

## Families and children in Lääne-Virumaa with a parent working abroad

### Introduction of the regional program

So far, two studies have been conducted as part of this project and a third one is coming up in the future. An online survey was conducted in the schools of Lääne-Virumaa and two focus-group interviews were done with the social and/or child protective services workers of the Lääne-Virumaa local municipality government. The purpose of this project is to include families and children who are directly influenced by this topic and to offer them support and help. Therefore, the third study is about the families who are going to participate in this project. This study will be done in a later phase of the project.

33 teachers, including social pedagogues, from 16 schools took part in the *online* survey that was conducted in January and February in the general education schools of Lääne-Virumaa. Mostly subject teachers and class teachers participated in the survey but there were also headteachers and social pedagogues. Two focus-group interviews were done in Rakvere on February 11 with the social workers and child protective services workers of the county. A total of 19 social and/or child protective services workers participated, including representatives of the Rakvere Social Support Centre. The purpose of the studies was to research and map the importance of this topic in society and in Lääne-Virumaa, and to study how the two main groups of professionals who come in to contact with these kinds of children and/or families as part of their work could notice, help and support the children who have at least one parent working abroad.

### The problem in society, the county and the community

Most of the professionals who participated in the study were convinced that this is a topic in society that needs to be addressed and is becoming more prevalent due to the trends in labour migration in recent years. However, many educational and social workers brought out in their answers that just the fact that one of the parents works abroad does not mean there is a problem that needs intervention or that help should be offered. The social workers pointed out that a family where a parent works abroad is similar to a family with a single parent. The children growing up in such families could even have an advantage if the relationships inside the family as a whole are good and strong. The parent working abroad can ensure better financial security for the family, the child has the possibility to travel more and a parent working abroad is usually a better option than an unemployed parent in Estonia. The teachers gave examples where one parent leaving to work abroad has had a positive influence on the child and the family as a whole. If the parent that went abroad was dominant and/or prone to violence or the parent that stayed in Estonia has been able to create a calm and discipline-oriented environment at home after the other parent left, it has had a positive influence on the child's progress in school work and development.

Both educational and social workers are convinced that the problem is much more serious when both parents leave to work abroad and/or the children that stay in Estonia do not have a sufficiently supportive environment or supervision and care from an adult. The social workers described several cases where information about children in this kind of situation came to the local municipality government from attentive neighbours who noticed that the children were living on their own and partying often. Both the social and

educational workers find that problems with making progress in school and with attendance come up quickly when a child does not have adult supervision and a supportive growing environment and the child whose parent works abroad becomes a topic that needs intervention.

## Noticing and helping

How many children influenced by this topic could there be in Lääne-Virumaa as a whole or in local municipalities, schools and/or kindergartens? It is difficult to say and provide an estimate. The exact number of children and/or families is unknown. On the one hand, the teachers and social pedagogues who participated in the *online* survey have mentioned that they have personally come into contact in their work with 158 children who have at least one parent working abroad. On the other hand, this number only accounts for the cases that have required action from the pedagogues, the schools do not have a clear overview of how many children there are with a parent working abroad. The information about these kinds of children and/or families is even less sufficient in the local municipality governments because information about such a child or a family gets there only if problems have occurred that cannot be managed independently by the family and/or school. The overview of these families may be better in small local municipality governments due to the small size of the community but the information may not be complete even there.

Both the educational and social workers brought out that the first possibility to prevent problems would be to notice this kind of children/families early on but this requires prior knowledge. The results of the teacher survey showed that it is not common for parents to notify the school and/or local municipality government as soon as this kind of situation occurs in the family. The information about these kinds of children generally gets to the school from the children themselves or from the parents only when the child already has problems at school. The teachers point out that knowing early on would enable them to notice possible warning signs sooner and prevent problems. The information about these families and/or children comes to the local municipality government from the school when it has become impossible to solve the problems, for example systematic truancy, within the school, or from the family when they contact the local municipality government due to problems that cannot be managed within the family, or from members of the community who have noticed that the children do not have sufficient adult supervision.

The school, teachers and social pedagogues see their role first of all in noticing and supporting if necessary. The schools find that intervention should be done when there is a necessity for it. According to the teachers and social pedagogues, the families are generally cooperative, but not always. The different positive and negative examples described by the teachers show that the effectiveness of the help and support given by the school often depends on cooperation with the family and on whether or not the family acknowledges the problems that have occurred and is ready to accept help. The teachers described cases where the problems have deepened when the family has ignored them but the cases have had a positive solution when the family has admitted the problems. When the family denies the problems, it could lead to the child dropping out of school or to the parent's decision to ignore the problem and change schools. The school can support the child and the family in the school environment, but if there are problems outside school and/or they are not related only to the educational system, it is generally recommended for the family to contact the local municipality government.

The local municipality government mostly has to attend to children who have been left without sufficient adult supervision. The local municipality government can convince the parents to raise and supervise their children better within the family, or find alternative solutions for the children to ensure them a safe growing environment and supervision, for example arrange housing for the children in the school housing facilities during the week. Another set of problems is related to communication with the parent that works abroad. Families where the relationships have not been strong enough until then tend to fall apart when one of the parents goes to work abroad. In this case the families that have stayed in Estonia need help locating the parent abroad or internationally solving matters concerning communication with the children or assigning custody. This includes communication with the officials of a foreign country, including understanding and translation of legal documents which is often too difficult for the family in Estonia. Access to services is also important in maintaining positive family connections as much as possible in the changed situation. Taking into account the small size of the county and Estonia, this access could be limited or a family counsellor, support worker, psychiatrist etc. could not be accessible soon enough. The social workers emphasized that helping the families and the effectiveness of this help depends first and foremost on the family's willingness to cooperate, admit problems and accept the help that is being offered.

Both the schools and social workers emphasize that every child, family and case is different, which makes it difficult to develop a guide for behaviour with families where at least one of the parents has left to work abroad. Not all families need an intervention and it could even have a positive influence when a member of the family goes to work abroad. However, the social workers find that their knowledge of the social care system in other countries, including Finland, is not sufficient to help and counsel both the families going abroad and the families that have stayed in Estonia in ensuring and protecting their rights. The social workers see a need for training about the social care system of other countries, including Finland, and they would be interested in the experiences of other countries on work with families who have gone to work abroad and on supporting the families that have arrived from abroad to live and/or work in these countries. The social workers also found that covisions (sharing experience between professionals about positive and negative cases and about both traditional and alternative solutions) have an important role inside Estonia and the county.