

Introduction

This edition focuses on Korean culture, and both articles below are written by Koreans. South Korea is still one of the largest missionary sending countries, and this is reflected in all of the regional and international leadership conferences in our organisation. We hope that the two articles below will be of great help to those who work with Korean colleagues. Jaehee Shin and his wife are dorm parents for teenagers attending an MK school. Eun Hya Ha is a missionary and a therapist with many years of experience with teenagers and children.

An interview with a Korean father

What do you think are the qualities of a good father?

It is the father's job to take responsibility for the needs of his family. Communication is very important. Fathers need to understand that their children belong to God. They need to reflect on their parenting and make adjustments when necessary. Sometimes we need to apologise to our children if we realise that we have got things wrong, and this can bring healing. We need to ask God to help us to redirect our parenting.

Do you think there is such a thing as a typical Korean father?

Yes! A typical Korean family is hierarchical and the father is authoritarian, king of his family. Children can feel the pressure of this. However, recently this style has been changing, and some Korean fathers are now acting more like friends than parents. Sometimes this could lead to the children being spoilt. There needs to be a balance, with a move from authoritarian to authentic parenting.

How does a typical Korean father relate to his family? What does he do? What does he expect his wife to do?

A typical Korean father sees the ministry or the mission as more important than the family. He expects his wife to look after the children and deal with all domestic matters. J has talked with numerous MKs where the situation is like this. They make comments such as: 'my father is never there when I need him' or 'my father is more interested in the local children than in me'. Nowadays Korean wives sometimes feel freer to ask their husbands to spend more time with the children and help with household chores. However, the concept of wives taking care of all domestic matters, including bringing up the children, is still quite common.

J has learned a lot about parenting since joining our mission organisation. When he worked as a church pastor, he acted like a typical Korean father. He started work early in the morning and finished late at night. His wife commented to him that she 'raised the kids alone'. After finishing the pastoral work, J and his family went on a vision trip for a year, visiting six countries. After that they did missionary training courses for three years. During that time, J had to spend more time with his family, and 'break the mould' of being a typical Korean father. God taught him a lot during that time. His wife commented that they would be unable to do their ministry as a dorm parent for with young people now, if they had not experienced those years together.

Do you observe cultural differences between Korean and Western cultures? How is family life different?

Western cultures are more family-centred. As an example, if it is someone's birthday, Westerners will move their work to accommodate the birthday. Koreans will put the work first, and may decide to celebrate the birthday at a different time. Western cultures give teenagers more space for independence, sometimes too much. Koreans emphasise politeness and conformity.

In Korean culture, boys have more freedom and can stay out later. Girls need to be protected, so they would have an earlier curfew time. There are some changes for girls – an example would be women's soccer. In the past, it was rare for girls to play soccer, but now it is promoted. There is a very famous TV show now about women's soccer.

There is a hierarchy amongst siblings in the family. The eldest son has responsibility and authority. As an example, at the funeral of one of the parents, the eldest son will carry a picture of the parents. If parents live for a long time, the eldest one used to be expected to live with them. This practice has changed, and many families now do things differently, but this custom is still a familiar idea for many. The eldest boy has authority over the others, even if there is an older sister. However, this may be changing now.

What do you see as the main challenges of being a missionary father, from your own experience and from others that you know?

The missionary father living in another culture needs to think a lot about his parenting. If he is not a TCK himself, he needs to make more of an effort to understand the children. (Note: J is a pastor's kid – PK – not an MK). J feels that, for his family, the experience of the vision trip, when they lived in different cultures, really helped him to understand his children. It was good to give them these multicultural experiences as well.

The most challenging time for the father is when he is adjusting to the new culture. He doesn't know the language or culture and he feels helpless, like a baby. He doesn't know how to help his kids, as he feels the same as them. Help from other is needed during the adjustment process. J found it hard to adjust to the new culture, but his kids coped well as they benefitted from the previous multicultural experiences.

