

How a Grandparent Can Help a Third Culture Grandchild Transition to America

Eileen Rife

“What’s so great about America, Grandma?” Rebekah, age 12, asked via Skype session in prep for her family’s furlough. Born in India to American missionaries who now served in Cambodia, she honestly didn’t feel American. To Rebekah, America was a distant Disneyland—a fun vacation spot but not a place to live. “But then,” she quickly added, “as far as an earthly home, I don’t really feel like I belong in India or Cambodia either.” Her conflicting emotions challenged patriotism, a concept she found fascinating, but one she did not feel. As a Christian, she realized her citizenship was really in heaven, and that brought a measure of comfort. Still, for as long as the Lord desired, she would live on this earth. She knew she had to process through the transition from one culture to another in order to make sense of God’s purpose for her life.

Rebekah is not alone. A common theme among third culture grandkids (TCGs) is the challenge of transitioning to America after a stint in another country. Since all three of our grown daughters and families (nine grandchildren total, ages 2 to 12) serve the Lord around the world in fulltime missions, I’ve witnessed the challenges that take place during a transition. Below are seven tips I’ve gleaned from my grandchildren. Although the suggestions are written from my point of view as a grandmother, if you are a family member, friend, church member, or host family who cares for and reaches out to this special population of kids, you may find these tips helpful as well.

Prepare them and then welcome them with open arms.

Technology has made it easier to “visit” with grandchildren via Skype and other video chat forums, through email, and Facebook family groups. Listen as your grandchildren share their concerns and their excitement about making the transition. Pray with them about these areas. Together, brainstorm activities you might engage in once you are together in person. Let them know you’re excited to see them when they arrive in America.

By the time their plane lands on American soil, TCGs have already experienced many changes. Depending on the distance traveled, they’ve potentially flown over multiple time zones, eaten a variety of foods, endured lengthy layovers, and lack of sleep. Knowing that Grandpa and Grandma will be waiting for them at the end of the trip provides a sense of comfort, security, and stability as they make the significant shift from their host country to America. It truly is a Kodak moment when that van door flies open and out pours the little ones, faces beaming, arms reaching, and legs pumping as they dash into our open arms—a scenario repeated often at our home (Mission Manor). The heartfelt hugs offered during this first interaction reassure the grandchildren that in some way they are “home.”

Listen for understanding.

During the early days of transition, a grandparent's chief role is to listen and ask questions that help the TCG process thoughts and feelings. Resist the urge to fill the grandchild's days with outside activities that in your mind might provide distraction and adventure. Just leaving their host country to return to America is adventure enough! The grounding of Grandma's house, home-cooked meals, and a measure of routine, if only for a couple weeks before traveling to update supporters, is a stabilizer for TCGs. This helps them catch their breath and ask questions about everyday life in America. Be prepared for "What's that?" and "Why do they do that?" It's important to listen so you understand the TCG's frame of reference and thus avoid shock, judgment, or criticism.

Recently after returning to America, Rivers (4) asked why our washing machine was in the house. In Thailand where his family served, the machine sat outside. This question opened the door for further discussion about washing machines in general, which stimulated a special grandma/grandson moment.

During her second furlough, Rebekah (7) learned that she and her family would not return to India, a country and ministry they had grown to love. Listening to her process the news, holding her, and weeping with her showed that Grandma and Grandpa cared and served as an example of how Jesus enters into our pain.

Appreciate resources and teach responsibility.

Another growing experience for TCGs as they transition to America involves all the perks that America offers that their host country does not. Two weeks into his time in America, Rivers was still in awe over the opportunity to drink water right from the faucet. On several occasions he'd be outside playing with his brothers and I'd hear him say, "Come on, let's go drink some faucet water!" What might seem routine, even laughable, to a child reared in America was sheer freedom and joy to Rivers. I'd step into the bathroom where he was standing on the stool, water on full blast, lapping up the cool liquid as it ran through his fingers. After a few moments, I'd shut off the water. "Isn't it wonderful to drink right from the faucet? One of God's special blessings, indeed." Then I'd take him into my lap and explain that with the blessing comes responsibility. We can thank God for this precious resource but also use it wisely.

Celebrate their host country with them.

As TCGs transition, they also process what they've left behind in their host country. Celebrating the unique experiences another culture provides can show them you respect their host country and appreciate that they may miss what seems natural to them yet unusual by American standards.

Recently, when I emailed Rebekah and asked her how she was doing as she looked toward another transition to America, she responded with a list of things she was looking forward to but also things she would miss about Cambodia, such as buying coconuts from roadside vendors, rice paddies,

sitting on the floor during church services, and trying to speak to someone in another language. Some of the same things that had stressed her while adjusting to life in Cambodia were the very things she was now going to miss. I chose to enter into her world and celebrate those aspects with her.

Learn and apply Scripture to their current situation.

Early in our grandparent journey, Chuck and I decided to host a Friday Grandparent Camp for any TCGs who were staying at Mission Manor. Chuck introduced Philippians 4:8 to the grandkids, which has quickly become our theme verse.

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things (New International Version).

We start the verse in unison, then each child says his chosen word, and then we finish the verse in unison. To this day, every Grandparent Camp begins by quoting this verse. Even as we're on our way to the zoo, park, or ice cream stand, we look for and talk about what is noble, right, pure, lovely, and so forth. In this way we help our TCGs draw upon Scripture to adapt to a new culture.

Maintain family traditions.

Even a few pieces of furniture or family keepsakes that remain the same over the years can provide a sense of stability and continuity. Family stories can provide roots and a sense of belonging to the larger family community. Sharing how a grandchild mimics a relative he's never even met can help him develop an appreciation for his family history. Just the other day, I started to toss a piece of bread that had hardened. Gabe (8) said, "Wait! I like that bread!" I frowned. "It's been sitting in this bowl for who knows how long." He insisted on eating it. I laughed and said, "Well, you must take after your Great-grandpa Bobi who absolutely loved hard bread!" I didn't miss the twinkle in Gabe's eye. Our TCGs enjoy knowing they share a connection with a family member. They also enjoy family reunions where we share games, stories, music, and prayer with members they would otherwise have little to no contact with.

Encourage them to enjoy friendships wherever they are.

One of the most difficult adjustments during transitions is saying goodbye to friends TCGs may possibly never see again. Recently Kylie (12) lamented that other missionary friends she'd made were now leaving to serve on another mission field. Since she's fresh to the missionary experience, this reality jolted her. As she journaled her thoughts and feelings, she determined that she had two choices. She could stay sad and angry and decide not to make new friends, or she could consider friends a gift from God and enjoy them while she had them. Ultimately, she chose the latter. As a grandparent, I can help my TCGs welcome new friends and value the interaction rather than push people away and isolate.

Welcoming, listening, teaching, celebrating, applying Scripture, maintaining family traditions, and encouraging friendships are all ways a grandparent or other caring person can help a TCG transition to America. As Rebekah once said in reference to Mission Manor: “I can’t believe how much fun it is here!” Helping TCGs adjust and enjoy life in America for however long is both a privilege and a calling for grandparents and others who long to invest in third culture kids.

Eileen Rife is a multi-published author in both fiction and nonfiction. In addition to writing and teaching, she hosts Mission Manor, a temporary respite for her missionary children and grandchildren while on furlough. She may be contacted at eileenrife@yahoo.com.

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