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Growing Up Between Worlds

Why Third-Culture Kid Care Matters

When Chris Babcock stepped off the plane in Malawi at age ten, he wasn't thinking about theology or mission strategy.

He was wondering if there would be lions near the airport.

On the drive into the capital city, Chris pressed his face to the window and saw his first slum. Crowded streets. Corrugated metal. Laundry strung between trees. Nothing in small-town Ontario had prepared him for that view.

His parents, Free Methodist pastors who sensed a call to serve overseas, did what faithful parents do: they prayed, they talked with their kids, and they moved their family halfway around the world to follow Jesus.

Chris became what we now call a third-culture kid (TCK)—a child who grows up between their passport culture and the place where their parents serve.

No one used that language with him in 2010, though. Back then, there was no structured “you’re about to be a TCK” training. There was just a plane ticket, a new country, and a crash course in being visibly different.

“I remember being surrounded by fifty kids who all wanted to touch me and say the two English phrases they knew,” Chris said. “It was overwhelming. I knew right away this was going to be a very different life.”



Chris Babcock
T.C.K.

The hidden cost of “going”

For many global worker families, the toughest challenges aren’t the ones you can photograph.

TCKs learn to navigate crowded markets, blackout days, and different school systems. They also carry quieter burdens: constant transition, grief over goodbyes, and the nagging feeling that they don’t fully belong anywhere.

As kids, they’re treated like heroes in local churches, but as adults, some of them walk onto university campuses where “missionary” is a dirty word.

“I went from being the ‘missionary kid’ everyone celebrated,” Chris said, “to sitting in classes where missionaries were blamed for every form of colonialism. Overnight, I wasn’t sure if it was even safe to say what my parents did.”

Research backs up what many of us have seen anecdotally: about one of every four adult TCKs walks away from their faith. Some carry deep wounds from family stress, isolation, or ministry cultures where “the work” always seemed to matter more than their hearts.

That’s not inevitable—but it is what can happen when we send families without also surrounding them with care.

What good TCK care looks like

Chris’s parents have served with two organizations besides TMS Global, and the difference, he says, is stark.

“TMS Global gave my parents real support and a lot of trust,” he said. “They didn’t just care about the ministry numbers. They cared about us as a family.”

Over the years, different members of Chris’s family have received support through TMS Global’s care network—confidential help from people who understand the joys and challenges of cross-cultural life. The TCK care team has also offered teaching, debriefs, and spaces where kids and young adults can process their stories honestly.

But the thing Chris mentions most often isn’t a program.

It’s the questions.

“Good TCK care looks like people who ask thoughtful questions and then listen,” he said. “I’ve had conversations with TMS Global staff where they asked about a small detail from a story and then followed it up with, ‘How did that shape you?’ or ‘What was that like for your faith?’ Those questions helped me understand my own experience.”

That kind of care doesn’t erase the hard parts. It does send a clear message: *you matter as much as the ministry you’re part of.*

Why TCK Care matters for the whole mission

TCKs aren’t “ministry accessories.” They are sons and daughters, image-bearers of God, and often future leaders in their own right.

Chris now works in public service in Canada. He still carries Malawi with him in how he thinks about poverty, policy, and faith. His life is one small picture of the long-term impact that healthy TCK care can have.

“When you invest in TCK care,” he said, “you’re not just helping kids on the mission field survive. You’re shaping how they follow Jesus as adults.”

“TMS Global gave my parents real support and a lot of trust. They didn’t just care about the ministry numbers. They cared about us as a family.”





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Some people just learn

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When Care Comes Full Circle

Elizabeth's Story

Elizabeth Ballinger grew up in Beijing, the daughter of cross-cultural workers. She loved her childhood, but she also learned early what it meant to live between worlds. During a visit to the U.S. when she was eleven, Elizabeth sat in a van listening to other girls trade jokes about pop stars she'd never heard of and TV shows she had never seen.

"I remember thinking, *I'm always going to feel different*," she said. Like many TCKs, Elizabeth carried invisible questions: *Where do I fit? Whose world is mine? Am I allowed to belong here?*

Over the years, people came alongside Elizabeth—teachers who listened, mentors who understood, families who opened their homes. They didn't erase the tension of growing up between cultures, but they helped her see it clearly and integrate it with grace.

Through college and early adulthood, she found language for her story. When she and her brother spoke in chapel about being TCKs, several students approached them afterward with their own experiences of not quite fitting in. That moment reframed her calling: *Everyone carries an in-between place. Some people just learn to name it sooner.*

Today, Elizabeth and her husband serve with TMS Global as cross-cultural workers in Spain. Their ministry revolves around a table—open doors, shared meals, and quiet listening.

"We've spent so much of our lives on the receiving end of hospitality," she said. "It made us see how vital it is."

The Next Generation in the Kingdom

Gifts to the **Global Mission Fund** make stories like this possible, providing care to TCKs who could become the gospel leaders of our future.

How Your Church Can Care for TCKs

6 ways you can have a real impact in their lives.

- **Pray—and tell them.**

Let TCKs know you're praying. Ask for their specific requests and connect a class or small group to their family.

- **Welcome them on home assignment.**

Ask what they've missed and make a simple "welcome basket."

- **Give them a buddy.**

When they visit your church, pair your TCK with an outgoing child to show them around, sit with them, and play. Keep the relationship going over video when they return overseas.

- **Celebrate milestones.**

Remember birthdays, first day of school, performances, and holidays. A message or small gift card helps TCKs feel seen.

- **Support the whole family long-term.**

Help their parents get rest and recharge spiritually. Healthy parents = healthy TCKs.

- **Give to the Global Mission Fund.**

\$86/month provides TCK care to one family all year.



Grace Kids
Snellville, GA

Every TCK matters. Can you help by December 31st?



TMS Global
Linktree

Give.

- Online at tms-global.org/give
- By mail at the P.O. Box below
- By phone at 800.478.8963
- From your assets such as crypto, stock, a charitable IRA rollover, or an estate gift

Have questions or need prayer?

Please contact Kenda Hembrough, Vice President of Advancement, at khembrough@tms-global.org or +1 678.542.9045.

Thank you for partnering with us to

**train
mobilize
serve**

Equip disciple-makers to live and share the gospel cross-culturally as humble learners in local and global communities

Awaken individuals and churches globally to prayerfully discover and live into their unique missional calling

Join Jesus in strategic, innovative ministries supported by holistic care for our cross-cultural witnesses and their families