What advice would you have for missionary fathers?

Please find a hobby that you can enjoy with your kids. J and his son play soccer a lot. Wherever they live, they find somewhere to play. His son is not talkative generally, but he will talk a lot about soccer. His daughter likes baking, so he finds time to do that with her. It is important that the fathers do this, not just the mothers!

How well do Korean churches support MK workers?

MK staff generally have low status in Korean churches. Some churches even question the idea of missionaries supporting other missionaries (such as by looking after their children). To them, mission involves church planting, teaching or relief work, but does not include support ministries such as MK care. However, it is changing slowly. Thankfully, J and M's churches do support them. When J was a pastor, he felt like a very important person. He was preaching, teaching the Bible, leading worship and organising events all the time. Now that he is a dorm parent, he spends time doing shopping, driving the kids around and doing errands for them. His friend of the same age is now a senior pastor, leading camps and doing all kinds of other things. J sometimes struggles with pride – wanting to be in a 'high status' role. He thinks that the reason he feels like this is that he was affected by the church culture described above, and also by Korean culture in general.

Young people in Korea

1. Please describe your job

I am a counsellor and therapist with the Korean government, working with children and young people in a centre for mental health and welfare in Pusan. There are 16 of these centres in my city. I usually have between 25 and 40 clients, at three different levels of need. The three levels are:

- urgent – serious self-harm or attempted suicide
- serious – eating disorders, anxiety, ADHD
- stable – monitoring mental health, managing medication

Most of my clients are in the 'serious' category. I see young people with mental health problems, referred there by schools, hospitals, the police, and other agencies. Sometimes parents refer their children, or teenagers refer themselves.

2. How old are the clients that you see?

Aged 6-19.

3. Do you also relate to their parents?

Yes. The first time they attend, they come with their parents. I run clinical interviews with the parents as well, especially with elementary students. For secondary students, it is done on a case-by-case basis.

4. What sort of problems do the teenagers have?

5. What causes the problems?

Sometimes there are genetic disorders. For example, there is a family where the father has ADHD and is addicted to gaming, and the mother has post-natal depression. The children are affected by all of this and may also suffer from ADHD or depression.

Self-harm has increased greatly since 2017. A pop singer appeared on TV with an arm bandage because he had been harming himself. Teenagers who saw this started copying the behaviour.

Many students have mood disorders, and some have anxiety which leads to psychosis.

6. How has Korean culture been changing in the last 10 – 20 years?

7. What are the changes that have occurred in family life?

Korean society has changed. It used to be a hierarchical, collective society with tight relationships, including with the extended family. Now it is much less collective, and the extended family is no longer seen as important. Many young people are now addicted to Internet use. During Covid, students could not go to school and had to learn online at home. Many students have lost their social skills.

There is a big generation gap. The hierarchical system has been replaced with ideas of equality. Young people (Gen Z) no longer obey their parents, as was done in the past, but want to have their own ideas. Gender roles within marriage have also changed. Both husband and wife have to work, to earn enough money, and housework is shared. Previously, the husband had a career and the wife looked after the home.

8. What do you offer to help students and their families?

First I try to build a good relationship with them. The relationship with their parents is often broken. I build a rapport, support their emotional difficulties, listen well and reflect back to them. (Emotional therapy). If they have cognitive issues, I use cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). For anxiety, I train them with breathing exercises, to help them to relieve tension. There is also special medication for sudden panic attacks.

With really depressed students, I try to help them to activate their pre-frontal lobe, the part of the brain that is involved in 'planning, decision making, working memory, personality expression, moderating social behaviour and controlling certain aspects of speech and language'.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prefrontal_cortex#:~:text=This%20brain%20region%20has%20been,aspects%20of%20speech%20and%20language]

I help them to make an action plan, to try out what they would like to do. If they are not motivated to do something, they will lie down and do nothing. I ask them to find three good things – examples are physical exercise, hobbies, going out the shops or other places.

