

Bonus material 2.2. Pregnancy and Giving Birth – Planning and Practicalities

Neuvola

Neuvola is the part of the Finnish healthcare system which deals with children – from pregnancy right up until they go to school. When you find out you are having a baby, you then book an appointment with a nurse at your local health center in order to get the ball rolling. The likelihood is that this same person will then deal with all of your pregnancy issues and your child's health matters, as well as any subsequent children you may have.

However, the challenge here for intercultural couples is that all the appointments and birth training classes will automatically be held in Finnish or Swedish and according to Finnish practices and traditions. This has the potential to isolate one of the parents-to-be and should be talked through before your first visit and with the nurse once you arrive. However, one way to combat this issue is to attend neuvola appointments as a couple whenever possible. While this may be difficult due to work or other children, doing so will allow your nurse to become more aware of your intercultural characteristics.

If the expatriate parent doesn't speak Finnish or Swedish, then to begin with the native speaker in the relationship could call the health center and ask to be assigned a nurse who is comfortable speaking the preferred language of his/her partner. This will allow both parents to hear the same information and be involved from the outset. In terms of birth training, literature may be available in another language but the chances are that the immigrant spouse will need to rely on his/her partner to translate all the material. While this may not be possible during the course, try to set aside some time after every class to ensure you both fully understand what has taken place during the class. You could also try using these 'translation' periods as quality time together, as well as an opportunity to talk about the issues raised.

Hospital

In Finland, it is normal for first-time parents to visit the hospital where they will give birth approximately a month before the due date in order to familiarise themselves with the environment and process, as well as talking through any concerns they may have. The maternity hospital you are allocated is generally decided according to where you live, unless there is a special birthing requirement. In some circumstances, the tour can be arranged in a different language, usually English, and this is worth enquiring about.

When it comes to the actual birth, the vast majority of doctors in the hospital will be able to speak different languages, as will a number of the midwives, but this is very much dependent on who is working at the time.

You could, however, organise your own private midwife to join you in the hospital, as then you would be able to guarantee someone professional who speaks a common language. A further option is to have a doula or friend present, and this is a particularly useful alternative if the father is not comfortable being at the birth itself. A useful resource for this type of service is the website www.yebomama.fi. However, this part of the process should be organised well in advance and both you and your partner need to decide what kind of birth you would like, what issues surrounding the birth are different in the immigrant partner's home country and certain basic questions such as: should drugs be used; should the father be present at the birth; is he allowed to film/take photos; and what is his role? Furthermore, some cultures or religions may have specific rules relating to the birth and it is better to find these out in advance rather than when you arrive for the big event.

Cultural needs

Tying into questions such as 'should medical pain relief be used at the birth?' and 'should the father be present?' are the cultural needs of both parents during the pregnancy. While the majority of pregnancies the world over follow roughly the same pattern, intercultural parents need to discuss the process at an early stage so that they are both aware of the other's expectations. The role of the mother may change dramatically from culture to culture, as could the father's, and the sooner these issues are discussed and finalised the better. For example, is the mother expected to work during her pregnancy, and if so for how long, and how involved should the father be throughout the labour process? The latter question is commonly raised, as in some cultures it is not generally accepted that the father is present, while some mothers may not wish their partners to witness such an intimate event.

The importance of talking and sharing

As we are already beginning to realise, talking and sharing what you are feeling is of paramount importance when it comes to being an intercultural parent. Starting the discussion with open dialogue in the early stages of pregnancy will set a good foundation as you move forward with more testing questions and situations. However, while it is crucial to talk about the pregnancy and its many issues, as well as the birth itself, questions related to the future should also be asked and explored at this stage. A child who will inherit the best of both cultures is about to be born and it will help everyone concerned if you are ready – with a plan as well as a name for your baby.

Before moving on, please take the time to look over the following worksheets, which bring up a number of pertinent questions regarding pregnancy, childbirth and the early stages of raising a child. Take some time to yourself to think about these issues and then talk to your partner about them, as getting things out in the open now rather than later will let you know what you agree on and what needs work.