

Guidance for Guidance Counselors

about

Internationally Mobile Children

Third Culture Kids (TCKs), Global Nomads, Missionary Kids (MKs), Military Brats,

What is the hardest question for these students to answer?

Where are you from?

And the next hardest question is...

Where is home?

Who are these kids?

TCKs (used to cover all the people in the title) are the children of diplomats, missionaries, military, and people who work for international organizations, the United Nations, and multi-national companies. They have spent years living in other countries. They move to the United States and enter the schools as foreign students or immigrants who are disguised as American students. The “third culture” is the blend of the home culture and the various other cultures they have lived in; it’s an international culture (Useem, 1993; Eakin, 1998; Larson & Larson, 2007).

Where are you from?

For people in the United States this is a very common ice breaker kind of question. For these students this is a loaded question.

- Are they from the last country they lived in? If so, won’t that make them weird? Or, will it make them look arrogant or like a show-off? (Larson, 2007)
- Are they from the place where they were born? If so, it is likely to be a place they really don’t know anything about.
- Are they from the place where they now live, even though they don’t know anyone?

Where is home?

- TCKs are “a part of and apart from” everywhere (Useem & Downie, 1994).
- Home is where there are other TCKs to share life experiences with (Useem & Downie, 1994).

They are foreign students and need support.

- If they have experienced several moves, they likely have a build-up of grief for the losses of friends and homes (Pollock, 1994).
- They do not know the contemporary culture, what different dress styles mean, slang, or music. They have been very “with it” in the places where they lived, but it is very likely that the culture was significantly different even if it was trying to emulate the American culture (Smith, 1996).
- They do not know how to broach a conversation with their classmates, although they can easily do that with other TCKs. “Where have you lived?” and “Who are your parents with?” are the common threads for getting to know other TCKs (Useem & Downie, 1994).
- Similar to immigrants and refugees, they may make poor choices in an attempt to fit in and make friends. Some will flaunt their foreignness, others will attempt to be invisible, and some will become freaks because that is how they feel (Smith, 1996).
- Their academic background may be advanced. However, there will be gaps such as only knowing the metric system of measures (Kidd & Lankenau, 2006).
- They may have had to change sports with every move, so they may lack the self-confidence or skill to participate at home.
- They may have under-developed problem solving skills for social interactions because their mobile life style has taught them that either they or the problem moves away (Kidd & Lankenau, 2006).

They are foreign students and bring strengths a counselor might draw on.

- They usually speak at least one other language (Gerner, 1992).
- They understand and are at ease with people of other cultures (Bodenhorn, 2005).
- They are knowledgeable about current events and geography (Larson & Larson, 2007).
- They enjoy diversity, be it people, music, food, art, literature (Bodenhorn, 2005).
- They understand what it is like to not know the language or culture in a new country (Larson & Larson, 2007).

What can a counselor do to help these students?

- Whenever possible make sure they are in a classroom or on a team with at least one other TCK (Kidd & Lankenau, 2006; Bodenham, 2005).
- Direct them to the organizations on the list at the end of this handout. These groups offer support for adjusting to being “home” and give them a place to discuss their life experiences and be accepted as normal.
- Get them involved with the immigrant students and community. Some have provided translating services for free clinics and other community services.
- Create support groups for them and/or their parents (Bodenham, 2005).

What can TCKs do for counselors?

- They can assist a counselor with understanding people from countries where the TCK has lived.
- They might be willing to offer translating services.
- Older TCKs very often have organizational and fund-raising skills that can be put to use for such activities as an international fair or feast.
- They can befriend a foreign exchange student.
- They can mentor newly arrived TCKs (Bodenhorn, 2005).
- One or several can prepare a handbook for other TCKs. This should include the traditions and “unwritten curriculum” that everyone knows, such as whether or not or how to participate in spirit days, the need to save papers for the whole school year because there is a comprehensive exam at the end of the year, etc. Such a handbook is crucially important in high school and middle school.

Web sites of organizations that offer support groups, literature, reassurance:

www.fsyf.org: Foreign Service Youth Foundation (programs for elementary, middle school, and high school children of all Foreign Affairs agencies); D.C. area

www.tckworld.com: for children and adults; see articles by Drs. Ruth Hill Useem and Ann Baker Cottrell

www.tckinteract.net: for children and adults

www.gnvv.org: Global Nomads International: for adult TCKs

www.globalnomads-dc.org: for adult TCKs

www.youthcompass.org: focus on Missionary Kids (MKs)

www.sietar.org: Society for International Education, Training, and Research; home of the Intercultural Press; an excellent source for materials related to working in other cultures, foreign students, returning “home”

Recommended books

Eakin, K. B. (1988). *The foreign service teenager—at home in the u.s.: a few thoughts for parents returning with teenagers*. Washington, D.C.: Overseas Briefing Center of the Department of State.

Eakin, K. B. (1998). *According to my passport, i'm coming home*. Washington, D.C.: Family Liaison Office of the Department of State.

McCluskey, K. G. (Ed.). (1994). *Notes from a traveling childhood—readings for internationally mobile parents and children*. Washington, D.C.: Foreign Service Youth Foundation.

Pollock, D.C. & Van Reken, R. E. (1999). *The third culture kid experience: growing up among worlds*. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press.

Smith, C. (Ed.). (1996). *Strangers at home—essays on the effects of living overseas and coming “home” to a strange land*. Bayside, NY: Aletheia Publications.

Sorti, C. (1997). *The art of coming home*. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press.

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