



**Title:** Third Culture Kids: The Experience of Growing up amongst Worlds

**Authors:** David C. Pollack and Ruth E. Van Reken

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*Reviewer:* Nicole Drinkwater

## Introduction

This book is supposed to be the most comprehensive book on this topic, written by pioneers on the subject of the inter-cultural upbringing of children. An American study estimated the total number of American people living abroad, either permanently or temporarily, at 3 million.<sup>1</sup> So if we add the number of citizens from other countries as well, we get an idea of the increasing phenomenon of global nomads.

## About the Authors

**David C. Pollack** worked with third culture kids and adults for more than 20 years. One of the first to start doing re-entry seminars for missionary kids in the early 1980s in the US, he was a founding member of Global Nomads International and conducted seminars and conferences for third culture kids, their parents, and sponsoring organizations. David Pollack died in 2004.

**Ruth Van Reken** grew up as a missionary kid in Africa and is well known for her previous book *Letters Never Sent* which she wrote in her forties about what it was like to go away to boarding school when she was 6 years old. She knows the world of living in a culture and country not your own from her own experiences and as a parent and grandparent of third culture kids.

## Book Summary:

In the book the authors refer to the following acronyms:

MK: Missionary Kids  
TCK: Third Culture Kids  
ATCK: Adult Third Culture Kids

The book starts with a foreword by Norma M. McCaig, Founder of Global Nomads International and President of Global Nomad Resources. She is one of the true pioneers in raising global awareness of the issues facing TCKs. She is an ATCK herself and works now with international companies preparing employees and their families for overseas assignments. She summarizes:

*[This book] is a highly distilled body of knowledge that is both anthropological and psychological in nature. Through this knowledge he [David Pollock] gives voice to what so many of us [third culture kids] felt soul deep but often cannot articulate. . . . Clearly, for many who have grown up globally, having their past validated and placed*

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<sup>1</sup> Carolyn D. Smith, *The Absentee American*, 1991, Aletheia Publications.

*in a clear context of a shared heritage brings with it a stunning sense of safe homecoming.*

*With this book, the authors add a new level of understanding, articulation, and visibility to an emerging interdisciplinary social science field – one with a focus on the children of the globally nomadic community. Undoubtedly it will prompt greater intellectual discourse and synergy.*

The book is divided into two main sections: “The TCK Experience” and “Maximizing the Benefits”.

### **The TCK Experience**

In Part I “Understand the Worlds of TCKs” (chapters 1-4) the authors discuss such questions as, “Where is home?” “Who are TCKs?” “Why cross-cultural childhood matters,” and “Why high mobility matters”. It focuses on the definition of TCKs and their world:

*A Third Culture Kid . . . is a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents’ culture. The TCK builds relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any. Although elements from each culture are assimilated into the TCK’s life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar background (pg. 19).<sup>2</sup>*

- Part II describes “The TCK Profile” (chapters 5-11), including the benefits and challenges of this experience. It goes on to examine the characteristics this lifestyle fosters and what effects it has on interpersonal relationships and developmental patterns.

TCKs are referred to as cultural chameleons who may have trouble figuring out their own value system from the multicultural mix they have been exposed to. It is said that in the end, TCKs might adopt so many personas as cultural chameleons that they don’t know who they really are.

The chapter on *Practical Skills* examines the abilities most TCKs have: cross-cultural, observational, social, and linguistic skills. Following chapters deal with the common traits of *Rootlessness* and the *Restlessness*, and descriptions of relational patterns that TCKs develop through their cycles of multiple losses.

One chapter is dedicated to developmental issues. How can TCKs develop a personal identity? What are their struggles, including early maturity, delayed adolescence, delayed adolescence rebellion, as well as identity in a system? Despite the challenges, they are always interwoven with the benefits of this experience. Only a few of all the TCKs that the authors have worked with would ever exchange the richness of their lives to avoid the challenges they have faced along the way.

The final chapter of Section one deals with unresolved grief, which is the second biggest challenge that TCKs face after their sense of identity. The authors investigate the possible tangible and intangible causes of this, such as the fear of denying the good, the many hidden losses, lack of permission to grieve, lack of time to process, and the lack of comfort. Grief is

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<sup>2</sup> “The TCK Profile,” seminar material, 1989, Interaction, Inc.

natural when we can do it openly for what we have lost, but not dealt with, it can emerge in other more destructive forms.

### ***Maximizing the Benefits***

In this part of the book, the authors give advice and suggestions on how to benefit from this rich inter-cultural experience. It tells us what is needed for TCKs to sustain a strong personal identity and feel enriched by the experience.

In the chapter on *How to Build a Strong Foundation*, the reader gets (parental) advice on what questions to ask before embarking on the cross-cultural upbringing of their kids. The chapter on *Dealing with Transition* explains how highly mobile families can deal with the process of transition in such a way that they can grow from it. Five stages of transition (involvement, leaving, transition, entering, re-involvement) are treated, and concrete advice is given on how to leave and enter each stage of the process and what tools are needed. There is also information on how to make the best choices when it comes to the educational needs of the TCKs, giving the pros and cons of different schooling options like home schooling, local, national and satellite schools, or international or boarding schools.

The last chapters bring the book full circle. Here we have titles like *Enjoying the Journey*, *Coming Home: Reentry*, *How Sponsoring Organizations Can Help*, and *It's Never Too Late*. There are tips and suggestions on how to make the best of the journey and what to expect when finally returning home.

For the ATCKs, *It's Never Too Late* raises all the questions retrospectively to adults who lived as third culture kids and offers help on how they can deal with their past, including coping strategies.

The appendix includes Adult Third Culture Kid Survey Results and two writings by Adult Third Culture Kids, as well as a long resource and bibliography list.