

Cross-Cultural Worker Marriage Issues: How Will We Discipline Them?

Remembering the pain when his father whipped him with a belt, Stan resolved never to use anything but his own hand when punishing his child. He knew that the Bible said that the man who “spares the rod” hates his son, so Stan was “careful to discipline” the son he loved (Proverbs 13:34). He spanked only with his own hand so that he could feel how much pain he was giving.

Remembering that her mother would remind her that “God is love” even when she disobeyed, Beth resolved that no one would ever hit her children. She could not imagine Jesus giving a child a spanking. Her mother had always emphasized that Jesus would forgive her if she just prayed and said she was sorry.

As husband and wife Stan and Beth now have their own small children. They have had many discussions about differences between the families they grew up in, differences in the way they looked at Scripture, as well as differences they had about disciplining their children. They had come from diverse family and church backgrounds, but after talking with their pastor they finally came to some agreement about disciplining their children. They are glad to have that behind them now that they are planning to serve overseas. Or is it behind them? Will these issues come up again?

Another Culture

In *Families on the Move*, Marion Knell tells the story of a child attending an

international school. One day the boy came home from school and told his parents that a teacher had touched his private parts. The distraught parents immediately went to the school to investigate. They found out that touching a small boy’s private parts to discipline him was the cultural norm in their host culture. The teacher could not understand what the fuss was all about—she certainly had no intention of abusing the boy or of harming him in any way.

Just as families differ in their view of punishment, so do cultures. In some cultures the only ones allowed to discipline a child are the child’s own parents. In other cultures any responsible adult present is expected to discipline a misbehaving child. Some cultures use corporal punishment; others use shame or time-outs; and still others use little punishment at all. Even cultures which use physical punishment about equally may differ in the kind of such punishment.

A 2007 comparison of Japanese and USA college students found that about 90% of the students in both cultures reported experiencing physical punishment. However, students in the USA were more likely to report being hit with an object than those in Japan. In addition, USA students were most likely to be hit on the bottom and the hand, but Japanese students were most likely to be hit in the face or on the head.

Thus, as expected, people from families and cultures not using punishment may be appalled at any punishment given to their children. Even people who come from families and cultures which use punishment may be appalled at their children being slapped in the face by relative strangers or having someone touch their children’s private parts. These situations are most likely to

occur in the context of household help, nearby national neighbors, or nearby expatriates.

Household Help

When wages are much lower in their host countries than in the passport countries, cross-cultural workers often hire people on a regular basis to work around their homes. Some of these people are essentially nannies, there to care for the children. Of course, people should be aware of major cultural differences and screen the nannies carefully to find out not only the cultural means of discipline they use but also their family’s means of discipline.

In addition, other nationals who are there primarily to cook, clean, do household maintenance, or yard work also come into contact with children. They may also discipline your children, especially when you are not present. All of these individuals will also impart other aspects of their culture to your children, a part of making them TCKs.

As parents it is your responsibility to learn enough about the culture and your household help to assure that what your children learn from them meets with your approval. Since these people are your employees and work in or around your home, you can influence what they do with your children. Even then your spouse and you may disagree on what to do about such discipline.

National Neighbors

Assuming that you live in a “neighborhood” with nationals living all around you (rather than in a “compound” with only people from your agency), your children will probably play with national children who live nearby. While playing together your

children are likely to spend time in homes of these national children where they will encounter parents and other extended family members. These adults are likely to step in and discipline your children; after all, your children are in their homes.

In this situation, you have much less leverage to question the families and much less control over what they do to discipline your children. You can still learn about the culture, but you have to rely on general conversation and observation of everyday behavior to discover their family norms for discipline.

In this case you will need to make judgments about the relative value of your relationship with these people and the influence of their discipline on your children. This may lead to marked disagreement between husband and wife. One spouse may think of broken toys as an indication of lack or respect for another’s property, and the other may see those broken toys as evidence of a lack of materialistic influence.

Nearby Expats

Unlike parents in their passport country, people living in a host country have a relatively limited number of people from their own culture to talk with. Some parents live in rather isolated (from other expats) conditions where they have few people with whom they can discuss disciplining their children. In fact, some people live in small villages far from anyone from their passport culture.

Other parents live in urban areas where they have access not only to other parents from their passport culture but also parents from other cultures who speak their language. Having others from back “home”

nearby may be a real help, but asking parents from other cultures (even ones who speak the same language) may result in even more confusion since that brings in other cultural differences.

If other families live nearby, children playing together and visiting each others' homes may bring conflict not only between spouses, but with nearby expats about how children should be disciplined. Issues on the value of the relationship with these expats and the morale of the agency community need to be considered.

Other Factors

Here are several things to keep in mind as you discuss disciplining children.

- There is no one best way to discipline children. They grow up and become members of society after being disciplined in a wide variety of ways.
- Parents must present a united front. They need to have core values agreed on before marriage if possible, or with a counselor after marriage if they did not do so before marriage.
- Always intervene in cases of abuse. Do not give your silent approval if you see physical, sexual, or emotional abuse such as name-calling or other damaging activity.
- Be careful of what you do that is motivated by guilt. Some parents try to “atone” for what they have “put their children through” by taking them to live in another culture. Though you may want to be compassionate for a short period of adjustment right after arrival, do not hesitate to discipline when that time is over.
- Agree on the role of children and refine your view of their role as they mature. Are they also “cross-cultural workers” while in

the host country with you? They may enjoy this role while children but come to resent it as adolescents. Likewise, they may think it is “neat” to sing in the national language to help you raise funds during childhood, but they may despise doing it as teenagers. Allow them to play these roles, but be very careful about force or shame to get them to do so.

- Remember that you are very influential in your children’s lives. In a large study of adult TCKs (specifically cross-cultural workers’ kids) one question asked was, “Who was most important in your life as you were growing up?” Two-thirds of the respondents named their parents: 32% said father, 28% said both parents, and 6% said mother. The other one-third was distributed among houseparents, teachers, siblings, friends, and others.

What does Bible say?

As noted in the introduction, the Bible mentions a variety of means of discipline, ranging from the rod to love. No one method fits all children at all times. It is clear that even the children of spiritual leaders go bad when not disciplined.

- Sons of Eli, the priest. God told Samuel that he would judge Eli’s family because of the sin Eli knew about and “he failed to restrain them” (1 Samuel 3:13).
- Sons of Samuel, the prophet. “But his sons did not walk in his ways (1 Samuel 8:3).
- Adonijah, son of David, the king. Adonijah proclaimed himself king. The Bible says that “His father had never interfered with him by asking, ‘Why do you behave as you do?’” (1 Kings 1:6).

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