



Latviešu valodas
aģentūra

The guide for parents: returning to Latvia and sending children to a Latvian school

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Latvian Language Agency

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The guide contains recommendations and experiences to encourage families to learn more about the Latvian education system after moving from their previous country of residence, and to help students integrate into a new learning and living environment.

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FOREWORD

The authors of the guide rightly point out that “in some families the decision to move to Latvia may have been made slowly and gradually, allowing time to dream and prepare for what was to come. For others, the decision had to be taken suddenly, perhaps even as a result of unpleasant life events, such as the threat of family breakup or when the family had already broken up, or when the only source of income had disappeared. For some it will be a return to their home country, for others, a move to a new country because they have never lived in Latvia before (moving with a Latvian spouse who is a Latvian or fulfilling an exiled family’s dream of living in Latvia).”

Students with education experience abroad often feel uneasy, uncomfortable and even threatened when they enter a new learning environment, class or school. These feelings are mostly experienced by those who have come to Latvia from a different country, who are used to different traditions, climate, food, relationships and styles of dressing. Teachers who must try to understand return migrants and work with students who have different experiences, knowledge and skills, can feel equally uncomfortable.

Today’s school is a place where different cultures are increasingly encountered, so education institutions need to create an environment where positive attitudes prevail, where there is a desire to be together, to cooperate, to communicate with each other and to feel safe.

In “The guide for parents: returning to Latvia and sending children to a Latvian school” you will find:

- suggestions on how to involve children when planning a move to Latvia,
- suggestions on how to find and choose a school for the child and start communicating with the class teacher,
- reflections on the Latvian education system and teaching and learning process in schools,
- reflections on the differences observed in the education systems of different countries, etc.

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I.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PARENTS

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1. THE MOVE: BEFORE AND AFTER

In some families, the decision to move to Latvia may have been made slowly and gradually, allowing them to dream about it and prepare for what was to come. For others, the decision had to be made suddenly, perhaps even as a result of unpleasant life events, such as the threat or breakup of a family, or the loss of their only source of income. For some, it will be a return to their native country, for others – moving to a new country because they have never lived in Latvia before (moving with a Latvian spouse or fulfilling an exiled family's dream to live in Latvia). The anticipated life in Latvia seems full of hope (often like a dream). As the move approaches, both expectations and worries grow about what everyday life in Latvia will actually be like and whether the plans will work out, especially if the return is accompanied by children or teenagers.

Most children like Latvia; they associate it with holidays, spending time with their parents, grandparents and cousins. So it may seem that a child will be fine in Latvia even after moving, but such a decision is a huge life event that inevitably causes deep uncertainty and anxiety in both the child and the parents. **The move is more likely to create a mix of emotions** – uncertainty, sadness about what has to be left behind, excitement and joy. Some plan to spend only a certain amount of time in Latvia which may be comforting if things get difficult, while others hope to stay life. There will be situations when a child does not want to move to Latvia, or when parents themselves cannot make the decision with complete certainty. No one is safe from doubts whether they have made the right decision.

One way to deal with uncertainty is to prepare in advance. Finding a place to live and work, choosing a school or a kindergarten, making an appointment with the family doctor, arranging private Latvian language lessons for the child – these and similar practical things help to ease the worry. All this is accompanied by an emotional experience that should not be ignored and is worth considering. You also need to be prepared for the psychological shock caused by the change of environment. However, no matter how well you prepare, you will lose your emotional equilibrium and **need time to settle into your new home**.

How to involve children in planning the move

Parents often feel that if they do things without their child knowing, without telling them, and organising everything seamlessly, they can save them from unnecessary worries. Although the child does not need to know every detail and problem, this can take away the opportunity to prepare for the big event emotionally.

The child or teenager can be involved in this process in different ways. You can discuss where the new home will be, what the city is called, how far grandmother, cousins or family friends live. They can look at a map, photographs of the new city or other visual material that helps them to imagine their living environment. You can find stopping points that might be of interest to your child or teenager in their new home – where the park, playground, swimming pool, museum, walking trails, clubs, cinema or library will be. School-age children can be encouraged to draw their new room or to imagine how they will decorate it, where they will put things, where they will play computer games. Where possible, the child can be involved in decision-making, e.g. what will need to be bought, how to best furnish the house, etc. The child and teenager should also be allowed to take part in the process of packing things, especially their personal

belongings. Saying goodbye to the old home and friends is an important stage in the process of change. Some children and teenagers make gifts for each of their closest friends or make memory books where friends paste their photo, write a short note about themselves and add a wish.

