

A Third Culture Kid ..a what?

You may or may not be familiar with the term, but you are about to become educated as to the true meaning! The term “Third Culture Kid” was first used by Ruth Hill Useem in the 1960s during her anthropological study of expatriates in India. It has been used and copyrighted by Dave Pollock, Executive Director of Interaction to describe

A T.C.K. (Third Culture Kid) is an individual who, having spent a significant part of the 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.

Aha, you are saying to yourself, it has nothing to do with the “Third World” as some people seem to think. Another common term used to describe these children is “Global Nomad” and it is used to describe the children of internationally mobile families, be they Embassy, UN, Business, Military or Missionary and of course the children of cross-cultural marriages. What some adults living overseas fail to realise if they were born and brought up in one country, is that their children will be different from them. Their sense of identity, nationality and belonging is not the same as that of their children. Their children will be forever affected by the decision of the parents to live and work overseas. The research I carried out in 1995 tracked people who had graduated from international schools 20 years ago to look at the long-term effects of an internationally mobile childhood. 82% of the respondents still have international aspects to their lives. 42% are living in a country other than their passport country.

Now we know what the definition of a T.C.K. is, but what are they actually like? Dave Pollock has been teaching and preaching the T.C.K. Profile since 1980, directing an organisation (Interaction) which provides pastoral care to such families and travelling the world ministering to individuals and organisations. So what does constitute the T.C.K. profile? Read on and you may recognise yourself or someone you know.

Mobility

If you have moved around a lot as a child, your mobile lifestyle may become the habit of a lifetime. Children tend to repeat their upbringing and have a migratory instinct as adults which started during their childhood. This can be a positive factor because it represents a confidence and ability to cope with change. However, it can mean an inability to make a long-term commitment to anyone or anything.

Languages

Not surprisingly, T.C.K.s tend to be good at languages. They have been exposed to more than one language at an early age and this ability to speak

more than one language often plays a key role in career choice and employment.

Belonging

Sense of belonging is a key issue. Where do these children feel that they belong? "Where do you come from?" is one of the hardest questions they have to answer. They either end up feeling at home everywhere and have the ability to move and settle in anywhere, or else home is always elsewhere and they are constantly moving and searching for that elusive somewhere to settle down.

Personality traits

They are usually extremely friendly and good at making friends quickly because they have been exposed to far more people than perhaps their monocultural counterparts. However, being able to initiate relationships they also have to know how to end relationships, because an expatriate community is characterised by frequent goodbyes. They may have very good closure skills because of frequent practice but unresolved grief is one of the key issues which T.C.K.s have to deal with. When an internationally mobile family moves, the child experiences the simultaneous loss of home, friends, school and this pattern which may be repeated numerous times, can have long-term consequences if the child never has an opportunity to grieve properly.

Expanded world view

Children who have been exposed to more than one country have a global perspective. They can seem much more mature and worldly wise than their peers in their passport country. They haven't just seen places on TV but have actually been there and are far more interested in travel and the rest of the world.

Cross-cultural skills

T.C.K.s have a natural ability to act like chameleons because they have grown up knowing that you change your behaviour, language, or customs to suit the situation. No one sat down to teach them, it was something they learned by osmosis. As a result they grow up more culturally sensitive, more aware, more interested in people from other countries and cultures and generally with cross-cultural skills that many adults never acquire who have not travelled overseas until adulthood.

Implications

If it has not occurred to you yet, think about the potential of these kids. In a new country it takes the parents a long time to learn the language and the customs. The children seem to learn effortlessly and experience a bonding with the country that is their childhood home. They have local friends, are at ease with the place and the people. The traits mentioned above make them extremely marketable in the multinational business world.

Interaction seeks to educate people about these Third Culture Kids. The idea is to help them develop their true potential and maximise their skills and background. These people are real cultural bridges and can be invaluable

mentors. Sometimes, they have spent a long time on returning to their passport country, trying to be like everyone else and wondering why they feel as though they are different. I know when I first heard Dave Pollock present the profile, I recognised myself. I realised why I felt more comfortable as a foreigner in a foreign land rather than feeling different from people in my own country. I realised why I always “clicked” with other people who had lived overseas and why I studied languages at University. The internationally mobile community is growing. An awareness of the gifting and abilities of this special group can contribute to helping individuals to achieve their full potential. I hope that the term “T.C.K.” holds more meaning for you now. If anyone is interested in knowing more, please feel free to communicate with me directly or contact Interaction for an order form to see what other resources are available.

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Helen Fail