I have run group therapy sessions for three years. I use peer activation, encouraging the students to motivate each other.

I also use dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT), especially for treating Borderline Personality Disorder. 'Its main goals are to teach people how to live in the moment, develop healthy ways to cope with stress, regulate their emotions, and improve their relationships with others.' [Dialectical Behavior Therapy \(DBT\) \(verywellmind.com\)](http://verywellmind.com)

The centre where I work has produced a workbook and power point presentation, which we use in schools, two or three times a year. I have used these resources in four different schools.

9. What are the changes in Korean public schools?

Korea has a rapidly-ageing population. When I was in my 20's most young people expected to get married. Today's young people do not want children and prefer to remain single. The birth rate has dropped fast, in a similar way to Japan.

Many elementary schools have closed. Universities are also merging together, at the request of the government. When I was young, there were 70 or 80 students in a class, but now it is less than 20. There were 10 to 15 classes for each level in a typical school, but now there is a maximum of 5 classes. There is more attention from the teachers, as the classes are smaller, but there is a higher proportion of students with special needs such as ADHD. They spend some of the time in specialised classes.

Schools are now much more multi-cultural. Previously Korea was a mono-cultural country, but there are now many foreign workers here, due to the labour shortage. They come from places such as Nepal, Cambodia, Thailand, the Philippines, China, Laos, Indonesia, and Central Asian countries. Their children's presence changes the cultural profile in the schools.

In the past, parents and teachers had a lot of power, but this is no longer the case. Children previously obeyed their parents and teachers, but young people are now much more disobedient. Discipline is difficult, because there are 'study rights' for the children. Corporal punishment is banned, and teachers cannot even ask a student to leave the class or stand at the back, because of the study rights. They can keep children in detention, but they complain about this.

10. Could you explain how the hagwon (learning after school) system is working at the moment?

This system is still in place, from elementary school upwards. Students usually attend three hagwons, for subjects like English, maths, music, art and tae kwondo. The government provides some opportunities at a reduced price, running hagwons on the school premises.

There is a government institute for students who are very talented in music. 'Genius' students are able to attend free of charge, from age 15 to 18, and can then enter a good university. Students do not always behave well in hagwons, but it is a bit better than school, as the parents are paying.

11. What do you think are the main challenges for children and young people re-entering Korea from the mission field?

The level of Korean language is a big issue. Students with a certain minimum level can finish their schooling in Korean, but otherwise it is a big struggle.

MKs who need to go to school in Korea, for example during home assignment, have some other options. They can go to an International School, but these are very expensive. In the past, they offered reduced prices for MKs, but this is no longer the case.

There are alternative schools which are bilingual, 50% Korean and 50% English. They are often run by churches, as in Pusan. The fees are less than for the international schools, but it is still a lot of money to find, especially if there is more than one child in the family.

Some MKs continue with American-style home schooling, when on home assignment. They can apply to college or university in America, but this is very expensive. There are means-tested government scholarships to help them go to university in Korea, if their Korean is good enough.

MKs often find it hard to build good relationships at university. Many of them grow up in a Christian 'bubble' and Korean university students mostly have a secular world view. It is a shock for the MKs. Some of them choose to take a gap of a year or more before going to university. The boys may choose to do their military service, and the girls other forms of work or study.

Recently, some Korean MKs have chosen to study in English in Hungary or in the Netherlands, where it is much cheaper. They can even study in Hungarian if they are willing to learn it first.

Students who have been home-schooled throughout their time overseas often have undeveloped social skills. I know several who tried to go to university after being entirely home-schooled, and they really struggled, some of them giving up altogether.

I have counselled families like this and recommended the alternative bilingual schools. However, funding is often a problem. Some churches offer partial scholarships. There is also a Christian elementary and secondary school which offers one year of free education for MKs.

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