

Children on HA

If you have children, it's worth remembering that HA may not be for them what it means to you. You get a happy reunion with old friends and family, going to places that resonate for you and talking about your ministry. They get dragged off to a foreign country, spend a lot of time with people they don't know, and are put on display to perform in a succession of boring meetings. On top of that, they may even be forced to go to a scary indisciplined school where everybody wears strange clothes and laughs at them for speaking with a strange accent or for not knowing who Spongebob Squarepants is.

Not that we're at all bitter. But usually we can't wait to get home again. Mission Kids (MKs) don't really think of your sending country as their home, so you really need to think about how you're going to make this experience work for them.

If you've done your preparation thoroughly, your children will be as aware as you are that they are mission workers and will have that as a vocation as much as you do. So explain to them that this is a normal part of mission work. The best thing that you can do is talk about it well in advance so that they have plenty of time to get used to the idea, and involve them in the planning so that they can own the experience rather than feel that it is something they have to undergo. Invite them to participate in your presentations, but don't compel them. Let them decide for themselves how they want to be involved. They may just surprise you.

One way to prepare your kids culturally is to get friends in your sending country to send out magazines, DVDs etc, so that the kids are informed about what other kids their age are doing, reading and watching. Globalisation is minimising this effect, but it's still important to help your kids fit in. Think about music, fashion, television, movies and games (have your kids got a Wii or an iPod shuffle?). Maybe your kids will be the only ones in their class who are wearing last year's shoes. It might be a good idea to find a friend with similar aged children to take them shopping as soon as they start HA. I heard of one MK who was bullied because she didn't bring the right bag to school!

Get the children ready by showing them photos of family and friends, talking about them, and reminding of previous happy times together, or telling them stories about your past. Prepare them by reminding them things will be different, for example "Next Christmas we won't be by the pool; we'll be keeping warm by a nice cosy fire". When you're packing, remember to take one or two of the children's favourite small toys with you, so that they'll have something familiar to play with. One family I know sends games and books their children enjoy to their English cousins for Christmas, so that they will have common interests.

Once you're on HA, try to make sure that you spend lots of time with the kids, so they don't feel neglected. One of the worst things is to be left in a foreign country in the care of strangers (aka grandparents?) while your parents do something 'important'. This has to be balanced with continually being dragged to meetings, so you need to plan your diary carefully. Try to be at the same church as your children at least half the time, so they don't feel you're neglecting them.

Don't assume that your children know how things work in your home country – you may need to brief them as much as you did when they first went abroad. I know of one little boy who was brought up in the Philippines, and his parents didn't realise that he didn't know how to button his duffelcoat and tie his shoes.

Help your children make friends at church quickly by associating with supporting families as much as possible. Getting children praying together helps, and for older children texting and social networking will help reinforce bonds. Remember that kids at secondary school who don't have mobiles or facebook accounts will feel like second class citizens.

Other things you can do include getting your kids together with other MKs – they'll love sharing the horror stories! If you're part of a large sending organisation, they can facilitate that. In the summer there are also camps specially for MKs to help them get together and deal with life in the sending country. We particularly recommend ReKonnnect (rekonnnect@gmail.com) camps for kids and teens, or re:ignite (http://www.keswickministries.org/missionary_retreat) at the Keswick convention.

School is always going to be a challenge. If possible get back before the start of term, and talk to the teachers so that they know what to expect. Make sure your children know what to expect too! They might take a few weeks to settle in, as it will be very different to what they're used to, so don't expect them to perform outstandingly. They may also find it tiring, and if they're away for weekends they might find they haven't got a lot of energy. Help them to make friends quickly by inviting classmates round after school, or meeting up in the park.

Above all, make it fun – an adventure in a strange foreign land where the customs are really weird, and if budgets permit build in lots of exciting things to do so that they've got some good stories to tell their friends when they get back home. Getting HA right for kids is hard, but worth it. If you get it right, it will be more fun for you and will also sow the seeds of a good HA experience next time round – if they enjoyed it last time, they'll be much more excited about going next time.