

Missionary Kids

"MISSIONARY KIDS"

Paul G. Hiebert

"Born January 1876. Died July 1876. Our Beloved Daughter" read the small gravestone in a neglected cemetery in a distant country. One of many thousands around the world that stand as silent testimonies to the high price missionary children have paid for the spread of the Gospel. The parents too paid a high price as they buried the child with their own hands, alone and feeling forsaken by the God to whom they had given their lives.

Today malaria, smallpox, cholera and the other great killers of the past are largely gone. But there are new fears - terrorism, kidnappings, anti-American hostilities and wars. Probably no area of missionary service creates more heart searching, more concern and worry and more agonizing decisions than raising missionary kids (M.K.s). And no area creates more joy and love, for missionary families, for the most part, are closely knit together. They travel together, worship together and play together. They support one another in their many moves, and abroad where there are no T.V.'s and nightly activities, they often spend the long evenings together in family gatherings.

What kind of people are these M.K.s, how should their parents see them, and how should the western sending churches relate to them?

Don't Pity Them.

Missionaries often feel guilty of depriving their children the privileges of growing up as "normal" children in the West, so they compensate by treating them as deprived children. And some M.K.s begin to pity themselves.

But nothing is further from the truth. Exposure to the world and its cultural diversity is one of the greatest gifts parents can give to their children. M.K.s in a sense are world citizens and few of them would trade

their experiences for the toys and entertainments of western childhood. Studies show that a greater percentage of M.K.s are higher achievers than are normal American high school graduates. Many have become outstanding in their professions.

Don't Neglect Them.

Growing up abroad has its special privileges. It also has its special needs. Missionary parents are often so busy with mission tasks that they forget that because of their special situation, their children need special attention. Should father go to speak at some meeting and miss Johnny's birthday? Should mother be so active in church meetings that she must send her children to boarding school at an early age rather than teach them at home herself?

Missionary parents often see a conflict between God's work and the demands of their children. But there is no greater work of God than raising godly children and modeling a Christian home for new converts. Many an M.K. has rejected Christianity because they saw God as their rival for the affections of their parents, and felt that their parents loved God more than them. Studies have shown that a greater percentage of M.K.s than normal struggle with psychological problems of adjusting to life in the west.

Remember they are Bicultural People.

M.K.s are not Americans or Canadians just because their parents are. In other words, they are not "going home" when their parents return on furlough. Nor are they Indians or Africans just because those are the countries where they grow up. Their culture is that of the American community abroad. It is neither fully American, nor is it fully African or Latin American. It is a special mix of both, and for that reason is sometimes called a biculture.

M.K.s who grow up in a biculture have within them two worlds. When they are abroad they often talk about and emphasize their American identity. But when they are in the West, they talk about their country overseas, eat and praise its food, and criticize American ways. In fact, they do not feel fully at home with the natives of either country, and are often happiest when they are flying from one country to another. On the other hand, they often have an international perspective that sets them apart from people who have grown up only in one culture and never participated deeply in another one.

Remember They Face Culture Shock Coming to the West.

Parents, and even more, grandparents and relatives fail to realize that M.K.s are not "Americans" and that they are not "coming home" when they come to the West. After all, their parents belong to western cultures, and the M.K.s themselves are often citizens of the U.S. or Canada. But for the M.K.s the West is a foreign land towards which they feel a great deal of ambivalence.

When they come on furlough they often have a sense of excitement. They are coming to the country their parents have talked so much about and idealized. And the first months are often full of new and interesting activities. But when they settle down and enter school and the other routines of everyday life, they often feel lost. They must make new friends and establish new habits. But more important, they do not know the inside information and customs that make them members of the local culture. They don't know the latest music hits, or leading baseball players. They don't know the jargon or the newest dress styles. When they talk about their overseas experiences no one seems to be really interested. Even relatives soon get bored with their descriptions for they have no personal experiences to which they can relate them. Everyone expects them to forget their past

and to become good Americans. But if they do this, they must kill a very important part of themselves. Deep within them springs the feeling that they really do not belong here, and they fear that they might never go back abroad.

It is not surprising, then, that many M.K.s try to return overseas during their younger years. Most of those who do only find disillusionment. The biculture is a temporary culture and is often gone when they return. So too are their schoolmates and local friends. Possibly for the first time they realize they can never come back to their childhood culture as adults. It is gone and they can never really "go native". Some find careers in other overseas cultures as missionaries, diplomats, scholars and development specialists. The rest learn with varying degrees of success to live as migrants to the West.

Remember They Face Identity Crises.

M.K.s face a particular type of identity crises - to which culture do they really belong? To the West? To India, Africa or Latin America? Or to the transcendent biculture?

Some resolve the tension by trying to be American or Canadian, and to reject their foreign experience. Others reject the West and identify with their country abroad. Both of these responses are destructive, for in each the M.K.s must deny a very important part of themselves. Some recognize the two worlds within them, but keep these separate to avoid the conflicts that arise between them. Sometimes the M.K.s are Americans, and at other times they are their international selves. While this enables them to function in different situations, in the long run they face the danger of a cultural schizophrenia. They have within them two cultures and two sets of values that they cannot bring together. Finally, there are those who work on the

long and difficult task of integrating between these conflicting worlds, taking the best from each and working towards an international synthesis. They indeed become world Christians.

How can we help M.K.s face their identity crises? First we must recognize the unique problems they face as bicultural people. Then we must show them a great deal of love and acceptance, not trying to reshape them into a western mold. We must seek to incorporate them with their differences into the fellowship of the church without placing them on a pedestal. Most M.K.s want nothing more than to become part of a local community without having to give up an essential part of who they are.

Remember They Too are Missionaries.

We often forget that M.K.s themselves are an important part of the missionary task. Not only are they asked to pay a high price so that their parents may minister, but also they themselves often open doors to the people who know that the missionary has no greater gift to share with them than his or her children. They are often the bridge to an effective communication of the Gospel within another culture.

And what is their reward? The Psalmist says, "The lovingkindness of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him, and His righteousness to their children, and their children's children (103:17)."