

Bonus material 8.1. How to build a third culture

Talk openly

The first thing to consider is how you talk to each other and in what way. By being open and honest you will give both yourself and your partner the best opportunity of understanding what you want from your relationship and the family environment in general. Moreover, try to converse with your spouse in a respectful manner, as you will get nowhere if you are unable to listen to what is being said or consider their opinions and ideas.

By thinking about what you consider important to you and sharing your thoughts, your partner will also feel comfortable enough to do the same, meaning you create a mutual understanding and a basis from which to discuss each issue that comes your way. For example, you may not realise you both have the same ideas regarding hobbies or reading, whereas religion or cultural heritage may be something you want to pass on to your child. However, if you do not convey this to your partner then they will be unable to take it into account – particularly if they do not share these ideals. Some of these issues may even come as a surprise as you discuss them, meaning you may not have brought them up previously. Parenthood brings up childhood memories that may affect us in ways we were not expecting, and these issues will influence the ways in which we pass on traditions to our children.

Be willing to make compromises

Compromise is a crucial aspect of any relationship and being able to do this will stand you in good stead when it comes to having children. Having said this, there may be some issues you simply cannot compromise on immediately. This is perfectly natural and your partner may feel the same way, so getting them out in the open as early as possible will allow you to establish them in your child's life without an undercurrent of bitterness or anger. On a larger scale, by sitting down with your partner you will discover whether you share the same fundamental ideas about family life. This may seem obvious, but doing so early on and in a comprehensive manner can prevent complications in the future. Therefore, it is important to be conscious about the fact you may have differing ideas and that open discussion is always the best way to understand these differences.

Don't avoid difficult issues

Avoiding issues that are difficult or putting off tough decisions is something that everybody has done at some stage of their life and is perfectly understandable. However, when it comes to your family it is better to confront them. Intercultural families will face different challenges and decisions to those from the same culture, but that is not to say they are any less crucial. One of the most important decisions you will make as

your child grows relates to education. This is a classic example of a difficult decision and one which needs to be discussed openly and as honestly as possible with your partner. Children in Finland can go to kindergarten at just a few months old and, while it is not yet considered education, this represents the start of the decision-making process with regards to their academic career. At six children begin pre-school, which is followed by primary and then secondary school, meaning you must plan years ahead in order to come up with an agreed plan of. Of course there are a multitude of other big decisions to be taken throughout a child's life, but this example will hopefully give you an idea of the gravity, scale and time consumption of each single one.

These decisions do not only relate to your children, as you may face decisions regarding your relationship, too. The most obvious in terms of intercultural relationships concerns where you live. While you may live in Finland at present and for the foreseeable future, there are a number of factors which may cause a difference of opinion regarding where your future lies. For example, the expatriate parent may not settle in Finland or be able to find employment, or they may realise their parents are getting older and require help, whereas the Finnish spouse may become bored of their own country and want a change or receive a job offer from abroad. As we discussed in the Two of You theme earlier, talking about your relationship and tackling the big questions before they become even bigger will help you improve your relationship and give you a better chance of solving them. This will also have a knock-on effect on your children, as if they see you engaging in conversation when it comes to making a decision, they will be more inclined to do the same – both with you and others around them.

Accept change and differences

Just because you have decided upon the correct way to tackle a subject, idea or issue does not mean it will never rear its head again. Many will come back time and again, and your attitude towards each issue, as well as how you deal with it, may change over time due to experience or different life circumstances. Therefore, discuss, plan, negotiate and renegotiate whenever the need arises. Try to be flexible and open to new ideas and ways of doing things as much as possible, as your partner may have a better idea that could lead to a much more satisfactory outcome for you as a family. Flexibility is just as important as communication, as it allows you to see the bigger picture and change what you might have believed was right in the past but which actually did not work as well as a new or different idea.

Be flexible

Changes, such as employment, housing and emotional and health issues, will occur and it is important to be able to adapt to them. While some are surprising and perhaps less than enjoyable, the majority of changes, for example moving home or having more children, will be positive and life affirming. It is therefore essential to be able to accept the things which do not go according to plan, as they may be of significant benefit to everyone involved. This is not to say that you should abandon your ideals and beliefs - you absolutely should

stand up for what you believe in - but being adaptable will let you make the most of a situation, while mutual acceptance allows both parents to have an equal influence on the child's life. An added benefit to this way of thinking is that it will influence your satisfaction levels in terms of your relationship with your partner.

Support your partner

Given that you expect your partner to support you in every way possible, no matter if you are the community or expatriate spouse, it is only fair that you support them in the same manner. If you can support each other by showing kindness and consideration, the bond between you will become stronger and you will always know you can rely on them. Asking for help is by no means a sign of weakness – quite the opposite. You can and should be able to ask each other to lend a hand, as this represents concrete help and shows the other that you do care. This concept also goes hand-in-hand with the idea of sharing parenthood. Both parents should allow the other the time and space necessary to be their own kind of parent, as each individual needs to be able to implement their ideas and share their own culture. Having said that, parents still need to share the responsibilities that come with parenthood and make decisions – particularly the big ones – as a team. While this balance may take time to strike, it is worth it and can be achieved through teamwork and trust.

Talk about the future

Don't be scared to talk about the future and what it may entail. Parents will always have hopes and fears when it comes to their children and the family as a whole, but bottling them up will not help. Instead, speak to your partner and discuss what you think the future holds and the many different, and sometimes challenging, decisions you may have to make further down the line. Your partner will always appreciate your honesty and consideration and may be more inclined to talk to you about these issues. Questions such as the following all need to be answered at some stage, so having open dialogue and constant communication will lessen the burden.

Will you stay in Finland forever or do you want to live elsewhere?

In what language will your child be schooled?

What kind of education do you favour?

What your life will be like after the child leaves home?

Then there is your long-term future. When your children are grown-up and have their own families, you will also have an influence on grandchildren and younger relatives. Talking about how you will cope with that is also a good idea, as you can then speak to your children about it when they reach a certain age. Furthermore, you will not be around forever, so talking about what legacy you hope to leave your children once you are gone may seem slightly morbid but it is necessary. You may wish to leave them some kind of property in the expatriate's country to give them a grounding there or cement family bonds with younger relatives in that

country, so as to ensure your families will be linked long into the future. The future may seem distant now, but it will arrive at some stage so being prepared and ready will help you make the decisions that need to be made.

As we can see, creating a third culture for your child is achievable through a combination of discussion, compromise and honesty. However, nobody is perfect and of course you will make mistakes as you strive to find the best environment in which to raise your child. Remember, though, that the decisions you make can be rectified and revisited throughout, so do not be scared to make adjustments together as you learn and grow into your roles. But most of all, enjoy creating this unique culture for your child – they will thank you for it in the end, but the journey itself will be rewarding and incredibly fulfilling.