

Mom & Dad...Are you listening to me?

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In my years of working with missionary kids (MKs) I've spend a lot of my time just listening to what these great young persons have to say. They are great story tellers and generally speaking they have some amazing stories to share. By the time many MKs turn 18 years of age, they have traveled the world, can speak 2-3 languages (or more), have witnessed global politics as a frontline observer, and have developed a three-dimensional view of the world. That is, the things that most people only experience through TV and newspapers, they have actually lived and experienced personally. MKs exude a cultural richness that in many cases exceeds their parents' experience.

Listening is not one of my strengths, but these MK encounters have provided an amazing opportunity for me to hear their heartbeat and to understand more thoroughly their relationships with their parents. I know as I've talked and listened to my own kids, I've come to realize that there were many times in their growing up years when they did not have my full attention. The result has been that there were things that they wished I knew that I didn't. So the observation is that there are times when our kids wish we were listening to their heart-cry, but we were too busy to hear their heart-cry and so the teachable moment passed.

In this brief article I'd like to explore with you two issues that MKs wish their parents had known and responded to as they grew up between cultures. If you are an MK reading this article, I trust you'll print it off and use it as a discussion point with your parents. If you are a parent, you might want to take some time today and listen as your child expresses his or her deepest thoughts with you.

Do you really know how hard it is to say goodbye?

Transitions are the norm for missionary families. If you doubt this fact, take a minute and count how many significant moves you have made since getting into missions. The number may surprise you! I grew up in the same Kentucky hometown my whole life, so transitions as a child are not my experience. When I ask MKs to count the number of "significant" moves they experienced as children, in many cases it matches or exceeds their age. With the current trends in missions and the global scene, mobility is growing within the international community and especially in the missions movement.

I've talked with many MKs who have been shifted from one place or culture to another and were never included in the decision-making process. Educational moves from one educational system to another. Mobility is high! Now I realize that it is impossible to include our children in every transitional decision that we confront, but I've come to realize that as our children get older, we must listen to them—specifically when it comes to the mobility that comes from being in missions. In many cases our children only want us to empathize with their emotions and acknowledge the difficulty of saying goodbye to people, places/cultures, pets and even the food. As adults we have learned the necessary skills to deal with these changes in our lives, but too often we assume that our kids will just "go with the flow" and we (unintentionally) leave them out of the process.

Moms and Dads, can I ask that the next time you see your family coming to a "significant" move, you pause and listen to your children? Open your heart to them and share *your* pain in saying goodbye. Be H.O.T.: **H**onest, **O**pen and **T**ransparent with them. Give them the freedom to share their heartaches and allow them the space and time to process their goodbyes. You'll be surprised how this will open up a new and deeper relationship with your children.

The kids back "home" just don't understand me!

Do you remember how you felt when you came back to your passport country on a home assignment or furlough? Do you remember standing in front of your home church on a Sunday morning (or a missions conference) as you tried to share in 5 minutes what God had done in your own life and in your ministry over the past 3-4 years? It gets my blood boiling just to think about it! Well, if we are frustrated with the fact that people in our passport countries don't understand our lifestyle or even our ministry, try to imagine how our kids must feel when they are thrown back into the passport culture environment.

Our children typically look at life quite differently from children who have not lived overseas. This becomes ever so obvious to our children on their first return to the passport culture; and as they grow older, their connections with the passport

country grow in importance. I remember when our kids returned to the United States for furloughs in their elementary school and junior high years. Even though we did a good job of keeping their friendship base intact, it was still a shock to us and to our kids how un-informed their friends were. It is discouraging to have those you thought were good friends ask questions that prove they didn't read your emails and didn't make an effort to remember what you told them. I don't think we can "blame" these folks; they have lives of their own...but the truth is—it still hurts.

Our role as parents is to help our kids process these disappointments and at the same time try to instill an appreciation for this "home culture" and the relationships that have been established. We can also use these "disappointing" experiences to enlighten our "home-based" friends about our kids' world. It might be worth bringing some friends from the "home culture" over to see your life overseas. This will take some time and planning, but the investment could build a significant network base for your own kids when they make their transition back to the passport culture.

A Closing Word

One trait of a healthy family is that they can communicate well together. Listening is a key dynamic of communication. Often our communication with our children seems one-sided. That is, the adults are doing all the talking and the children are doing all the listening. I encourage you as parents to practice proactive listening and thoughtful responding. Not reacting but truly responding to the felt needs of our children. When we react, we project our own experiences and feelings onto what we've just heard. When we respond, we enter the other person's feelings and are empathetic. We need to listen as well as speak.

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