

Introduction

In this edition of Educare, we are privileged to have a very helpful article by Tim Cook on families with teens. It covers recruitment, the selection process, important questions to ask, and supporting a family with teens on the field. It also includes an inspiring story from Tim's experience, and some resources that he recommends.

At the end of this edition we have listed two further resources which are particularly helpful for this time of coping with the linked challenges of dealing with the impact of Covid 19, and parenting in the digital age.

Best practices in mobilising families with adolescents

This paper has been written by Tim Cook, TCK Consultant with AIM International, and edited by Gill Bryant, MK Consultant with WEC International. Tim gratefully acknowledges input from the following individuals and organisations:

Nancy Elwood (Greater Europe Mission); AIM's TCK consultant team; Tumaini Counselling Centre, Nairobi; some key consultants from the MK Education Summit; further feedback from participants in the 2020 summit.

In addition, Gill acknowledges with appreciation the comments of Guille Eddy, chair of Eurotck and Latino TCK specialist.

Experience across missions has found that mobilising a family to the field for the first time with a child or children aged 12 or older is not recommended. Adolescence is a crucial time in children's development when they are establishing their own identity. When adolescents get uprooted from all that is familiar to them and are placed in a new and strange place where they don't even speak the language, it can create a significant crisis in their lives. The emotional trauma can be so strong that the family has to return home in order to sort things out.

A study based on data from 2009 carried out with almost 550,000 children, 25% of whom had moved within the previous year, found a 20% increase in mental health issues for children moving between the ages of 12 and 17, and only a 3% increase for children between the ages of 6 and 11.

"It shouldn't come as a surprise to us that adolescents in particular - even more than younger people - have a difficult time making adjustments," said Christopher Bellonci, a child and adolescent psychiatrist at Floating Hospital for Children at Tufts Medical Center.

"The job of adolescents is to find a peer group and an identity outside of the home, and that is harder when your peer group and school are disrupted by a move when they should provide support and strength," he told Reuters Health.¹

Moving to the field for the first time is often complicated by the fact that parents are going through culture shock as well and may be less able to provide the emotional support that the children need at this time.

However, researchers also acknowledge that there are many factors that play into a move. Many moves happen because of discipline issues or family issues. Others are simply job related. And there is a lot of useful information for helping prepare children for a move. In talks with TCK Consultants from other organisations, I found that none had a written policy of not accepting families with teenagers, but some have an unwritten practice of not allowing it. Although not the norm, I have encountered positive outcomes with families moving to the field for the first time with adolescents.

AIM has chosen not to have a policy prohibiting the mobilisation of families with adolescents, however, we want to emphasize the need for careful consideration in this process. Parents should be well informed of the challenges and adolescents should be on board with the move. It is to that end that this paper is written as best practices for mobilising families with adolescents.

It goes without saying that we need always to be in prayer through the process and listening to the Holy Spirit. He may prompt us to do something totally against logic. But if we do, let's make sure it is God's Spirit speaking and not pressure from parents or pressure from the field to get a family out to meet an urgent need.

Why do a few adolescents adapt well?

There are several key factors that have been observed in adolescents who have adjusted well, against the expected norm.

- They are excited about the idea of going. Not just willing to go, but actually excited to go. This does not mean that they are not afraid of some things. In fact, the more realistic their outlook the more likely it is

that they will adjust well. Or to put it another way, the more clearly they are able to express the mixture of their feelings, the better. If the interview just results in a shrug and saying, 'I suppose it will be OK', I would be quite wary.

- They have a good relationship with their parents. They can talk comfortably with their parents about their struggles without feeling judged.
- They have a voice in the family.
- They have had a sense of personal calling. They not only accept that their parents are called, but they see themselves as an integral part of that calling.
- They leave well: proper goodbyes are said, relationships are restored, thank you's are said, and arrangements are made for staying in contact with family and friends.
- There is a good schooling option that meets both academic and social needs.
- They are comfortable with themselves. This is a rare thing to find in any teenager.
- There is an opportunity to visit the field before making the final move.
- There are good mentors outside of the family who invest time in them.
- The attitude of the parents has a real impact on the kids.
- Parents need to trust God for his timing with their children's views, emotions and feelings toward the move. (Don't hurry God!)

