

# GUIDE FOR LOCAL CHURCHES ON



## Caring for Third Culture Kids (MKs)



### THE BIG IDEA

---

When local churches send out and support missionary<sup>i</sup> families, they are not only committing themselves to the care of the parents, but also to the care of the children. Children who grow up in a culture different to their “passport culture”<sup>iii</sup> enjoy wonderful experiences and unique challenges.

**Missionary kids (MKs) and children of expatriate workers are together known as “Third Culture Kids.”** They do not feel they truly belong in either their first or second cultures (i.e. the culture in which they grow up or their passport culture), and so find a unique sense of belonging with other TCKs who understand their struggles and joys.

For many MK/TCKs, who have grown up overseas, Australia may never feel entirely like “home,” no matter how many times they visit on home assignment with their parents, or how many years they live here after their cross-cultural childhood. Churches can help MK/TCKs navigate life’s transitions and challenges, and can also benefit from their unique experience and skills.



### TIPS & EXAMPLES

---

- 1. Remember that each MK will feel differently** about their cross-cultural experiences and Australia: some will resent having to settle in Australia, while others will have been looking forward to it.
  - **Avoid presuming** how an MK/TCK feels about things. Each child may experience re-entry stress<sup>iii</sup> in different ways during resettlement in Australia.
  - Don’t be afraid to **ask them** about their views or their adjustment.
- 2. Understand that there is a small range of socially acceptable behaviour for young people.** The ‘bandwidth’ of socially acceptable behaviour is narrower for school aged children and young adults than for adults, and at it is narrowest for adolescents. This means that it is often harder for returning MK/TCKs than it is for their parents, because

they have more to learn to 'fit in.' Many of the understandings and behaviours they need to learn will seem 'obvious' to their peers or adults.

- Before sending out a missionary family, **organise for other children in the church** (around the same age) **to stay in contact with the MK/TCKs**, in order to minimise the amount of Australian information and 'common knowledge' they miss out on. Social media can really help with this!
- **Involve MK/TCKs overseas in your Children/Youth programs** through social media etc., so that they may be known and welcomed by children/youth in your church when they visit on home assignment or return to settle in Australia. This is also a great way to disciple the children/youth in your church to be [global Christians](#).<sup>iv</sup>
- During home assignments or resettlement in Australia, **arrange peer supports** – young people of similar age who would be able to assist MK/TCKs in understanding social norms, who they can turn to if they need to ask questions.
- Provide information for MK/TCKs in your church on helpful **networks and support groups** (e.g. contact Missions Interlink about such networks).

### 3. Understand that it can be tough for MKs to accept the 'Good and Bad' of their experiences.

Young people find it harder to accept 'grey,' and default to binary or idealistic thinking. They will need help to accept that there are good and bad aspects to both the culture of their childhood and Australian culture, and that being an MK is part of who they are (but not ALL of who they are).

- **Avoid using extreme language** on either topic when speaking to MK/TCKs, e.g. 'welcome to civilisation,' or criticising 'the moral decline of the West.'
- **Provide/organise age appropriate debriefing<sup>v</sup>** during home assignments and in preparation for settlement in Australia, in order to help children process their experiences and the changes they are facing.
- **Utilise their experiences and encourage them to share**, but ensure they are able to say no. It is important that MK/TCKs learn that they are not solely defined by their time in another culture.
- **Support their involvement in other activities**, in order to encourage other interests and a broaden their identity beyond being an MK/TCK.

### 4. Understand that the relative ages and time since Home Assignment affect MKs/TCKs' adjustment.

As the experiences of our formative years set our 'grid' for social behaviour, this makes it is harder for MK/TCKs to adjust to a 'new' culture as compared to an adult remembering their home culture.

- **Be careful about presuming** what an MK/TCK knows or understanding about “youth culture,” as they may have fewer or no “instincts” on how to act in Australia to fall back on, which creates additional stress for them.
- Remember that **the length of time between visits to Australia will affect MK/TCKs more than adults**, as it will be comparatively more of their total lived experience (4 years is a quarter of a 16yr-olds life!).
- Do not underestimate how much MK/TCK may appreciate **offers of assistance with the “basics,”** e.g. public transport, driving on a different side of the road, visiting a shopping centre, walking around the university, etc. Also make sure they are given space to confirm they can manage on their own.

