

Resource Article

Meeting the Needs of Cross-Cultural Kids

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Students who live in 2 or more cultures for a large part of their childhood are called cross-cultural kids* (CCKs). The types of CCKs include:

- Multicultural or multiracial children, whose parents are of 2 cultures or races
- International adoptees
- Children of immigrants and refugees
- Third-culture kids whose parents are serving in the military, serving as missionaries or diplomats, or are employed in international business
- Students who cross cultural, social, or economic barriers for educational reasons
- Domestic adoptees, foster children, and children of divorced parents may also share common characteristics with CCKs.

CCKs are common in today's world. They share certain rewards and challenges.

Rewards of Being a CCK

- A global worldview
- Ease in cross-cultural communication
- Familiarity with multiple cultures and languages

Challenges of Being a CCK

Constant Cultural Transitions

When a person transitions to another culture, many of that person's original cultural rules may not apply. This can cause confusion, fear, and anger. Understanding the cultural transition process can help the CCK to transition more smoothly.

Like grief, the cultural transition process involves change and loss. There are 4 stages, which vary in length. The entire transition process usually lasts about 1–2 years. The CCK may go through these stages more than once.

Tourism: Differences are seen as fresh, new, and exciting, creating feelings of happiness, awe, and gratitude.

Disenchantment: Differences are seen as threatening, causing feelings of superiority, anger, frustration, and isolation.

Resolution: Differences are seen as acceptable, resulting in feelings of humility, patience, and readiness to learn.

Adjustment: Differences are seen as normal, producing feelings of belonging, peace, and understanding.

CCKs often experience major cultural changes daily. For example, a CCK who is a refugee in a new country experiences cultural changes as he goes to work or school and then returns home. Values, expectations, and languages may change 2–3 times a day.

This constant transition may cause CCKs to develop unhealthy patterns. For example, she may feel that sudden endings are natural, which may cause her to believe that everything is temporary.

CCKs may adapt to the visible parts of their host cultures. However, they may not understand the unseen values, such as honor and shame, so their cultural transition is never complete. They still maintain their original culture, which differentiated them from others in their host culture.

Changing Sense of Identity

Due to cultural transitions, the CCK's sense of identity can be affected in the following ways:

Initial Reaction: During the initial cultural transition, CCKs may respond to the new culture by:

- Trying to act and be the same as others who are native to the culture
- Trying to act and be completely different from those who are native to the culture
- Trying to hide and not interact with others in the culture
- Developing an international identity that is in between the 2 cultures and acknowledges the complexity of the situation. This is the healthiest reaction.

National Identity: CCKs typically do not have a strong sense of national identity with either their parents' culture or their new culture.

Sense of Belonging: Because CCKs have been forced to adapt to new cultures, they often believe that they will have no difficulty going back to their parents' home culture in their teen or early adult years. Often they discover that they do not fit into their parents' culture, causing them to wonder where they truly belong.

Language Barriers

CCKs often deal with language barriers on a daily basis, which can lead to frustration with simple daily tasks. Because of language barriers, they are unable to share their thoughts or desires. They feel that they cannot express their feelings or respond effectively. They are unable to joke.

While some CCKs may feel confident within their own language group, the challenges of communication in another language may harm the students' view of themselves. They may feel that their real identity is being lost and a new one is being forced upon them.

CCKs may lose the ability to communicate well in their parents' original language as they use a new language at school and with their friends. This loss creates tension in the family. Language is an important part of culture. If a CCK returns to the parents' original culture without knowing the language, meaningful communication will be a challenge

Unresolved Grief

CCKs go through cycles of transition, separation, and loss. Even if the CCK stays in 1 place, others in the community often transition in and out, causing the CCK to live between the ending of 1 relationship and the beginning of another. With every loss, the stages of grief are felt. This unresolved grief is caused by factors such as:

- Hidden losses—status, lifestyle, possessions, and relationships
- Feeling a lack of permission and lack of time to grieve and process

Lack of comfort

Grief is a normal part of the life of a CCK. Grief is healthy when it is expressed and processed in positive ways. Unresolved grief can create issues later in life, including anger, depression, and fear of intimacy.

10 Tips for Helping CCKs

1. Be aware of where your students and families are in the cultural transition process.
2. Help CCKs to understand their new culture and the transition process.
3. Model kindness. Be humble and curious and begin discussions about cultural differences.
4. Help students and parents understand the rewards and challenges of being a CCK.
5. Be aware of each student's identity struggles. Affirm the CCK's international identity.
6. Teach students about healthy grief and how to deal with frequent losses. Help them to express their feelings about their transitions.
7. Offer nonjudgmental, real, and meaningful comfort for their grief. Listen without trying to solve the problems. Allow the CCK to share stories and emotions.
8. Be aware of the difficulties of multiple languages. Celebrate language differences and the value of learning a new language. If possible, teach to all language groups.
9. Encourage students to share their cross-cultural experiences through the arts, storytelling, and discussion. Invite parents to attend, when appropriate.
10. Create opportunities for community and friendship among your students and their families.

* Van Reken, Ruth E., and Pollock, David C. 2009. *Third Culture Kids*. London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.