

Bonus material 5.3. The expatriate partner – adjusting to life in Finland

The main issue that every expatriate spouse has to deal with is integrating into a new country and the various issues that stem from being far away from home. Firstly, there is the fact that everything is new and different to what you are used to and you essentially have to start all over again – new friends, new networks, new job, new home, new language, etc. Furthermore, the chances are you will be a long distance from your family and close friends, meaning you have to adapt to life without them. This is never easy, regardless of how much time you spent with these people while living in your home country, and requires a great deal of readjustment. Added to this is the third factor, which concerns your home culture. This is something you will have grown up surrounded by and can involve matters as trivial as missing a favourite food, park or sporting event, but all the small things add up over time.

On top of the aforementioned issues, there is then the fact that the majority of expatriates will not have a job, or a place to study, waiting for them upon arrival and therefore the search for employment must begin almost immediately. Factors such as not speaking the language or qualifications not being recognised may hamper you and cause stress, given your partner must shoulder the financial responsibility until you find work.

Living in Finland long-term

If a person lives away from home for a long period of time, or even permanently, new issues begin to arise. The first of these concerns ageing parents and the fact they may need help as old age sets in. Sometimes there is another sibling in the home country to help out, but expatriates often feel guilty if they are less able to lend a hand. Furthermore, there may be a longing for home and the desire to return due to missing friends, family and the home culture in general. Some find it easy to adjust and set down roots abroad, but for others there is a need to return after a certain length of time.

Social and support networks

There is always the potential for unhappiness and even dissatisfaction when it comes to living in Finland, and this is true for both partners – while the expat may miss home, the Finnish spouse may wish to live in the partner's country or a completely different place. The simple fact is that if you are not happy with where you live, this will spread to every area of your life. Therefore, try talking openly about the future and make decisions based on what is best for both of you and your family. Bear in mind that decisions can always be revisited and re-evaluated further down the line and changed if necessary.

No matter how long you live in Finland, whether it be for 18 months, ten years or the rest of your life, everything will be more complete and fulfilling if you try to make the best of it. For example, try to avoid making comparisons with how life might be if you were living at home or somewhere else, and that includes

aspects such as your friends, job prospects, standard of living, etc. If you plan to stay in Finland, then it is worth considering what this will involve in the future. Your children will start school, your career will need to be directed towards a goal and your friends may change – particularly if you move within expatriate circles. Furthermore, it will also involve not having one set of grandparents and family close by and therefore the majority of your holidays will involve visiting them.

Lastly, try to remember that each couple is different, meaning set rules and ideals may not work in every case. Think outside the box and feel free to implement ideas that work for you and which perhaps do not conform to the norm. For example, some couples split their time between the two countries, although this does become more tricky as the children get older, while others invite family members to live with them. The most important thing is that it works for you and your family.

Furthermore, support networks may be weaker than back home, meaning the expatriate partner may not have as many people, if any, to share the experience and any subsequent challenges with. These challenges always seem less daunting and troublesome if you share them with your partner and together you may well be able to find solutions to them. For example, there are places you can build up your support network, while arranging a holiday home when the baby is old enough to fly or having family visit you will allow them to share in your joy

Of course, these issues are related to the time when an expatriate arrives in Finland, but those who have been here for a period of time will face their own experiences. For example, support networks are essential if a person is to fit into a society. This assimilation can involve finding people to socialise with and confide in, be it natives or expatriates who speak the same language or share the same culture. This can often be more difficult for the intercultural father, as there are more avenues open to his spouse in the form of ante-natal classes and post-birth mother and baby groups.

Social media is an excellent way to find such groups and a simple internet search is likely to set you on the right path. Furthermore, sporting clubs or hobby groups in your language should be fairly simple to locate online and will offer a solid base from which to meet people. Another possible avenue is making contact with your embassy. Many embassies host events specifically designed to introduce people from the same country, and even those which are less active will have literature about how to get in touch with others who share the same language or culture.