**5. Understand that parents of MK/TCKs may not understand parenting in Australia today.** While the core principles of parenting do not change, regardless of which country missionary parents are serving in, they may still need help figuring out how to parent in Australia today.

- **Arrange parenting peer supports** – other parents with children at similar stages who can explain current age appropriate expectations in Australia, who can answer any questions without being judgemental.



## HELPFUL RESOURCES

---

1. Clyde N. Austin. “**Advantages of Being a Third Culture Kid.**”  
[https://www.mrnet.org/system/files/library/advantages\\_of\\_being\\_third\\_culture\\_children.pdf](https://www.mrnet.org/system/files/library/advantages_of_being_third_culture_children.pdf)
2. **TCK Guidelines** - “Guidelines for Developing Policies and Procedures for Families and Serving Children Overseas.” Global Connections, UK, 2008.  
[http://www.globalconnections.org.uk/sites/newgc.localhost/files/codes-and-standards/TCKs%20Guidelines%20Nov%2008%20final\\_0.pdf](http://www.globalconnections.org.uk/sites/newgc.localhost/files/codes-and-standards/TCKs%20Guidelines%20Nov%2008%20final_0.pdf)
3. “**Preparing TCKs for Overseas.**” Global Connections, 2007.  
<http://www.globalconnections.org.uk/sites/newgc.localhost/files/papers/Preparing%20TCKs%20for%20Overseas%20-%20Mosbach%20Mar%202007.pdf>
4. “**Raising resilient MKs: Resources for Caregivers, Parents and Teachers.**”  
[http://www.missionarycare.com/ebook.htm#resilient\\_mks](http://www.missionarycare.com/ebook.htm#resilient_mks)
5. “**Third Culture Kids and Adolescence: Cultural Creations.**”  
[http://www.missionarycare.com/ebook.htm#cultural\\_creations](http://www.missionarycare.com/ebook.htm#cultural_creations)

6. **“Praying for Missionary Kids.”** <http://www.globalconnections.org.uk/churches/global-mission/support/mks>
7. **“Factors re debriefing TCKs.”** Global Connections, 2007.  
<http://www.globalconnections.org.uk/sites/newgc.localhost/files/papers/Factors%20re%20Debriefing%20TCKs%20-%20Mosbach%20Mar%2007.pdf>
8. **“We’re Going Home: Reentry for Elementary Children,”** and **“I Don’t Want to Go Home: Parent’s Guide for Rentry for Elementary Children.”**  
[http://www.missionarycare.com/ebook.htm#going\\_home](http://www.missionarycare.com/ebook.htm#going_home)
9. **“TCK Transition Chart.”** Global Connections, 2007.  
<http://www.globalconnections.org.uk/sites/newgc.localhost/files/papers/TCK%20Transition%20Chart%20-%20Mosbach%20Ma%2007.pdf>

---

<sup>i</sup> **Missionary/missionaries** - a person/family who has been commissioned by their sending church(es) and/or mission agency to be explicitly dedicated to the work of cross-cultural ministry. It indicates someone who is gifted, set apart and trained/prepared for cross-cultural service, and so serves a particular role in the global Body of Christ. While every follower of Jesus is called to be His witness wherever they are, some are specifically lead to cross cultural and geographical boundaries to share the gospel with those who could otherwise not comprehend its message.

<sup>ii</sup> **Passport country/culture** – The country on a missionary’s or MK/TCK’s passport. This is generally the location of the missionary/family’s sending church(es), and often (but not always) the place they will return to once their current cross-cultural service comes to a close.

<sup>iii</sup> **Re-entry shock**–Sometimes termed “reverse culture shock.” These include the shocks associated with returning to one’s home culture, but also the pressures of relocating and emotional pressures, such as grief caused by the many losses involved in the re-entry transition.

<sup>iv</sup> **Global Christian** (“World Christian”/mission-minded) – a disciple of Jesus Christ who shares God’s global perspective and engages in various ways in God’s global mission, no matter where they are located. While ideally there should be no difference between a Christian and a global Christian, the difference often lies in a Christian’s the level of understanding and active obedience in regards to God’s global purposes for the whole world.

<sup>v</sup> **Debriefing** - directed conversation(s) whereby a skilled person to guides the cross-cultural worker/missionary through reflection on past events, looking at what is happening in the present, and helping them gain perspective for the future. This can be at points of change or crisis through their cross-cultural service, just before they leave their cross-cultural work/assignment, and/or on return to their passport country.