

Missionary Mothers and Mothering Missionaries

By Susan Bixby

Introduction:

Runny noses and scraped-up knees. . . sibling rivalry and peer pressure. . . education and discipline. . . mothering is mothering no matter where it's done, right? Kids are kids in Indonesia or Ecuador. They can talk back in Chinese or French as well as in English. Is a missionary mom different from any other mom? What are the unique challenges? How should she approach this task?

As a disciple of Jesus Christ, I must examine carefully what the Scriptures teach about any area of my life. Motherhood is no exception. If I do not begin with a biblical foundation, I will easily go awry and be distracted (at best) or deceived by the enemy. After considering important biblical principles regarding motherhood, I would like to address some of the unique challenges a missionary mom can face, and finish with some common qualities and practices of missionary parents who produce missionaries.

1. On Being a Mother.

Every Christian mom must maintain a biblical perspective on motherhood. It is easy for a missionary mom to allow the uniqueness of her circumstances to distract or even misguide her thinking. She must have a personal walk with her Lord that is soaked in Bible study and prayer in order to maintain a biblical perspective. What essential reminders does every mother constantly need in order to carry out her role?

a. My sufficient Helper is the object of my trust. (Phil. 1:6; Rom. 8:28)

The Holy Spirit is perfectly able to guide and work in my children and in me. He has begun the good work, and I must have complete trust in His purposes, methods, and timing. This is true no matter where I live and in what circumstances. He is not limited or inhibited by culture or surroundings or language. He is not scrambling around trying to figure out how to help me because suddenly I live in a different culture. All things truly are being designed to work for good in our lives. When I put my complete confidence in the power and work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of my children, I will not doubt my husband's decisions, or worry about the effects of the local culture on my children, or manipulate circumstances to "make things better." My faith in the sovereignty and goodness of God will affect every decision I make in parenting. I must have an accurate theology. . . I must know and trust my God.

b. My sufficient Handbook is my source of wisdom.

If I truly trust in the Holy Spirit as we've just discussed, I will also trust in the primary resource He has given me for making wise decisions. For every mother, the Word of God should be the first go-to. And when a mom finds herself taken out of her familiar culture and placed into one with very different ideas of right and wrong, acceptable and unacceptable, good child-rearing methods and bad ones, the stability and wisdom provided her by a thorough knowledge and trust in the Scriptures is absolutely essential. I cannot emphasize enough the importance of a deep-seated trust and reliance on the wisdom of the Word of God. Most of "us moms" don't even realize how much "wisdom" we absorb from the culture

around us. Being displaced into a different culture can actually make us more aware of how much we naturally rely on conventional wisdom instead of genuinely evaluating everything by Scripture.

- c. My specific task is to make disciples of my children.** This focus on what my true responsibility is will help me not to get distracted from what is important. I will just mention a few of the biblical commands and examples that I must strive to follow no matter what my situation is as a mother.
- i. *“And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation”* (2 Timothy 3:15). Lois & Eunice (2 Tim. 1:5) were faithful to pass on their unfeigned faith through the teaching of the scripture. No matter what language they speak best, no matter how many friends they have (if any), no matter if they get to have a “normal childhood,” the holy scriptures will make my children wise unto salvation, and it is my responsibility to teach them.
 - ii. *“Bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord”* (Eph. 6:4). My home, no matter what country it’s in, should be soaked in biblical teaching and discipline. We must not allow our general environment (the culture in which we live) to determine the environment of our home. Everything we do and say to and with our children should be founded on our desire to make disciples of them by nurturing and admonishing them in the Lord. Obviously when the culture around me is in stark contrast to this, it is a greater challenge, but not impossible.
 - iii. *“Provoke not your children to wrath”* (Eph. 6:4). This commandment has its unique applications on the mission field at times, but applies to all believing parents. I mustn’t get so caught up with the challenges around me that I neglect or confuse my children, provoking them to wrath. This requires much wisdom, which our Lord has promised to those who ask Him! (Jam. 1:5)

While striving to maintain a biblical perspective on her purposes, resources, and tasks in mothering, the missionary mom will soon face some unique challenges on the field, and will become her children’s primary counselor in the many transitions they will go through during their lives as MK’s.

2. On Being a Missionary Mother

a. Unique challenges

i. A lonely task.

