

# Working with International Students and Third Culture Kids – Some Points to Consider When Advising on School Placements

by Rebecca Grappo, M.Ed, C.E.P., IECA (CO) by Rebecca Grappo, M.Ed., CEP, IECA (CO)

American boarding schools—as well as therapeutic schools and programs—have earned a reputation for excellence that has led more and more families around the world to look to them to meet their children’s educational needs. However, these families have unique concerns that many of those working with these families or in schools may not predict. Hopefully, just being aware of some of the issues can keep the relationship between the families, students, independent educational consultants (IECs) and schools on an even keel.

1. Communication is key. Most of the time when I hear a parent complain about a school it’s because of a lack of communication. Parents want to get frequent updates about grades, behavior, and successes and struggles both in and outside the classroom. Surprises are usually never welcomed unless they bring extraordinarily great news. There needs to be a system in place for communicating with parents with meaningful, reliable, timely, and predictable feedback. I’ve seen parents blindsided when a child starts to fail a class, or has a disciplinary issue, or does something crazy and no one in the school tells them until the problem has escalated. IECs also don’t like to be caught off-guard. If a consultant has placed a student and has no idea that the student is struggling, or that something has happened, it’s a very awkward moment when that family calls to complain. Keeping everyone in the loop is key to maintaining good working relationships between all parties. Likewise, I have found schools to be very appreciative when I give them a heads up about a situation that may be brewing without them realizing it.
2. Time zone differences are tough on everyone. Many times the families are on the other side of the world, so finding times for parents to talk to their children are limited. Going the extra distance to be sure that parents and children can remain in touch will be greatly appreciated. It’s also difficult to schedule conference calls with school personnel and IECs. All parties need to be flexible.
3. Language barriers can also be challenging. When speaking with someone who may not be a native speaker of a language—any language—it’s important to speak slowly, clearly, and distinctly, and with minimal use of slang. Depending on the language skills, it might also be useful to check with the parents and students for

understanding in a way that is not condescending. The use of acronyms and truncated words is also difficult for the non-native speaker, and accents can also be difficult to understand over the phone.

4. E-mails can be a wonderful method of communication—or a nightmare. As we all know, e-mails can keep us all connected and informed, and serve as a way of documenting our conversations. However, e-mails are a flat method of communication, so without body language or inflection of voice, they are hard to interpret or may be completely misinterpreted. They can also be fired off in a moment of anger or distress, leading to offense or hurt feelings when that wasn’t the intention. This is true with all families, but is compounded when dealing with cultural differences. When in doubt, pick up the phone or Skype.
5. Do not assume that in a cultural sense, parents and students know what you are talking about or agree 100% with the values of the school or other students. Cultural differences abound. I can think of examples where plagiarism or smoking on campus were not considered a big deal by the student or family, but were major issues for the school. On the flip side, some families may be distressed over a topic that would be non-controversial in an American school but would be a major issue in their own home culture. Discussing therapeutic issues with someone from a different culture is almost always a challenge. Relationships with roommates also offer potential for conflict. There are many other scenarios we could discuss here, but patience, communication, and clarity will go a long way towards winning over the parents as allies.
6. Long weekends and interim holidays can be hard on students and families. Usually most domestic kids get to go home and see family, friends, and sleep in their own beds during school breaks. But the student whose family lives overseas may not have anywhere to go. Dorms often close and many schools assume kids will figure out a place to go on their own, but the students might not. This also causes a great deal of anxiety on the part of parents as they anticipate the break and worry about their children’s plans or lack of plans. Schools can relieve a lot of the anxiety by being aware of student plans (or lack thereof) for

school breaks.

7. Parent weekends when everyone else's parents come are also rough if the student whose parents live overseas can't come. That's when a student may feel very homesick. It helps if the school is sensitive to this. Perhaps a local host family can be matched to the student so that they have adults outside of school who care about their welfare and come to their events.
8. Flying home over long breaks can also be difficult. Many places where kids live are difficult to reach, and so parents might try to get the children to come home a few days early or stay a few days after the break ends. One can empathize with a family that is overjoyed to have a child home again, but that must be balanced against the academic demands and standards that a school represents.
9. The system of education is new and not all families will understand it. School personnel, therapists, and/or IECs might need to spend a lot more time explaining policies, routines, expectations, clinical work, or school work just because it is all so different for the family.
10. Just the feeling of distance can make a family more anxious about a situation, so again, communication is extremely important if the family is to trust the school or program. If there is a void in the flow of information, a parent can fill the vacuum with their imaginations and may assume the worst. Establishing trust and a good rapport is essential to the school/family relationship.
11. Students may come from a country that faces economic or political uncertainty or instability. They may not talk about it but may be troubled by events at home. Family members might be involved in events making the headline news. Just checking in with the students to ask how they're feeling is appreciated and provides a source of comfort and strength for both the student and family. It sounds so simple but it's surprising to me how rarely it is done.
12. Americans coming from overseas may look, speak, and act like all the other Americans on campus. However, their inner values and perspectives may be quite different from those of other Americans. These kids are known as Third Culture Kids, or TCKs. TCKs are not limited to just Americans—this could also be the Brit returning to the UK, or any other nationality going to their country of passport. TCKs are often surprised when they feel like they don't fit in with their peers from their own country, and

thus may gravitate towards other international students. This adjustment can be very difficult for them, so again, having an advisor or mentor who can take an interest in their lives can make a huge difference in their adjustment.

13. Social adjustments are at least as important as academic progress. We all want our students to thrive in their new school, and most do. However, I spend time trouble-shooting on the following two profiles. One is the student who is overly social and can't focus on the academic piece enough. The other is the student who makes it through the day without raising any red flags, but is actually quite lonely, homesick, and feeling like he/she doesn't fit in. If ever a placement is going to fall apart, it's when the student is unable to connect and make friends. Whether it's the TCK or an international student, figuring out a new school culture in a new country can be very difficult. This is when it is so important for the IEC, school, and family to communicate about what they are seeing and hearing. I recently had a conversation with someone in a school about an international student who did not want to return for another year, but in our conversation the school official focused on how well the student was doing academically. I stopped him and pointed out that the student was feeling disconnected and that was the area we needed to focus on. After that, our conversation took a new direction and the school promised to follow up with mentors, advisors, dorm parents, and coaches all being aware of the silent and hidden struggles that the student was experiencing.

Everyone benefits when students from around the world interact with one another. International students and TCKs can greatly enrich the culture of the school or program, whether it be in the classroom, the playing field, stage, or the dorm. Students learn from one another and gain perspective by being with those who are different from themselves. But international students are still children or teens who are far from home. In order to maximize their experience on campus, they need a healthy dose of patience, compassion, and understanding from all the professionals involved in their lives.