

Engaging with Children in Africa

In many ways children are similar all over the world and have common developmental needs for their emotional, physical and spiritual well being. But the experiences of childhood can vary greatly from place to place. In any African country there can be huge differences growing up in a city compared to growing up in a rural area. For many African families, the experiences of the current generation are far different from those of their parents and grandparents. It is important to familiarize yourself with the tensions and challenges faced by African families.

Here are some suggestions to help you engage with and learn more about the children in your host culture both during your homestay and thereafter.

- Practice language with them. They are usually very willing, and it is often less stressful than making a fool of oneself to adults!
- Observe, observe, observe. It is much easier to observe relationships than to question a cultural informer about them because people rarely reflect on relationships, they just live them.
- There is great tension between rural and urban life in Africa these days. If you have the opportunity to experience a homestay with both an urban family and a rural family, note the differences and the joys and stresses of both ways of life.
- Take time to visit homes, various schools (including nursery or preschools), and children's ministries in churches

Invaluable time can be spent hanging out with children watching a football match or playing football. Before you begin spending time with children in your area, it's always good to find out what kinds of interactions are culturally appropriate. It can take time to develop rapport with the children and their parents.

Below are some suggestions for things to observe or ask about in various settings:

When visiting a home:

Who makes up the family circle?

Who is considered "family"?

Who talks or doesn't talk to the children?

Whom do the children talk to?

Are there gender differences in the free flow of communication between adults and children?

Who initiates conversations between adults and children?

Are the children listened to? Are they allowed to interrupt?

What are the eye contact patterns between speakers? Are children allowed to look straight at adults when talking?

Where are the children allowed or not allowed to be?

How do children demonstrate respect for adults?

How are children encouraged in their schoolwork? In general?

What are children afraid of? (i.e. bogeyman, monsters, etc.)

How are children disciplined?

Who disciplines the children?

How are children kept in line? What kinds of threats are used?

What chores do children do?

What are the family's signs of affection?

What religious instruction, if any, goes on in the home?

When visiting a school:

At what age do the children start school?
What subjects are they learning?
How long is the school day?
What is expected of the children as far as homework?
What is the style of teaching?
How do teachers motivate children to learn?
How are children disciplined?
What subjects do the children enjoy the most?
What ensures success in school for a child? (ask of teachers and children)
Why would a child want to come to this particular school?
What hopes do teachers have for their students?
What do the children hope to get out of their education?
Is there a Christian Union or Bible club or SU group at the school? If so, who goes to it?
Who leads it and/or sponsors it?
Is religious education part of the curriculum? What does it entail?

When visiting a children's Sunday School or other children's ministry:

Who is teaching the children?
How is the Sunday School different from or similar to the school experience?
What teaching aids and materials do the teachers use?
What teaching methods are used?
How are the children disciplined?
How is Christianity demonstrated in the Sunday School?
Is there any mention of the Sunday School in the worship service? Any acknowledgement of children at all?
Ask the children why they come to Sunday school.

When hanging out with children:

What do they aspire to in their lives?
What else do they do in their spare time?
Who do they enjoy spending time with?
What are their favorite activities, games, toys?
What are they good at? What would they like to be good at?
Observe in their play who are the leaders and who are the followers. Who makes the game rules? Who enforces the rules?

Working with African children can be very different from working with western children. For example, some African children may not be as adept at cutting or coloring or painting since these materials are not readily available to them. On the other hand, African children will usually sit still longer and need less "entertainment" and generally have more responsibilities. There is great joy in working with these children. The most important thing to remember is that you are demonstrating Christ to them. SHOW them Jesus' love, don't just tell them about it!