

Bonus material 4.1. Support network and integration

Establishing and benefitting from a support network

Having someone other than your partner to share things with is monumentally important, and a support network allows dialogue with people who you trust with issues you perhaps do not want to discuss with your partner – at least to begin with. You could have the strongest relationship in the world, but that space away from your partner in the company of someone you feel comfortable enough to confide in can make the world of difference. Family and close friends traditionally make up a support network, but it can also take the form of a group or organisation – such as a volunteer organisation, hobby group or sports team.

Having a support network allows an individual the chance to talk through issues outside the home environment and perhaps gain a second opinion. This can help immensely, as people who are not involved in a situation can often offer a refreshing viewpoint or unbiased comment. It also offers each spouse the chance to have a break and mix socially, which is an important family dynamic, away from the home environment. This will have a knock-on effect for your child, as being away for a period of time will allow each parent to charge their batteries and come back refreshed.

Finding a person or group you feel comfortable enough to trust and confide in is, of course, easier said than done, and finding a support network requires planning and the impetus to go out and meet people. Indeed, a number of fathers have initially said that they do not miss the support network they have left behind in their own country, but once the child arrives they tend to want someone to fall back on. The community partner in the relationship can have a large role to play here, especially in terms of using local knowledge or people and finding the right places to look for groups, societies or even individuals they think may help their spouse. Moreover, it is important for the Finnish partner to keep in touch with her support network, and even extend it if necessary, as their need for this type of support is equally important. In order to find a list of potential organisations which could help, please refer back to the previous theme.

The effects of integration on both parents

Moving to a new country can be incredibly exciting, as you look to build a new life together in a new country. Integration into Finnish culture can also be enjoyable, although the many effects it has on a couple means you should try and be there for each other – both when you move to Finland and in the longer term. The expatriate member needs to find employment, a social network and hobbies and interests, as well as navigating the system in order to live in the country for a long period of time.

However, it is essential to realise that it is not just the expatriate who has to deal with these challenges. The community partner has to take care of everything during the early stages of integration, such as finding somewhere to live, dealing with bills and money and organising appointments and schedules for their partner,

and they may feel a certain degree of guilt for making their partner give up everything to live in a different and new country.

When dealing with these initial issues, make sure that you are aware of what your partner is going through and how it is affecting them. They may be more stressed, and therefore less patient, as they attempt to deal with the issues being thrown at them. Also, by explaining how you are feeling and what you are going through to your partner, this will let the other person in and allow them to be more understanding towards you. Furthermore, try to talk through any emotions that you feel should be dealt with, so that there is no negativity once your child is born.

As an expatriate parent, it is natural that your partner will deal with most issues related to living in Finland during the early stages. However, try to make sure this does not become a permanent factor in your relationship as it may end up eventually spilling into parenthood. Ensure that you do not let her/him take care of everything and instead, even if you cannot speak the language, try to take on your fair share of responsibility. Conversely, as a community partner you should not have to deal with too much, and instead allow your partner to take on specific roles.

Contact with family in Finland and abroad

In the case of the expatriate's family, keeping in touch has become easier with the advent of the Internet and the technology that comes with it. For example, the programme Skype is free to use and allows both telephone and video calls simultaneously. This is an incredibly useful tool for language progression and keeping in touch without adding to your budget in the slightest. On top of this, you can also send photos via email or other messaging services and video clips through applications such as WhatsApp – again for free.

However, even though these new, Internet-driven, services are fantastic there is still a place for the 'older' methods of communication. Encouraging your child to write letters to grandparents in both languages will enhance their written skills, while asking family members to send postcards whenever they go away can help with your child's reading – as well as making them feel very much part of both families.

Bear in mind that it is important not to place all the emphasis on the family based outside Finland, even though they are further away. Keeping in regular touch with Finnish family members is just as important, although it may seem that they are much more accessible. Try to involve them as much as possible and utilise the fact they live in the country by seeking out as much contact as possible. Keeping in touch with family is essential to you and your children, though it can be challenging if one partner's family lives abroad – which is almost always the case for intercultural families. Grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins can all play large roles in a child's upbringing, so keeping them involved is both beneficial and enjoyable.

The attitudes and opinions of others

A family does not live in its own little bubble and therefore interaction with the outside world is necessary and inevitable. However, the attitudes of others and the way in which society treats people does affect both the immigration process and how welcome and involved in a society a person or family feels. Even if the family has a strong positive attitude and intercultural identity, the actions of others have an effect and the inability to adapt to the stress caused by a new life situation will filter into family life.

Therefore, the society that surrounds a family is important when it comes to supporting a happy couple and, in turn, a satisfied family. It will be easier for some couples to adjust, due to similarities in culture and language, whereas others will face the issue of difference on a more regular basis. It is worth realising at this stage that the opinions of others do not just affect the expatriate spouse. The Finnish partner also has to deal with the fallout and it can be difficult for them to watch their other half deal with the issues it presents. This is not always easy, as what other people say can have an effect, but talking about it with your partner can remove some of the taboo and also give you a solid stance regarding how to deal with any circumstances that may arise. Also, try not to take it personally, as it is by no means a slight on you as an individual. Strangers do not know you personally, meaning the chances are you will be dealt an inquisitive look rather than anything else.

Dealing with officials

Meetings with officials can be stressful due to the uncertainty faced, but it is worth keeping in mind the aforementioned advice. When dealing with people in an official capacity, try to remember that they see many expatriates every day and will therefore not treat you any differently. Although they may come across as stern and unwelcoming at times, they are just human beings who are trying to do their job. Your nationality, culture or background is not of any interest to them and all they wish to do is ensure your papers are in order. So, try to keep an open mind when in this type of situation.

Triggers

Many different triggers can cause reactions, such as clothes and the way people act, and everyone has faced an uncomfortable public situation at some stage in their life - i.e. while travelling abroad. However, the most common trigger is language. If the expatriate's language is being spoken in public there will always be people who are curious and perhaps look in your direction. This is not necessarily a negative stance, as people may just want to see what is happening given it is different to the norm. This is especially true in Finland, where immigration, at least on the scale present at the moment, is a relatively new concept. Furthermore, we may automatically assume that a reaction is due to the fact that a couple or family is intercultural, but this is not always the case and sometimes has to do with personal interpretation.

Speaking your own language

If people do glance your way in public, it is essential that you do not shy away from speaking your own language and continue talking in a normal manner. If your child sees that you are having difficulty talking in your own mother tongue, they may lose confidence when speaking it themselves. There is also a good chance that as your child becomes more aware of their surroundings, they will start to feel self-conscious about speaking the non-community language in public as, once again, people may look in their direction. Be strong and normalise this worry, even if the child attempts to revert back to the community language. This may seem harsh at the time, but if they see you are confident they will eventually gain the courage needed to speak your language in a normal manner.

Those close to you

Another issue that falls into this theme is how people close to you view your decisions. Most families are very supportive of intercultural relationships, and the many benefits and opportunities they bring, and enjoy watching your children grow up as unique individuals with their own culture. If, for some reason, there is hesitation towards your family, try talking to those close to you and explain just why you have made the decisions in question. While they may not agree with how you have gone about things, if they understand more about your reasons then they will, in most cases, be more sympathetic. However, as long as you and your partner are happy with the way the child is being raised, then the opinions of others should not matter.