

SOS Détresse

From the couple to the family

Migration marks a before and an after in the history of a family. There are couples who settle in the host country without children and giving birth links them more closely to this country. Others are already parents and leave their country of birth together with their children. But, there are also many families whose members find themselves separated: one or both of the parents leave first and they will only be reunited several years later. In every case, the family members must all adapt to their new life after migration.

If founding a family, living as a couple and raising children is one of the greatest challenges in life, migration makes everything more complicated. Actually every family goes through different phases: the couple without children, the birth of a child, childhood, schooling, adolescence... The family must of course readapt itself at these times and when migration coincides with one of these phases it can become an even greater source of stress...

Leaving as a Couple

The distressing events of migration can have an influence on the couple's relationship bringing

a sense of unbalance. They can question the roles that were nevertheless well defined in their home country. The professional situation and the division of jobs for each person can be different in the host country and demand a major effort of adaptation. It can also happen that the new country's culture attributes a different place and role to women who thereby acquire more freedom, while men can feel themselves sold short. Sometimes, when one of the partners had the idea of migrating and the other chose to follow to continue the relationship, reproaches and regrets can come up as they meet difficulties: 'It was you who wanted to come; it's your fault if things aren't working!' or 'You aren't trying to be happy here!' The compromises and adaptations that we live through at the heart of the couple in the host country are numerous and seem to test the strength of our bonds. It helps to take responsibility for our choice, to share our feelings and to respect the other person's feelings. In this way we can live through migration as an experience that binds us and which offers chances for realizing our projects as a couple.

There are couples where only one member is an immigrant. Since the partner is from the host country; he masters the language and knows the habits and customs of the

country. His everyday life is simpler and he can take on more jobs regarding the outside. He has more friends and his family is close by. The migrating partner, in his terms, is isolated from his close family and can find himself without a job; his professional qualifications are not always accepted. This can harm the important balance of the couple and bring about difficulties. One of the partners can have the impression of giving more when the other is dependent on him. It is important that the partner coming from the host country takes an understanding attitude faced with the partner's integration process and helps him with his support. The more the migrant partner's migration succeeds, the more he acquires autonomy and the better will be the sense of balance at the heart of the relationship.

When the two members of the couple come from two different cultures, it can sometimes lead to points of disagreement. The couple members can have divergent views on the roles of men and women, of the sharing of jobs or the education of children. There is also the question of the language chosen to bring up the child and the management of the different expectations of the respective in-laws.

Obviously communication is very important in a couple. When it happens that one or both members of a couple cannot express themselves in their native language, misunderstandings and lack of comprehension come up more easily.

When the partners show themselves to be interested and give value to the other's culture, the distinct cultural origin becomes a source of richness and attraction in the relationship. It is a good sign when one is ready to learn the other's language in the hope of also raising the children in this language so that they can become part of the dual cultural membership.

In a couple, whether the same cultural origins are shared or not, each member has his own beliefs, visions and values. In this way, one can have more liberal opinions while the other has more traditional ideas. In the same way, our migration experience and our adaptation to the new country can be made differently and at a different speed than that of our partner.

In every conjugal relationship, each person must learn to accept and respect the other's difference which is always unique. In the long term, this difference can be a source of misunderstanding and incomprehension. Identifying the disagreements which result from cultural origins can help see certain difficulties in a different light.

Being or becoming a parent as a migrant

Many couples have founding a family as a project. Being a parent is that much more complex as a migrant. Life's conditions are different, resources as well.

As a parent, we have the important job of preparing our child to adapt to life's situations. Through exchange, the sharing of education, we transmit knowledge to our children, know-how, language, interests, values... It is in this way that we the parents, with the school and other institutions, transmit and preserve our culture. Life being different in each culture, educational models also vary according to different places in the world.

How to reconcile two cultures through education?

We all ask ourselves different questions concerning our child. If we come from a different culture, there are more questions to ask: What language are we going to speak with our child? Must I insist that he studies his mother language or push him to concentrate on other languages? Once my child is in school; will I be able to help him when I didn't go to school here? What elements of education that we have received and of our first culture do we want to transmit?

In migrating to another country, we keep knowledge of the education and the developmental objectives from our 1st culture but, we are also entering in contact with new ideas and practices from our host country. We are in this way confronted with the means of thinking and acting of two cultures. We can decide which specifics of education we wish to keep or modify.