Although I realize there are exceptions, the typical Christian mom in the US has Christian friends or relatives on which she can rely for help, counsel, and encouragement, and to provide a positive influence on her children in addition to what they observe in the home. This reinforcement is often very beneficial to the kids as well as the mom. For a missionary mom that has no or very few like-minded co-workers or friends nearby on the field, it is easy to bemoan this fact and get discouraged and lonely in her parenting. This is part of what makes missionary parenting unique, and should be something that drives her to love and depend on Christ and His Word as her source of wisdom.

ii. *A glass house.*

While skin color, a different lifestyle, and an obvious accent will usually cause a missionary family to “stick out” anyway, they will also often find they are going against the cultural grain in the way they raise their children. When you are very visible to those around you, who also are the people to whom you want to be a witness, the challenges can be befuddling at times. Often a missionary wife and mother must be willing to give up preferences and traditions while being careful to obey God’s Word and not sacrifice essentials. That beautiful manger scene brought from home to decorate with at Christmastime may have to go (or stay in the box) because of the Catholic connection most people would make with it in that country. Public displays of affection with her husband may be offensive to the nationals. We must constantly be on our knees asking for wisdom and the humility to surrender our “rights”!

iii. *A different mindset.*

The host culture’s view on children in general can be very different and often un-biblical. Being aware of these differences can help us know how to deal with others’ comments and observations and understand how to respond to them and instruct them while remaining faithful to the Word of God in our child-rearing. Some differences missionaries might find are the following: (This is by no means an exhaustive list nor am I an expert on “around the world” cultural differences.)

1. The host culture’s general perspective on authority, the need (or lack thereof) to practice obedience to an authority, and the issue of respect and trust in authority greatly affect the way of handling child-rearing. Some cultures have dictatorial mindsets in which the child is taught to obey or get beaten or even killed. Others believe children should be allowed to do what they want and are only made to obey when mom and dad have had enough. Understanding the culture in which you live will help you anticipate the influence it will have on your own children and how to best combat that with the Word of God.
2. Child-centered homes. In many cultures, including Latin American ones, the children practically run the household and are worshipped. Dad can supposedly give an ultimatum, but if the kid throws a temper tantrum because he doesn’t like it, he’ll end up getting his way. Parenting is primarily done by bribery, and you may find that your own children are often bribed by others. They quickly pick up on their peers’ ability to get whatever they want and their lack of respect to elders and other people.
3. Physical discipline is not necessary or acceptable (unless Dad is really mad and chases the kid around the house wailing on him with a piece of electric wiring). I realize that more and more in the U.S. corporal punishment is also being seen as wrong, but there are some differences between the two mentalities. I will not get into it in depth, but I do encourage you if you go live in another country, be perceptive and observant and ask questions so that you can be better prepared to counter the effects of unbiblical thinking on your children.

iv. *Ways of life*

On some of the surveys I did, several missionary moms and kids mentioned the challenge of accepting and accounting for differing ways of life in the host culture while attempting to retain the ability to “fit in” in the U.S. and not feel terribly out of place. Some of these areas might include:

1. Dress and personal presentation.

These types of differences between the host and home cultures can be particularly challenging because we do not want to communicate to our children that we consider our host culture as wrong (unless it’s something anti-biblical), or inferior. They should not pick up disdain or disgust from us. Yet there may be elements of the host culture that we strongly prefer our children not adapt to. We should evaluate whether our preferences are strictly from tradition or if there really are legitimate reasons to not adapt.

2. Politeness and rudeness.

There may be things that are considered polite in one culture while being considered rude in the next. This can put the missionary mom in a quandary as to how to deal with this area with her own children. Instruction is essential, and patience. Sometimes it may truly be an area of right and wrong, and it just means that your children will be different from those around them. This can be used as a tool to help them develop a burden to be a light for Jesus.

Besides the unique challenges presented by living in a different culture, every missionary family will face the challenges of transitions. These transitions will normally include leaving for furlough and getting settled in the States temporarily, re-entering the host culture after furlough (particularly after long furloughs), and leaving the mission field to attend college in the U.S. Let’s look at just a few areas that a missionary mom should be aware of so that she can help her children through these times.

b. Transitions—a way of life for missionary families. (Remember who is guiding and directing our paths.)

i. *Understand that your MK will never feel that he fits in, no matter where he is.* He needs *your* compassion, understanding, and help in many areas. Each time you are preparing for a furlough transition or even a more permanent one, take the time to talk with him and be sensitive to his fears and doubts.