Factors that have been observed when things go wrong

- A teen does not want to move and the family goes anyway
- There is no understanding or buy-in to a missional or ministry mindset
- A student is expected to begin national school with no prior target language and no second language assistance or accommodation. (Note: Breaking into a school with established friends can be difficult even when the school curriculum and language of instruction are familiar.)
- A teen experiences social isolation in their new location
- A teen does not get along with the family – poor family dynamics
- A teen does not feel listened to by parents
- A teen stays too connected to friends at home, which prevents making new friends
- Parents treat transition issues in the teen as just a discipline problem

Recommendations for Mobilisers

1. Prioritise some face-to-face time with the adolescents, so that they feel valued and part of what their parents are going to be doing
2. Spend time on pre-field educational planning...this is a challenge even when parents attend education consulting seminars. Confront them with the reality, versus what they think will happen. This could be done by putting them in touch with people already on the field, especially newer families who are fresh to the current situation.
Take time during the first year to feel at home. The receiving branch needs to give the freedom to get “settled first”. This should be viewed as a long term investment. There might not be much actual ‘ministry’ for the first year, but the family is more likely to stay long term.
3. Establish peer support groups to help with those that are isolated and on remote stations: examples are WhatsApp groups, social media groups, and a social network for when they come into ‘the city’.
4. Provide resources:
 - A network of people
 - Helpful books on raising families overseas (see the end of the article)
 - A list of key resources, available on multiple communication platforms
 - Have 3 month, 6 month, 9 month reminders about the resources and networks
5. When possible, encourage the local church youth group to stay connected to the teen.
6. Make sure teens are part of pre-field orientation: include grief and loss training, equip them with tools similar to what you do for adults.
7. Have a good “kid” person on staff that the teens can connect with
8. Encourage parents to consider timing; just because now is not the time to go does not mean that you are not called.
9. Consider the number of transitions that will be required for the family; the fewer the better.
10. Parents of adolescents should be made aware of the challenges associated with taking an adolescent to the field for the first time very early on in the process. This should be done before the parents embark on their preparations to go.
11. Make sure that a one-on-one, face-to-face interview is done with the adolescent. Don’t simply accept the assertions of the parents that ‘the kids are fine with the move’. We all have blind spots to what is closest to us. Look for excitement about going, a realistic understanding and acceptance of the challenges, a strong relationship with parents, good

self-awareness, and sense of God's calling in their lives. But also don't take the adolescent's first response at face value. Their response is almost bound to be mixed - probably wanting to say 'the right thing', wanting to 'support their parents', not wanting to be 'left behind', not wanting to be 'blamed' for spoiling their parents' plans... etc. Teasing all this out will take time, sensitivity, and reading between the lines!

12. Make sure that both parents and the adolescent have bought into a workable education plan that looks to the future and not just one that gets them through next year.
13. Make sure the child leaves well. This is something that both parents and the adolescent need to understand and be committed to. Both need to understand the importance of proper farewells and thank you's and ensure that, as much as possible, the child is not leaving behind broken relationships.
14. Make sure that the ministry assignment is workable for the adolescent as well as the parents. Placing a child who has lots of friends and is very sociable in a remote location where they will be homeschooling and everyone in the family is going to need to learn language could be a recipe for disaster.
15. Make sure the child has a good understanding of the transition cycle. Understanding the cycle does not make transition easier, but it does give hope in the middle of all the struggles that there is light at the end of the tunnel. And it lets kids know that what they are experiencing is normal – they are not weird.
16. Consider the spiritual and cultural impact of the ministry location, especially for adolescent girls. The following is the testimony of one family for which the move caused significant trauma.

I have daughters that were continually sexually harassed by the local male population. It has meant that they have a warped view of men. Our organisation hadn't thought about rape education for children. There were no or few other children my kids' ages, so they were isolated and alone at a time when peer influence is more important than parental influence. Other families in our organisation have much younger children, so they had unrealistic expectations of my children. We were evacuated and the teenagers understood what was going on but didn't really have the resources to deal with it. My youngest was oblivious and so doesn't really have lasting issues. Schooling hasn't been great and the older kids are less flexible. Other kids in the class are also less flexible and so have been hostile rather than welcoming (especially for the 13 year old).²

17. Taking a vision trip with the adolescent is also highly recommended. This can go a long way to resolving fears of the unknown. By giving both parents and child a realistic look at what life will be like it can help them determine if this really will work for them.
18. Consideration should be given to the time it takes to mobilise a family. If a child is already 10 at the beginning of the process they could be 12 by the time they actually make the move.
19. Remember that God also calls children.

