

Three mums talk about...

Transition



For this issue of TCK TALK, we asked three mums in different locations, with children at different stages, working with different organisations, to share what they have learned through their experience.

Contributors:

Linda - Moved to Kiwoko Hospital, Uganda in 2017, from N.Ireland (3 children)

Joy - Moved to the Middle East 10 years ago, from England (4 children/teens)

Philippa - Served for 15 years in the Philippines and calls three places home: N.Ireland, America and the Philippines (2 children)

What lessons have you learned from going through transition?

Joy:

We got close to a lot of people who left, and then we never heard from them again. It's tempting to protect yourself and your children and keep people at arm's length, but this isn't healthy. You need to be aware of the toll it takes on your child and potential issues of healthy attachment later in life. Talk about it, be open, live in the moment in as healthy a way as possible, look out for signs of distress.

Ask people who leave to explain their reasons as much as possible to your children. One family left for no apparent reason leaving a lot of hurt. It was a "God told us to" kind of thing which really wasn't good enough from close friends. You can't then just mourn their going without also feeling resentment. The next family who moved suddenly I was quite bold in asking them to explain, as much as they were comfortable with, why they were going.

Linda:

We have learnt so much more of God's great love for us, as individuals and as a family. It has been wonderful to discuss God's plans together, to be open about the easier and more difficult things, and acknowledge that God's plans are always best, even when we can't see it at the time.

We have learnt so much about change by moving to somewhere there is constant change (many visitors, elective students and volunteers come and go, each for different lengths of time; the staff turnover can be quite high due to people moving closer to family or to the towns/cities; death seems so much closer with lower life expectancy, higher rates of childhood deaths, more accidents):

- It is good to be prepared, but also acknowledge that no matter what you do to prepare there will be unexpected changes and challenges. God has promised to be with us wherever we are (Hebrews 13:5) and he will strengthen and help us (Isaiah 41:10).
- There will always be change in life, sometimes quite unexpectedly. Yet we have an unchanging God (Hebrews 13:8).
- The importance of not clinging to the things of this world too tightly. For life is brief and our eternal home is in heaven (James 4:14; 2 Corinthians 5:1).

Although our relationship with God is the most important constant in all the changes, for the boys being together as a family is another important constant.

Philippa:

Going through times of transition has been very refining for us as a family, especially when it comes to our priorities and the desires of our hearts. I think I learned the most during the past few years when we had to leave our home and ministry behind in the Philippines due to my husband's cancer diagnosis. We left everything we owned behind, we came home with only a few suitcases and yet we were left to unpack a lot of worries and uncertainties. Our kids were 5 and 7 and we learned more than ever before about how to walk in the comfort and security of the presence of Jesus moment by moment.

When everything in our life was turned upside-down, we came to believe with all our heart, mind and soul that Jesus is enough.

During this time, I was concerned about the welfare of our kids and especially what they were thinking about the Lord as they watched their Dad struggle for months on end. I felt the weight of explaining and defending the Lord's

goodness to them. The Lord in his kindness and grace soon reminded me through his Word and through various circumstances that this weight was not to be fully on my shoulders. He was faithful to reveal himself and his goodness and faithfulness to our children. I just had the joy as a mother to pay attention and to point out that he was with us caring for us and looking after us.

I often felt like the children of Israel wandering in the desert, with many unknowns, and yet the presence of the Lord was with them as a cloud by day and fire by night. I imagined the mothers travelling then with their kids being asked many questions as they walked and they could point time and time again, when they didn't have all the answers and say with full confidence, "Look Yahweh is with us," I found myself doing this so often, lifting their eyes and their hearts away from the circumstances to say "Look, the Lord is our Shepherd, he is with us." And he was, always.

Do you have family traditions that you keep wherever you go?

Linda:

Although we don't have a huge number of family traditions, we have a few that we will keep wherever we go. As a family we like to mark birthdays and special events, such as Christmas. We tend to keep this relatively simple e.g. having a cake together with some friends. It's more about being together and enjoying time together, rather than about 'things'. We have a family quiet time each evening before the boys go to bed, where we study God's Word and pray together, and we try to keep this as constant as possible no matter where we are.

Joy:

Before we left UK we did a pack that was put together by OMF for children. You wrote about your favourite places etc in your home country- it was a really nice thing to do and bring with us.

Doing all the travelling round in the UK is hard. We visit lots of homes. We put together a scrapbook of each place we went to with pics, info, tickets etc. as nice memory for when we got back. We also gave homes we'd stayed in star ratings but did not tell the hosts that! This just made it more fun.

Philippa:

We have some family traditions we keep wherever we go, from the small daily routines of spending time in the Word and prayer, Saturday morning pancakes, to the bigger celebrations of birthdays etc. We tend to keep the traditions not around things or gifts but around our time together as a family. On birthdays we spend time telling the person whose birthday it is what we love and appreciate about them, how we have seen them grow in the past year. We often write them a letter for them to keep. Each Christmas we spend time during advent reading from the Word, with simple treats like hot chocolate each night. They really look forward to these special times.

