

# Unavoidable Change

Written by *Rebecca Hilton*

If there is one thing that is unavoidable in life, it's **CHANGE!**

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Sometimes, life changes are thrust upon us, and at other times, for a variety of reasons, we actively seek out change. However, for young children, routine is espoused as essential, as it provides a sense of security and helps kids develop self discipline. It is therefore somewhat unfortunate that change is an unstoppable force, and an indispensable part of life, and that every child (like adults) adapts and copes differently. With the double whammy of two big changes heading in my own son's direction (he is about to become a big brother and due to start preschool), my quest for learning how to help youngsters with change began in earnest.

I learned that there is a specific label for 'globetrotting' expat kids like mine and possibly yours: 'Third Culture Kid' (TCK). The term was coined by Sociologist Ruth Hill Useem (1953) to describe children who "have spent a significant part of [their] developmental years outside the parents' culture." Useem created the term 'Third Culture Kids' because TCKs integrate aspects of their birth culture (the first culture) and the new culture (the second culture) to create a unique 'third culture.'

Unlike adults entering this third culture, children don't have a firm grounding in their first culture yet. Their sense of identity and understanding of basic

cultural rules is still developing. As TCKs, they are doing this important developing in a mix of cultures, nationalities, languages, expectations and values.

The quest of how to help my TCK toddler transition into not only preschool but also into a culturally diverse world holds the possibility of being not only a more enriching experience but also a more challenging one. It's comforting to know that challenges are not necessarily liabilities, depending on how these challenges are managed.

So, how is it best to manage challenges for young TCK's who are trying to make sense of a unique third culture whilst also transitioning into the school years? Surely, it requires teamwork and a two pronged approach by parent(s), schools, and teachers.

I posed this question to someone highly experienced in transitioning young TCK's into their first encounter with school and their new culture. Ms. Simmi Rajkitkul is an 'adult third culture kid,' mother of two, and the director of Storytime Preschool, Bangkok.

### **Rebecca: Teaching TCKs - is it so different?**

*Simmi:* Children are like sponges, they absorb everything! So teaching a TCK versus a local child isn't entirely different

at this young stage. What must be taken into consideration is how the child feels in a setting that is often different from the one they were at previously. This takes assurance, positivity, and calmness to make sure the child is fine in the new setting. I would recommend that parents move to the new city or country a few months prior to the first day of school for the child. This will help the little one adjust even quicker. Preferably the school they select should be small and cosy to give a 'homely' atmosphere, too.

**Rebecca: How does a multi-cultural classroom affect a child's experience?**

*Simmi:* Multi-cultural classrooms are such a fun place to be! They allow children to be exposed to a variety of backgrounds, which helps them with resilience and interaction. It is definitely a challenging setting, but the environment promises a great learning curve for each child.

**Rebecca: How can students and their families have a successful integration experience at school?**

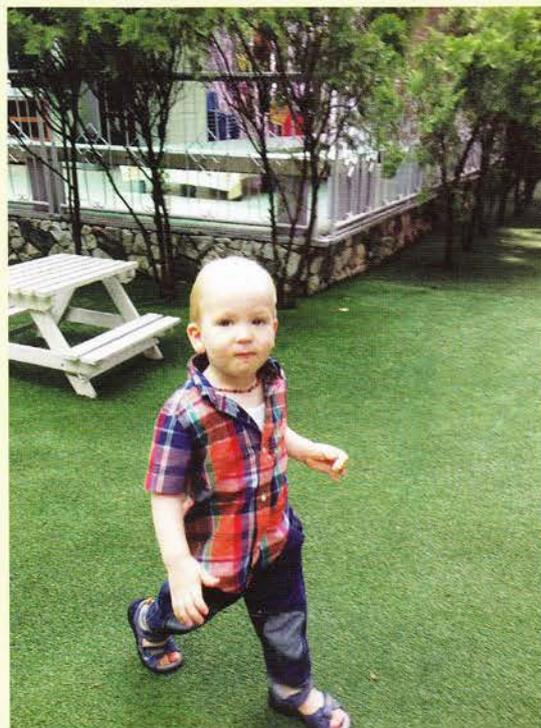
*Simmi:* Integration takes time, so the key word here would be patience. Some families or students do it better than others, but it's important to let the new party take the time they need for the process to happen organically. Support from friends, families, and teachers can go a long way

**Rebecca: How can families maximise the benefits of a TCK school?**

*Simmi:* Enrolling your child in a school that caters to TCKs offers many potential benefits. Be sure to take advantage of the different language and cultural classes being offered. Being in an international school means coming in contact with people from diverse backgrounds; whether it is your child's teacher or friends, students are going to be exposed to people who do things differently, so be prepared to answer questions! As a parent, you may be used to things being done a certain way and new processes and systems can often seem overwhelming. You should feel free to ask the school any questions you might have!

**Rebecca: How can families develop a pre-departure strategy?**

*Simmi:* The hardest part is the leaving. Letting your child know what to expect is the best strategy. Talk about it at home casually, from time to time. This will



allow him/her to absorb the idea that departing is part of the process.

**Rebecca:** For parents, the basic fundamentals for beginning a smooth transition into pre-school and life as a TCK are summarised as the following: plan ahead, note all the possible pitfalls, and enlist as much assistance as possible to help devise coping strategies. Much of this is unique to each parent and child; however Simmi suggests the following general strategies to help prepare your TCK youngsters for the transition into pre-school:

**Simmi:** Starting nursery school is a big change for both parent and toddler. A smooth transition will increase your child's confidence and lessen his separation anxiety. At Storytime pre-school, we do our best to ensure that each child's transition from the home environment to the nursery environment is

as smooth as possible. We also install CCTV in every classroom, and parents have the freedom to watch their child in a separate room.

Below, we have a few successful strategies that we recommend.

- We encourage parents to visit the nursery with their children before formal admission. Drop by a couple of times to play in the garden, visit the snack area, the restroom, the classroom, etc.
- Give as much information as you can about your child to the school to ease his first few days. This could include his likes and dislikes, any allergies, and his favourite toy
- Meet the class teacher and introduce your child to him or her
- Connect with other parents: this way, you can have playmates over before he starts school
- Take something familiar along to school, maybe his teddy bear, a toy, or a blanket
- Talk about the school ahead of time. Make bedtime stories about his new school, the fun he will have, and the friends he will meet.
- Create a short goodbye routine. One of the most popular ones is 'See you later, alligator,' and leave. This will make saying goodbye so much easier. The longer you hang around, the more difficult it will be to leave.

#### **Some additional pointers on leaving your child at pre-school:**

Do not sneak away when your child is busy in an activity. A child should learn that school is a place where he/she goes to everyday (or set days), and parents won't be around. If you manage to sneak away the first day, the next day becomes harder. Other tips include not asking your child for permission to leave, and avoiding promising gifts in exchange for your child allowing you to leave.

**Remember: you are your child's first teacher.**