Parents are usually the ones who make the decision on moving so the child or teenager may have a feeling that they are deprived of everything familiar, they lose control of their environment, home, room, kindergarten or school, friends, interest groups. **Participation in the moving process helps them recover the feeling of control and to reduce anxiety.**

After the move: comparison as an integral part of the adjustment process

When it comes to settling in, it is inevitable to compare your new home with your old one. It can start already in the airport just after landing. Every ending requires that we come to terms with what we are losing in order to have a new start. Starting something new requires letting go of much of our daily routine, our vision of life. Comparing Latvia to the previous place of residence will be part of this process of coming to terms, and will have to be done by adults and children alike. It is important to listen to each other and share feelings and observations. However, this should be done in moderation, gradually trying to see and comment also on the positive things in Latvia. Overly negative comparisons can unintentionally influence the child, preventing them from focusing on the positive in their new environment.

It is very important to listen to the child if they are willing to share their experiences at school. If it is necessary to express indignation about an incident or situation, parents certainly should not hide their feelings from the child, but they must remember that the child is very attentive to what parents say. This is where cooperation with tutors and teachers can help, as a sign of parental loyalty and intentions. If parents become aware of an unacceptable situation at school, it is important to deal with the problem directly – by approaching the school and dealing with things at adult level.

The feeling of guilt

In situations when it is not easy for a child to adapt to a new environment and the child is at an age when he/she starts to express indignation at it not having been his/her choice to move and starts to blame the parents for everything they have to go through, it is inevitable that parents feel guilty. Parents think they have wronged their child and now he/she has to suffer. This is a very sensitive topic. If it is not possible to resolve this within the family, it is advisable to seek help from a psychologist. It is important to let a child speak about his/her problem and try to solve it (either by going to the class teacher, the school psychologist, or a psychologist outside school, etc.), but blaming oneself is not good for either the parents or the child.

Every family makes the decision to move for a specific reason – the one why the family is now in Latvia. **Explaining this to the child can at least help them understand why the family is in Latvia** (if they don't already know), and any problems that arise need to be resolved by negotiation between the parties involved.

Being busy

Many parents (even those who have always lived in Latvia) are very busy. They come home late from work(s), have little time to spend with their children to talk things through. Parents feel tired, are often sullen and have no desire to deal with difficult issues at the end of the day. Moving to a new home causes additional stress. People start a new life, they have to deal with everyday problems, etc. All this can be very

worrying, as the issues to be dealt with are initially many and varied. As a result, the stress level in the family is high and this can affect the children who are expected to just get on with things on their own – to go to school, to do well, as if there's nothing there...

Meanwhile, the child, with his/her little life experience, has to cope with everyday worries – finding their place in the classroom, keeping up with others, understanding how demanding each teacher is, how to dress and behave in order to fit in. The child misses his/her former friends, familiar routine; perhaps the life in Latvia noticeably differs from the life in the country he/she has come from – perhaps abroad the family lived in a private house somewhere in the suburbs or in the countryside where the child had a lot of fresh air. Now life is in the city centre, in an apartment, with no opportunity to run around, to be in the nature, as usual. Maybe there are other changes that the child can't even articulate – **he/she doesn't really know what the problem is, but something is bothering and making him/her unhappy.**

It is important for parents to listen to their children despite their busy schedules. The word 'listen' means undivided attention when the child is talking about his/her problem. The child needs to feel that the parent wants to hear him/her, get involved and even try to solve the problem or at least confirm that it can be solved. Listening in passing while being busy with other things does not instil confidence in the child that what they are saying is really being heard.

Sometimes the child may not want the parent to be involved. He/she does not want to be given attention in the hope that everything will work itself out. And maybe it will, in time.

Suggesting that the child talk to a psychologist may often lead to the response – it's okay, I'll manage on my own. The child may perceive this suggestion as intimidating, which may not be helpful: although the parents think it is desirable and a way of dealing with the situation. However, the child may perceive it as an unnecessary, undesirable step to go to a stranger and talk about his/her life.

Moving with a pre-school child

Preschool children usually settle into their new lives more easily. At this age, children may show behavioural changes after the move: anxiety, regression or complaints about health problems. The child may want to be close to his/her parents and seek comfort from them, asking many questions when getting up at night. This should be seen as an inevitable part of growth and development, not so pleasant but cannot be done without. **A lack of language skills, or simply poor language skills, is a major shocking experience for a child.** A mother once described her child's experience in a kindergarten: "My son could not say anything, he just listened. He said he felt like he had no mouth. When in situations with other children, he had no choice but physical aggression. A kindergarten teacher suggested the child should start speaking even his native language, but just start speaking."