However, beyond the typical traditions revolving around the calendar we have our own family celebrations each year when we enjoy celebrating the goodness and faithfulness of God. These times include the date we arrived in the Philippines for the first time. We make “Cupcakes of Faithfulness” and write little flags on each cupcake with things we are thankful during the past years. eg “God has provided for us for 15 years,” “People have been praying for us for 15 years,” “30 people were baptised this year.” We want to teach the kids to remember, enjoy and savour the Lord’s goodness and kindness to us as we live lives of ministry as a family. Another example is the date when the Lord healed our daughter from chronic infections, through a surgery she was able to have in America. We thank the Lord each year on the date for her surgery and thank him for her health and strength.

What are advice would you give to others facing transition?

Linda:

Having a strong sense of God’s will for us as a family, not simply for the adults, is essential. We are here together, and God has roles for all of us. Our boys have forged opportunities and relationships that we would never have been able to. We are ‘in this together’!!

Always being willing to listen to each other’s concerns, no matter how little they may seem. This is especially important for the boys... and in addition to discussing concerns, praying together about the issue.

One of the best pieces of advice we were given prior to moving to Uganda was: focus on ‘being’, not on ‘doing’. It is so easy to get caught up in the doing, and forget the being... the busyness of sorting home schooling, and not

seeing and being there for the child who just needs your presence and comfort; the business of doing the work activities, and not being there for work colleagues, friends or family when they need you to listen. Just 'being'. Being a Christian father or mother, being a good friend, living out life as a Christian, are so much more important than doing.

Joy:

Pray they'll learn important truths about who God is- their Rock, never changing, never leaving. Jesus- a friend who sticks closer than a brother. Talk about these wonderful truths with them. R's only 2 expat friends left round the same time. It was really hard but she would say it was a time when she felt closer to Jesus than ever before, he became real to her then.

Philippa:

Be very aware of the words you are speaking to your children as you prepare to go to a new country for the first time.

As you are packing it is easy to say things like, "We can't take all these toys so you need to get rid of most of them." Immediately you have set them up to have negative feelings about the country you are moving to. We tend to not gather so many things they can't take with them, so this is not a constant loss when they move.

Learn about the country before you go.

When our kids were about 4 years and up we let them pack a small carry-on bag themselves. While we were packing our suitcases, they could take anything they wanted in their bag. They had control over those decisions. It always amazed me what they put in these bags; a rock from their grandparent's garden, a map from the zoo we had visited etc. So often to me it was "trash" I would have thrown the items away, but to them they were sentimental goodies of their time on furlough. It seemed to give one of our children who was very sentimental some peace to know she had the option to take these things she really wanted.

Try to keep routines the same, especially at bedtimes.

Don't forget to state the obvious. They have no idea what is ahead and moving across the world can seem so scary to them even if they are showing excitement and not voicing their fears. Especially when they are little, I would remind them of the facts, "We will all live together in one house." "Mom and Dad will be sleeping in the next room beside you just like we always do." I would be specific with my questions. Instead of saying "Do you have any questions?" I would ask "Are there any questions you have about where we

will sleep when we move?” “Any questions about what we will be eating?” “Mama will still make our favourite pancakes!” The more they can picture their life in the small moments the better.

Ask them who they want to specifically say goodbye to before they leave. There will be people you have never thought of and wouldn't be on your list! For us one time it was the cashier at the local grocery store.

Pray. Read the Word and pay attention to how the Lord is taking care of you and your family as you go. It can be easy in all the chaos and lack of routine to let this go until you get settled, but we need the Lord and his Word so much during these times. It models to your kids that the Word is not an extra but a necessity in your lives. You will want them in their future transitions without you to turn to the Word, so give them this memory.

Journal, and help them to journal, if that is something they enjoy. When they are little it can be through pictures or simple questions, or recording themselves on video or on an iPad. Then they can look back and see their fears and how the Lord provided for them in many ways.

When it is age-appropriate and beneficial, share with them your fears and struggles, too. It's ok for them to know Mum and Dad are having to trust the Lord with their fears and concerns and they are sad or lonely saying goodbye to people, too. Together you can pray for each other in these areas. (If kids are too young though this can be scary to them to know Mom and Dad are also nervous or unsure of what is ahead.)

Keep in touch with the people you have left behind, but not to the extent that it keeps you or your kids from being fully present in their new place. We have so many possibilities through the internet to keep in contact with people all around the world. This can be a blessing, but it can also be a hindrance. Zoom or face-timing “home” to all their friends' birthdays may make your family sadder that they are missing out on all the activity. It is something to gauge or be mindful of during transitions.