



# THIRD CULTURE KIDS

by Johanna Bambridge  
Elementary School Principal

*A Third Culture Kid* is defined as “An individual who, having spent a significant part of their developmental years in a culture other than the parents’ culture, develops a sense of relationship to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any. Elements from each culture are incorporated into the life experience, but the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar experience.” (David C. Pollack, Interaction International, Inc.)

I truly love my role as an elementary principal; however, my greatest joy is being a parent to my two wonderful children, now both teens. Although quite typical teens in most ways, my offspring belong to a unique category known as Third Culture Kids or TCK. I first heard this term as a new teacher and parent to Frankfurt International School, back in the early 1990s. I was struck with anxiety, back then, that my two little ones would be growing up into this cultural group. Over time and more research, I came to realize that the entire Third Culture Kid phenomenon is extremely interesting but complex, that I would eagerly seek to learn more and more on this topic both as a parent and educator, and that I would encounter many Third Culture Kids in my international experience.

Something I discovered in all this, however, is what I wish to share in this very brief article: That

normal parenting skills may not be enough when raising TCKs. Please allow me to suggest a few points, which may help you with your own TCK experience.

Some of the issues associated with raising TCKs begin even before leaving your home country. When the decision is made to move, it is important for the adults to seek information about the global nomad experience. There are many excellent books and articles written on this topic. Prepare for your move by researching the Third Culture Kid phenomenon through the Internet and local and school libraries.

Understand and accept that unless you yourself were an internationally mobile child, your child is not of your own cultural background in the same way you are, and never will be. Accept responsibility for the results! The move will have challenges and benefits and this message must be positively transmitted to the entire family. When we were experiencing some of the challenges associated with moving, we refrained from expressing our thoughts in front of our youngsters. We told the children that the move was going to be fun and exciting.

Create family traditions to help manage the highs and lows of the global nomad's experience. It won't all be fun—there will be low points for adults as well as youngsters. Find ways to make "light" of the lows. We had several family picnics on the living room floor for a long time before our furniture arrived. On

another occasion we enjoyed lots of laughs over trying to find the words to say, "We have bees in our ceiling and need an exterminator" in German over the telephone when we first arrived in Frankfurt. Frustrating? Maybe, but it all depends on how you look at the situation. We even laugh about it now.

Provide your children with regular opportunities to experience host country culture, to explore the ways in which their interests and hobbies exist among their host country peers. Search and support attempts to speak the local language and to build relationships with host country nationals. It can be as simple as attending the local church or commune sponsored activities.

Provide opportunities for your children to be involved in successful planning experiences. Children who have moved quickly or frequently often have things happen to them on short notice. They must learn to "trust" planning again. In our family, we make all attempts to plan our vacations as a team. Some families even plan a weekly "family day"—accepting ideas from all the members of the family and sticking to the plan.

Help your child develop skills in understanding and managing differences through problem solving and mediation techniques.

Multi-mover children, often do not see a situation through to resolution. They have learned to "move away" from most things and not finish the job. In our

family, the children had to finish something they started to the end. Quitting a sport or an activity midway through the session because a problem arose was, and is, still unacceptable.

Provide your children with one place to which they regularly return. For my family, this is still their grandmother Antonetta's house in New York. This is the special place where they measure their growth and development and gather memories.

Provide a few people outside the immediate family who are "the constants" in your child's life. Such an individual—whether a godparent, a family friend, a close teacher or coach—can be an excellent role model for building trustworthy and long-term relationships.

Encourage your child to serve as "buddies or cultural informants" for other children and families moving into the country. Allow the children to apply their knowledge of other countries. This is easy in a school like ours where help is always needed in greeting and helping new families settle in.

Finally, accept the fact that at some point, the TCK will realize that their adopted home means as much as, if not more than, their country of origin. My children would often ask me, "Mom, where is home?" and I would reply, "Your passport tells everyone what country you are allowed to reside in, but your heart tells you what is home." My teens no longer ask this question.