A visit to the new kindergarten can be a rewarding and comforting experience. Meeting with the teacher and seeing which group the child will attend, the place where meals are served and what the playground looks like, makes both parents and children feel safer. Such a seemingly symbolic visit has much more meaning than we sometimes think.

Choosing a school and communication with the class teacher

The skills of Latvian teachers working with children from return migrant families are very different. Before submitting an application, it is advisable to make a phone call and, if possible, have a meeting to find out what the school is able to offer and how much attention its staff is ready to give the student and to adjust to his/her needs. In smaller schools it is usually easier to get extra help and children adapt better, however, there are cases when children integrate smoothly in larger schools, too.

It is important to go to a class or subject teacher and ask for an urgent visit if there is a problem. It may also be that not all teachers are aware that a new student has moved from another country and may be attending school in Latvia for the first time. The exchange of information in the school may not be as comprehensive as hoped. Teachers are different and each has their own perspective on the situation. It is important that parents show willingness to cooperate and participate in problem-solving without reproach. Going to the teacher with a positive, cooperative attitude can avoid the teacher's negative reaction (*it was your own choice to leave and return, – then adapt as we all do it here!*). It might help the teacher if you make it clear what kind of support you want. Then you could match wishes and possibilities to find a mutually satisfactory solution.

Experience shows that if problems in a school are big and difficult to solve, changing school and carefully choosing a new one, better prepared to work with a child of return migrants, can help.

Understanding the changes in the life of the child and parents

Moving to another country with a different education system is an enormous turning-point in life. Change is big and it can be hard to get used to. Schools in Latvia are largely focused on accumulating knowledge, with little or no attention paid to the development of personal and socio-emotional skills, in difference from the students' previous school experience. As the process of integration takes place, the child's personality interacting with others, it should be borne in mind that people in Latvia are more reserved and introverted, which can make the child's integration more difficult.

Other changes also need to be taken into account: maybe the child played sport abroad, but not at the same level as in Latvia. Maybe the child lived in a private house with a garden but now lives in an apartment in the city centre. Perhaps abroad the child lived in the family with both parents but after their divorce he/she stays with one of the parents. Some now have to live with grandparents who, wishing the best, get involved in the family life making things more complicated. Perhaps the child had a lot of friends, nice classmates but here there are no friends and the classmates are very closed, not really letting the child into their company. Children have lost everything familiar they had – home, friends, the probably faraway family. Everything from the environment and the culture up to the food and the language is different. All this is likely to make the child feel anxious, angry or sullen.

Even for children, who are very sociable and until now have easily adapted to changes, a move can cause significant problems and affect their personality. A mother told the experience of her primary school-age daughter: "At first, the teacher characterised my daughter as a turtle who would hide its head as if saying: For God's sake, just do not speak to me! The teacher paid more attention to her and she managed to find a friend without language skills, so the situation improved." It may seem to parents that "their child has changed and is lost". They suffer and feel guilty and relate it to their decision to move to Latvia. However, for the most part, the effect of the changes will heal. Children are usually able to adapt well to the new situation.

Parents should try to put themselves in their child's shoes and understand how much the changes have affected the child. **They can learn more about their child's feelings by talking to him/her** – going to a café (outside the child's everyday environment) and discussing things in a relaxed, informal atmosphere. After the move, it is useful to have family meetings and to discuss from time to time how everyone is feeling, what insights and reflections they have, things that make them happy and what could have been different. It may be that instead of the excitement they expected, everyone suddenly recollects that getting used to the new life and mourning the lost one has made them nervous and angry. If this state of mind is prolonged, it can get in the way of enjoying the moments that the new turn in life offers.

Afterschool interest groups and clubs

After moving, **interest groups and hobbies can play an important role in the process of integration.** Although it may seem that the child is already very busy with a lot of homework and extra lessons, hobbies are usually not related to learning and are less related to the need of language skills. This can make an excellent counterbalance to difficulties at school, a great opportunity to showcase talents, build self-confidence, get a dose of positivity and reassurance that the child “can still do something well”. It can also be an additional opportunity to make friends. Being able to choose the activities can give the child a sense of control, as everything else has seemed out of the child’s reach recently.

