



# Transition in Finland: To find a way to be a family in new country

## THE TOBP CASE STUDY RESEARCH PAPER

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## 1. Executive Summary

The aim of the case study was to describe the experiences of social- and health care professionals and voluntary workers who work with migrant families, especially in a context of early family life. This case study aims to find out what transitions migrant families go through in their new countries and the actions needed for to support them. Additionally this study aims to find out the competences of transition mentors to work in collaborative ways with migrant families.

Methodological background of this case study-research is based on qualitative orientation. Five semi-structured interviews were conducted in one city in Finland. Interviewees were selected by their working experience with migrant families and their involvement to develop the services for them. Collected data was analyzed by thematic analyses.

This case reflects how the interviewees describe migrant families' needs to find out the way to be a family in a new country.



## 2. Background/Context

The situation of migrant families with children is unique, because they shape their identities as parents and try to integrate in to new country's culture and working life. At the same time, migrant families might have unpleasant experiences from services and this may weaken the integration into the new culture. This is the reason, why it is essential to understand the transitions what migrant families go through when settling into new country.

The aim of this data collection was to conduct information from professionals and voluntary workers who work with migrant families (especially in the context of early family life) about their experiences to work with migrant families. The focus was to find out:

- a) What kind of transition events/phases they recognize related to migrant families?
- b) What kind of action requirements they recognize related to transitions?
- c) What kind of skills, attitudes and knowledge (=competences) transition mentors (people who work with migrant families, also voluntary workers) need in order to be able to support migrant families?

Five Semi-structured interviews were conducted in one city of Finland 01/2019-03/2019. Interviewees were coordinator, coordinator of migrant counseling, public health nurse, senior lecturer, volunteer language teacher.

The interview themes based on the participants' experiences regarding their work with migrant families, and they took place in the university's facilities or at the interviewees' workplaces. The interview themes covered: interviewees' background, experience working with migrant families, ideas of skills and knowledge of a transition mentor, perspectives of services and service system (see specific interview questions Table 1.). The interviews lasted approximately 40-50 minutes, and were recorded and then transcribed verbatim. All participants signed an informed consent form before taking part in the interviews. The interviewees were allowed to withdraw from the interview at any point if they so wished without it affecting their participation in the project happenings.



**Table 1. Interview questions**

○ How / what kind of ways do you work or cooperate with migrant families with children?
○ Consider your own work with migrant families. In what kind of situations you may get an impression that a family has succeeded somehow or they feel themselves satisfied or well served.
○ Please consider your own working with migrant families. In terms of your own working, what seems to be difficult or challenging frequently?
○ Have you encountered unexpected situations that you have not been able to get ready for? What are they, please describe.
○ What kind of knowledge and skills are expected when working with migrant families with children?
○ What kind of services do you consider as benefits for migrant families with children? How those services can be reached?
○ What kind of services or assistance are required, what should be developed and implemented? Feel free to innovate this.

We applied thematic analysis in order to analyze the participants' experiences regarding their work with migrant families. First, we read the transcribed material thoroughly several times in order to form a comprehensive understanding of the content. Then, we identified meaningful preliminary codes and grouped them into themes according analysis framework, which was made to structure project interviews. Both authors did the initial coding by themselves, which was then discussed together. This aimed at increasing the reliability of the analysis.

We found out two main themes: 1) obstacles of family wellbeing and getting social- and health care services, and 2) to find out to be a family in a new country. This case study presents the last one. We also recognized actions needed to support migrant families and competences for people working within this "to find a way to be a family in a new country" theme.

### **3. Findings/Results: To find a way to be a family in new country**

#### **3.1 New parenting styles**

There are many differences in migrant families' family perceptions and example practices of raising children varies in different cultures. One interviewee reflect that differences in child raising culture might get you into contradictory position.

*"You have been a good mother in your home country, but not anymore in a new country. You have not changed as a person, but it is because of norms and laws."*

There might be new ways of parenting in a new society and parents might be pushed towards the idea of co-parenting.



In Finland, both parents are important when making decisions related to children and the interaction between children and both parents is strongly encouraged. It might be a new situation to spend actively time with child. One interviewee highlighted that:

*"There should be support and activities especially for dads to spend time with their children."*

The most concerning situation is, if a parent does not know any other people in a new society, is not receiving any migrant services and cannot speak Finnish either English. One question the interviewees reflected was that how to support parents to raise a child without punishing.

*"Punishment is not legal here in Finland and I feel helpless with that thing concerning migrant families."*

### **3.2 Difficulties with the language and organizing everyday life**

Importance of learning new language (Finnish) was mentioned in every interview. There is a pressure to put more effort on parents to get in to the society and to support their language studies. One source of pressure is to get a job as parents (both mothers and fathers) work quite equally and full hours in Finland. However, there are huge obstacles to organize all this. It is not easy to get a job without language skills and / or without an education and / or if your education or prior knowledge is not acknowledged. One interviewee mentioned that:

*"it is important to find a balance between searching a job and family/parenthood issues."*

One thing to pay attention to is to find your own role in a middle of new ways to combine work and family:

*"Finnish people have plans, calendars, are everything is scheduled. Foreigners are more present."*

Quite often, migrant children learn the new country's language quicker and better than their parents do. This might turn around traditional roles in families and children may have too many responsibilities on their parents' everyday life. Children may be forced to participate in to situations they should not be, example on labour:

*"A 12-yr old daughter needed to go to the labor room with her mom because mom did not have anyone else to speak or translate things from Finnish."*

This is something what should not be supported by professionals. Migrant families face often difficulties to find and accept new gender roles.