One current missionary reports that when she was a teenager, her parents felt called to missions. They sat down as a family and talked about it and they all felt called to go. She was getting quite excited about going when the mission organization they were applying with refused to let them go because she was a teenager. At the time she was quite upset as no one from the mission ever talked to her about it. They just made the call on her behalf. She felt like her calling was not valued or even considered simply because she was a child. God in His mercy and sovereignty called her again as an adult and she is still joyfully serving after many years on the field.²

One of our mobilizing offices reported of a family with a young 10 year old son. When they asked the parents how the son felt about going to Africa the parents said he was opposed to the idea. The mobilizing office suggested to the parents that they needed to take time to pray through this as a family and make sure they were all on the same page. So the family agreed and slowed everything down. One day the young boy came to his parents and said God had been speaking to him in dreams and told him that he too was called to be a missionary. They are now doing further orientation on their way to the field.²

Recommendations for Receiving Branches

1. Encourage teams to look for ways to provide non-family adult input into the adolescents on their team. Again, research has shown that another key factor of children remaining faithful into adulthood is the presence of positive non-parental adults in their lives when they are adolescents.
2. Be aware that teens raised on the field are culturally different from teens coming out new. If possible find a teen “buddy” that can help bridge the cultural gap for the newbie.
3. Allow for reduced educational expectations in the first year so the teen can learn some language and culture along with the parents.

4. Encourage maintaining friendships in their home country while building new friendships on the field.
5. Provide for opportunities for ministry as a family when appropriate and there is a desire on the part of the teen and family. Research has shown that when children choose to be involved with their parents in ministry, they are more likely to have a positive experience and less likely to walk away from their faith when they are adults.

Recommendations for Parents

1. Remember you don't know what you don't know: take advice seriously.
2. Make sure your children are part of the discussion.
3. Make sure your children feel free to share their feelings and validate those feelings.
4. Ensure your children have good transitions and healthy goodbyes.
5. Consider the number of transitions you teen will go through. Will you do language school in one country and then orientation in another country and then move to your location? It might be too many transitions for a teen.
6. Help your teen to maintain connections with your home church youth group. At the same time, limit the amount of connection back home so that the teen is encouraged to build friendships on the field as well.
7. Monitor social media usage. Studies have clearly linked an increase in social media usage to an increase in feelings of isolation and depression.

Conclusion

When dealing with a family heading to the field for the first time with an adolescent, we need to start with the assumption that this is probably not the right time for them to be starting their missionary career. Then we can look for evidence that in this situation it may actually work out well.

A comment from Dr. Mark Phippen, Tumaini Director:

Lastly, I would suggest that the final decision is not actually about the adolescent, but about how the parents handle their responsibilities for their (adolescent) children. As God calls us to lovingly parent and nurture any children he has given us, how do [Mobilising Offices] see the parents expressing this as they think about their calling to mission; how are they balancing their desire to serve on the mission field with their role as parents, especially when the adolescents are uninterested or reluctant? For example, parents who are in effect saying 'We feel called, so our kids will just have to follow' aren't (to my

mind) taking adequate responsibility for their children, and this would play out in their relationships on the field. I only spell this out because the reason for saying 'no' would not simply be the reluctant adolescent, but the parents' need to take adequate care for their kids.

So if we do recommend to a family that this is not a good time to start their missionary career, let's make sure that we communicate that it is NOT the child's fault, rather it is us being a responsible mission sending agency and them being wise loving parents.

Finally, remember that the whole purpose of our job is not to try and 'weed out bad apples', (although that might be necessary sometimes), but rather to do all that we can to help a family be successful on the field.

Personal story – don't forget God's sovereign hand!

When we were dorm parents of senior boys we had a young man in our dorm who came to us for the first time as a senior. When he was young his parents had been missionaries in Congo and they had to flee in the rebellion. As a young child he saw his mother mistreated as they were leaving the country and as a result he hated Africans. His local high school in the US also struggled with racial issues.

When his parents were getting ready to return to Africa they gave him the option of staying at home and living with his grandparents so he could finish grade 12 in the same school, or coming out with them and attending our school for his senior year. As he was telling me his story a few nights before graduation at about 1.00 in the morning, he said he had no idea why he chose to come with his parents. The only explanation he could give was that God must have wanted him there.

For his first two terms he struggled a lot. Not knowing his background, I had assigned him to room with a Kenyan. In the US he had his own car and significant freedom, but at school he had to be in the dorm by 7 pm for study hall. He got into a lot of trouble during his first two terms. Then God got hold of his life and totally turned him around.