Share to become closer

Sharing the history of migration with our children and interesting them in our past, reinforces family identity and ties. It also makes possible the children's integration in the cultural and family world prior to migration. It isn't always easy when the story of migration with its losses and its sorrows are sad memories. Children don't always dare to ask. They feel that there can be suffering concerning the previous life and that it is difficult to speak about it. If the children don't want to make their parents sad, the parents can on their side feel that they are boring their children with their stories or that the children don't want to know.

Speaking of migration, of the home country and family members reinforces the ties and the feeling of belonging in the family. Even more so if the children weren't born there and don't have regular contact with a part of their family. Children are often very curious about their family. Hearing talk of the past of parents and grandparents is for them an important sources of information on their origins and on themselves. This past is part of them also and is a way of becoming imbued with and feeling fully part of the family. For the parent, remembering and sharing information about life before perpetuates these memories. Sometimes, it is like a remedy for homesickness.

Roots are important for building one's own world

Our parents and the society in which we have lived have given us a certain culture that we want to share when it is our turn with our children. Many of us hope that our children will keep a little of our culture, such as the language or musical knowledge, history, the cuisine of the country... In the case of migration we are the only ones able to transmit it to them and it is the means for us to maintain a supplementary tie with our origins.

If we can sometimes have the impression that some elements of our culture aren't valued or useful here, we may not pass them on. Even so, sharing our culture and furthering learning our language of origin is beneficial for our child. This gives him the possibility to identify himself and to participate equally with both one and the other culture. By giving value to both cultural contributions, the child feels himself

more at ease between the two groups to which he belongs. Communication in the first language of his parents lets children be emotionally close to them and to other family members. In the same way, contact with other exiled compatriots is not only a way of finding what is familiar to the parents but also makes the children evolve in an atmosphere close to that of the home country.

In sharing a story, an identity or a common language ties are reinforced. Exposed to different cultures and languages, the child needs clear and solid family and cultural references on which he can form himself. Transmitting the culture that we know well to children offers them more resources and possibilities in their everyday life.

The separated family

There are families that are temporarily separated because one member, often the father, leaves first. Even though the decision has been motivated by the wish to ameliorate the conditions of the entire family and to offer the children a better future - it has a price. This situation is lived with a great deal of sacrifice and pain. The feeling of guilt felt by the parents caused by their separation from their children is hard to live through.

The roles on the inside of the family are also topsy-turvy. Sometimes the parent left alone with the children must assume two roles at once and get along alone without the support of the partner. The child also, often the eldest, has to take more responsibilities.

It happens that the situation does not permit the family to reunite for several years. Reuniting isn't easy when an emotional distance has set in. After all this separation time, the children and the adolescents can have a hard time recognizing the authority of a parent who has been gone. They can take their distance from the parent who has been far away because he has become somewhat unknown. This situation is distressing for the parents who must tighten their ties with their children and reestablish their authority. It can also lead to conflicts because everyone has to find their place again. The family must again get used to being reunited and relearn the art of living together.

And the family that has remained behind? When our parents are far away...

In migration, we leave family members behind. It is never easy to be far from loved ones. Our parents and the people who give us support can be living thousands of kilometers away. The events and important moments of our lives can no longer be shared with them. Above all, we become aware that we lack the precious support of our parents in raising our children. Moreover, the distance is felt more painfully when we are confronted with age and illness in one of our parent or friends who remain in our native country. We can feel guilty that we are not there for them.

Retirement Arrives ... to return or not to return?

For many people who migrated for economic reasons, work occupied a central position in their life in the host country. If investing themselves in this way in work

could be a huge sacrifice, this meant that children were able to enter in good fields of study or to have a job which was more highly valued than that of their parents.

When retirement age arrives and the children having become adults leave the home, the parents can face a major dilemma: stay or return to their native country?

Once the children have left, the feeling of being in a foreign country can re-emerge and solitude reappears. Many lose the people with whom they interacted on a daily basis. Some reject the idea of passing the rest of their life in the country where they have settled and wish to return to the country which remains their true home.

Others even though they have spoken of their desire to return when they retire can no longer imagine it after so many years passed in the host society. Being far from their children and grandchildren is unimaginable. Sometimes after so many years passed in the host country, we have the impression of no longer belonging in the country of birth. Belonging to the family and to the life made here is finally more important than the attachment to the previous life.

After a life consecrated to bettering one's children's chances, the parents can hope for a return of support and solidarity. It is a deception to note that the second generation faced with the exigencies of adult life in the present society may not be able to fulfil these expectations thereby undermining the values of mutual aid as well as the esteem and the authority of their elders. This situation is particularly hard when the retirement home has to be proposed. This is sometimes a second cultural shock for the parents.