According the interviews, acknowledging migrant families own gender traditions is important. At the same time, they should be helped and encouraged to reflect new roles, norms and laws.

*"We should encourage the discussion that what you can do in a new country versus your own background and culture. There are differences between the genders, how to respect them in a new society?" Interviewees found examples about gender roles: "if there is a male doctor, you cannot visit him as a woman" or "our municipality organized swimming shift only for women once a week."*



Interviewees reflected that daughters should get to educate themselves and through that, women could get more possibilities to go forward in a new society.

### **3.3 Social fitting**

Interviewees noticed that local residents are quite often reluctant to take contact with migrant families:

*“Migrants may feel themselves lonely but other people can't see it”.*

It might be difficult to get friends and have contact to Finnish families. The atmosphere requires also fitting (example negative attitude towards migrants and racism):

*“I think our society doesn't want to do anything with them.”*

This might make migrant families' social network scarce and puts them in unequal position.

Some of the migrant families have many relatives and broader family around them, some families has no social support available. Participants also highlighted that it is important to note, that country of origin is not necessarily the reason to keep in touch. Migrant families from the same country will not create automatic bonding and community.

It is crucial to learn things, which are normal in new country, and to integrate with Finnish families through that.

*“Migrant families should learn Finnish things to do, but nobody teach them to do it: example skiing, skating, and swimming. There are so many things, that are normal for Finnish families, but migrant families' have not done these things. Moreover, from the viewpoint of integration it would be important to integrate with Finnish families, doing the same things than Finnish families do. Doing things together gives a feeling that I am accepted”.*

### **3.4 How to move on in a new society as a family?**

One important questions, which raised from the interviews, was related to the future. There are so many questions and issues to solve, quite often under uncertainty. Additionally interviewees repeated migrant families experience of not knowing:

*“I can't know if nobody tells me.”*

Migrant families need understanding how the new society works. There is also a question of trust. How to trust services and public officers in a new country? The system might have been very different in a country of origin and there might be lots of uncertainty. Example taking a baby to day care might be very new situation for the family, even if it would be good opportunity for the children to get friends and acculturate to the new society:

*“How to take children to daycare and go to work? Can I trust the system? Will they take care of my child?”*



One interviewee noted that migrant mothers have also created their own systems to organize caring of the babies during their studies. However, at the same time outsiders might not accept this:

*“Mothers take babies with them to school to breast feed them during mom’s study day, between the lectures. Anybody could take care for anyone’s baby” to help with parenthood and parent’s studies during school day. Unfortunately, this is still a problem for someone in our university. They keep complaining that there are too many babies and mothers breastfeeding in a corridor.”*

Based on our interviews we found actions needed to support migrant families to find ways to be a family in new country:

- A systematic program / training for all migrant families. It should concentrate to discuss about things together. Not only going through the rules or laws, more like reflection to adjust new ideas to one’s own culture.
- Families should have adequate information to support adjustment.
- Easy to find, open access (and free of charge) activities for families. Sports is good way to familiarize to new people and spontaneously interact, especially with younger kids.
- Assistance with reading, understanding and writing the documents, applications etc.
- Low threshold services where migrant families can receive all family services under the same roof, and meet other families.
- More opportunities for migrant families to see each other and participate as a whole family. In addition, specific activities for fathers and children are needed.
- Systematic peer support is needed from families to families.
- Family mentors who could guide and support migrant families.

Based on our interviews we also found competences needed for mentors / professionals who work with migrant families to support this transition:

- To be able to connect people and to help families to interact with each other.
- To be able accept and reflect the differences of authority, gender roles, the concept of time in different cultures and how cultural background affects to decisions.
- To be able to empower migrant families: to take care, but not to do things that they can manage by themselves.
- To be able to discuss and confront what are socially accepted things in new country.
- To understand different kind of family perceptions, a concept of broaden family and family centeredness to be able to respect the perspectives and decision made by a migrant family.
- To acknowledge that there is no need to be a specialist in many cultures; all the people have similar joys and sorrows.
- To recognize when there is something wrong in migrant family, even when they say everything is fine. To face also “the bad and sad” things without massive anxiety”.
- To be able to take care of one’s own personal boundaries and well-being.



## 4. Discussion

In this case study, we interviewed professionals and voluntary worker to collect their experiences to work with migrant families, especially in a context of early family life. Eventually we were interested to find out what kind of transitions they would recognize related to migrant families and what kind of action requirements they find related to these transitions. We also wanted to describe competences that people who work with migrant families' need in order to support migrant families in these transitions. Based on this report, there are many things that affect migrant families' adaptation to be a family in a new country. Families might face new parenting styles and demands, difficulties with everyday life and especially with a new language. There are many new things to learn and know to integrate, but at the same time, the support needed might lack. One important point of view is that this transition case is strongly related in to the Finnish society. There are also some general aspects, which are relevant to take into consideration, when working with migrant families. Those aspects include example transition mentors' competences related to transitions. It is also important to highlight that these interviews were done with people who are working with migrant families and the results present their point of views, not migrant families.

## 5. Conclusion

Migrant families face challenges, such adopting ways to live in a new society and its norms. In a new country, also the ways of being a parent, and to raise a child, may differ a lot from the patterns that they have been used to. It may be difficult to adopt the culture where parents are equals in making decisions and take responsibility of their children. Sense of belonging is essential to support integration and strengthen the feeling of social fitting. That is something what people who work with migrants families should keep actively on mind. How to actively connect people and help families to interact with each other in order to support to find their own ways to be a family in a new country?



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