As he was talking to me he shared that if he had stayed in the US he was convinced he would have been dealing in drugs by now. He was fingering a necklace with a silver map of Africa and he said it was his most valuable possession and that he would never forget Africa. His closest friend now was his Kenyan roommate. God showed Himself as real to him in Africa.

He concluded by telling me he would never trade this year for anything in the world.

The key thing to me was that his parents gave him a choice, they involved him in the decision. Granted, he had none of the characteristics that indicate success. But God clearly had His plan for this young man.

I hesitated to share this story as it goes against most of what I have recommended above. But when I look at scripture I find that God often does not ask us to do the safe or logical thing. One thing that always scares me in my job is that I would be guilty of convincing a family to act against God's call on them because it does not seem wise to me. But the consequences of not giving good advice can lead to damaged parents, children and the mission reputation.

I am not sure how we factor this into mobilising families, except to emphasise again that we need always to be in prayer throughout the process and listening to that still small voice. However, as I stated previously, if we are going against our "wisdom" let's make sure it is because of the prompting of God's Spirit and not because of pressure from parents or pressure from the field.

A comment on Latino families from Guille Eddy, Eurotck

I would add one thing. It has been our experience and research with Latin TCK's that good family relationships and healthy communication between the teen and the parents, as mentioned, is crucial. But the other thing that is crucial is the role of friends on the field... not just in the school environment, but in both school and neighborhood, pueblo or town and church where the family is rooted. For our Latin families mostly cannot afford to send their kids to an international school (where the student population is overwhelmingly TCK) so they don't have the advantage of an education system that understands the teens' needs, and co-equals who are fellow TCK's.

Just to point one thing out in adolescent development... the teen is socialized into adulthood by the family acting as one component of social scaffolding and on the other side co-equals (social and anthropological jargon for friends). Friends form the other component that works, in conjunction with family, to build a straight and healthy self image and give the teen self confidence. In our workshops we emphasize that the parents' responsibilities when going to the field with a teen (we counsel against it but they still go) or a child does not end when you have rented an apartment, settled into ministry, found a church or worship group and find the kids a school... the responsibility ends when your

kids have at least one friend. And since our Latin families cannot count on school to provide this, it must be Mum and Dad!!!! They need to work with their child (and teen if they have taken a teen) to find a friend. This process may take well over a year, possibly longer. During this time Dad must see friendship with his teen as part of his ministry. I emphasize Dad because Latinos have the tendency to dive into ministry and let Mum run the house.

Recommending reading:

Third Culture Kids: Growing Up Among Worlds, third edition, by David Pollock, Ruth Van Reken and Michael Pollock. (It can be purchased on Amazon for Kindle.)

Raising Up a Generation of Healthy Third Culture Kids by Lauren Wells (It can be purchased on Amazon for Kindle.)

[¹Moving Increases Kids' Chances Of Needing Mental Health Treatment \(STUDY\)](#)

by Allison Bond with Reuters Health (written in April 2014 and updated December 2017)

[Transitions: A Lifelong Process](#) by Lynda Shingledecker-Wheeler from the Global TCK Care and Education website.

[Creating Smooth Transitions — RAFT from the Global TCK Care & Education website.](#)

² Responses to an email survey, names withheld.

Some resources for our times

The following resources are free of charge. They can be downloaded and printed, for those who prefer not to look at screens.

1. Trauma Healing Institute

<https://traumahealinginstitute.org/resources>

- **Beyond disaster**
- **Healing from the distress of Covid 19**
- **Peace, be still. A family guide to living in crazy days**

- **Unstuck, a teen guide to living in uncertain times**

The first two resources are for adults, to encourage processing of the impact of traumatic events.

Peace, be still is a work book with games and activities, designed for parents to do with their children aged up to 11.

Unstuck is a resource for teenagers to work through by themselves. It includes sections on naming your feelings, grief and anger.

2. Parenting in the digital age

<https://vimeo.com/505839418>

This is a two hour video presentation given by Manny and Lisa Manansala, in association with the MORE network (Canada). They live in the Philippines, where lockdown has lasted 10 months, with children being confined to their homes. Manny and Lisa have three children of their own. They focus on the effect of the digital world on families and young people, and parenting strategies to enable them to cope with the digital world in a healthy way. They address digital addiction and provide helpful proactive strategies for parents.

If two hours is too long, watch the final 45 minutes where Manny and Lisa share helpful parenting tips.

Gill Bryant

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