1. Express often your acceptance of him, and God’s unconditional acceptance of him just as he is.
2. Spend time focusing on manners and politeness so that he will not feel out of place or be accused of being rude.
3. Teach him how money works if it’s “foreign” to him.
4. Try to get clothing (and maybe even haircuts) that will not cause your children to “stick out” as fuddy-duddy, old-fashioned missionaries who have no clue what’s going on in the U.S. This is one of the main areas in which you can help them. Will they always feel out of place a little? Yes! Must they feel like they stick out like a sore thumb? No! And it’s Mom’s responsibility to attend to those details.

- ii. *Teach your MK to evaluate with biblical principles and choose what is pleasing to God no matter what culture he is in at the moment.* He needs an anchor of truth, and it can't be the opinion of other people because he will find that to be so changing. Trust in the wisdom of a sovereign God will provide him with the stability he needs to weather the storms of change.
- iii. *Watch for a tendency to self-centeredness and pride, and possibly even a victim mentality: "my way," "my struggles," "my" country is better (whichever that is).* He needs to see the world through Jesus' eyes—no matter where he is at the moment. Teach him to focus on others and to ask the Lord to use him to be a blessing to others. This is a wonderful family prayer request for furlough.
- iv. *Point him toward the path to greater usefulness in the future.* Help him rejoice in the special tasks God is preparing him to do and have a vision for the future. He needs your help seeing beyond his current discomfort.

3. **On Mothering Missionaries**

Common denominators for producing ministry-minded MK's (taken primarily from surveys of grown MK's)

Without claiming scientific reliability, I thought it would be helpful to share a summary of the answers I received to the question, "What specific attitudes, habits, and perspectives of your parents made the biggest difference (positive or negative) in how you viewed their ministry?" I also asked missionary wives the questions, "What specific efforts have you made to nurture a burden for missions in your children and avoid a negative attitude about the ministry?" and "If you have children who are now missionaries, what do you think most contributed to their desire to stay in missions work?" This last section is based on the answers I received from those questions. Except for the last point, which is the #1 answer, the other points are not in any particular order of importance.

- a. **Family is not 2nd to ministry.** This was expressed by MK's as not feeling like they were constantly pushed aside so Mom could "minister." Moms expressed this as a purposeful attempt to maintain biblical priorities as helpmeet and mother while teaching her children that ministry is still important.
- b. **Teamwork.** "We're all in this together to glorify God and bring people to Him." Almost every mom that filled out the survey mentioned involving the children (either out of necessity or as a purposeful choice) from an early age, letting them know everyone should do his part, including them in almost all activities, and teaching them responsibility in ministry.
- c. **We're not "sacrificin' fer the Lord."** This is our life, our calling, our duty, our joy. There's no complaining about what we do without, and nobody owes us anything (churches back home or nationals). On the surveys, one MK mentioned that the other MK's she would sometimes hang out with at get-togethers and such had a negative, sacrificing view on what they were doing, constantly complaining about what they didn't have or couldn't do because of being missionaries. This always seemed strange to her, since her parents never displayed that kind of attitude. None of those kids wanted to be missionaries, but she and her siblings did. She felt like this was a major factor in her desire to be in full-time ministry.

- d. **Home and hearts always open to people** and viewing all as equal (nationals, Americans, etc.). Parents did not display an attitude of looking down on the nationals.
- e. #1 Answer on MK survey: **Personal life and testimony of parents.** Children pick up on and, in many ways, filter life's circumstances through their parents' attitudes, actions and reactions.
 - i. *Humility and Integrity*—living honestly at home just as in public. No area of life was held back.
 - ii. *Genuine love*—for God first and foremost. What Mom and Dad do is genuinely motivated by a deep love for and personal relationship with God. This results in love for family and for people ministered to, for home country and host country. (The MK's who expressed this point also admitted little struggle with the problem of resenting one country or the other.)
 - iii. *Gratitude*: for salvation from my wretched condition, for the PRIVILEGE to be His ambassadors, for provision in every area of our lives, for financial and prayer support, for fruit for our labors, for citizenship in the kingdom of heaven.

May God give us the grace he has given so many humble servants before us to raise our children to serve Him!