (public or private)
- Home school (alone or cooperative)
- Assisted home school (home and other)
- Boarding school (mission or international Christian)
- Satellite school (small or multigrade class)

As you and your children face these choices, remember that no one type of schooling is recommended for all children or even one child over his or her lifetime. Some children flourish in one type of school while other children flourish in another. A child may do well in one school situation when five years old but need a different one when ten years old.

This decision is one that you are likely to revisit several times during a child’s life, so do not be reluctant to make changes when such changes will help.

“Home” again (Passport country)

When you return to your passport country, it is similar to going originally to your host country. However, just reentering

your “home” culture may be more difficult than the original change in cultures—much to the surprise of the children. In addition, your children are now several years older than they were then, and the issues may be quite different. Here are some of the factors that may affect reentry.

- Age. One child who went as a child may be coming back as an adolescent and have progressed to a different way of thinking. Another child who could barely talk is now in school.
- Personality. Each child is an individual, and the extrovert who is energized being with people may respond quite differently from the introvert who wants to be alone.
- Experience. One child who had a difficult time entering the host culture may dread going home while the other who loved the transition eagerly anticipates it.
- Third culture kids. Your children who were from one culture have now internalized another. However they do not really feel a part of either, they are TCKs.
- Reason for leaving. If going home at this time was on the schedule, it is quite different from one that is a forced premature departure.
- Your attitude. If you, as parents, are eagerly looking forward to going home, your children will have a different attitude than if you want to stay.
- Education. If your children are at “natural breaks” in their education (between elementary and middle school) it may be easier than if they are leaving just a year before that break would occur.

Considering all these issues in your decisions will likely enable your children to have a better international experience.

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