If more serious problems occur

Sometimes, it may happen that integration is too difficult and more serious psychological disorders can develop. These can take many forms – sleep disturbances, depression, eating disorders, anxiety or panic attacks. If you suddenly find yourself in such a situation, it is advisable to see your family doctor, clinical psychologist, psychotherapist or psychiatrist. Children should seek help from a school psychologist who can be requested for a child of a return migrant by the school, in case this kind of service is not yet available locally. Outside school, it is preferable to seek advice from a child clinical psychologist or psychotherapist. In Latvia, most psychologists and psychotherapists are available privately, so will not be accessible to all. But a family doctor can help with a referral to state-funded experts.

To understand how different the situations may be, here are some typical examples and suggestions of professor and psychologist Baiba Martinsone for finding the right way out

Situation 1. My pre-schooler is finding it difficult to adapt to kindergarten. He doesn’t participate in the group work and hides in the corner. There have been behavioural problems at home and in kindergarten since the move. His Latvian language skills are insufficient. He refuses to go to the kindergarten as well as to take the afternoon nap. What shall I do?

It might help to communicate with the teacher to work out some ritual together, for example, to have a special way to say goodbye to parents in kindergarten. Mum or dad would help the child take off outdoor clothes and kiss him/her goodbye, the teacher would approach the child and immediately invite him/her to come to the window in the group room, and mum or dad would go outside and wave goodbye to the child from the courtyard. The child may keep a favourite toy or ‘keepsake’ that helps him/her think about parents during the day.

Behavioural difficulties are often associated with impaired language skills.

It is important for adults to verbalize the child’s emotions and intentions and to offer choices, such as being in bed during afternoon rest but not sleeping (they can look at pictures in a book or play quietly with toys).

It is advisable for the teacher to show interest in the experiences of the child, e.g. by asking about his/her most delicious foods, life in the previous kindergarten, etc.

Situation 2. My first-grader is teased by other students because his behaviour is different. He speaks Latvian with a slight accent because he was born and lived in a different country but he can speak the language. This worries me a lot. My child suffers from panic attacks and teasing hurts him very much. The school does not address this problem adequately.

It is important to teach the child to take a proactive approach to dealing with situations. Parents often recommend to react to teasing in one of two ways – to ignore or to fight back. Most often, neither of these

two approaches works. From early days children can be taught to react verbally when they are insulted. For example, they can ask questions (*Why are you calling me names? Why are you saying this to me?*), make short retorts (*So what?*), comment (*A pity you're not leaving me alone*), turn it into a joke (*It seems I'm the only one you are thinking about*).

Situation 3. A family has moved to Latvia, the father is a foreigner. The children speak Latvian but not fluently. In kindergarten, the children were offered additional support in the first year but when they started to go to school this support was no longer offered. Shouldn't the pre-school automatically inform the school about the child's language skills and the fact of return migration?

Should the need for such support not have been noted when assessing the knowledge and skills of these children at the beginning of the school year?

This information usually is not passed on from the kindergarten to the school without the parents' consent. Parents' initiative in telling the school about the support their child needs is very important. Psychologists, speech therapists and special needs teachers can also make such recommendations.

Situation 4. I moved with my child (of primary school age) as a single mother. We are staying with my parents. The child's father lives abroad, we are divorced. The child misses his father. Nevertheless, the overall living environment is much healthier for the child here.

Both in this and the following situation it is essential to maintain contact with the father. The father's initiative is decisive here. In a divorce situation, if the child wants to have contact with the father, the mother should encourage this. It is good if the child can communicate freely with each parent without worrying about hurting, for example, the mother by telling how good the time with the father was.

If the father does not live in the family, it is worth considering that the father should not only play the role of entertainer and recreational companion, but also teaches something to his child, show affection and also make certain demands to the child.

Situation 5. A family has moved to Latvia, or, to be more precise, the mother moved with her primary school age children, the father stayed abroad to work. He meets his children, visits them. Children look forward to their father's visits and are always sad when he must leave. How can the grief be alleviated?

In addition to what has already been written in the previous example, the father can foster an emotional bond with the child, for example, by writing a letter or a message. They can agree on some age-appropriate duty to be carried out in the father's absence. Then discuss it regularly and express satisfaction, making the child feel valued and loved.

Situation 6. The child has lived in the country where there is plenty of sunshine and it is warm – even in winter. In the cold Latvian winter, by rising early in the morning and coming home in the dark in the evening, the child sees little daylight, little sun, life literally passes in darkness. In the situation when it is difficult to get up in the morning anyway, this makes it even more depressive.

It is good to develop new traditions and activities when experiencing change. Otherwise, it is difficult for the child to make himself or herself at home in the new place of residence and he/she idealizes the previous place as 'the land of happiness' where everything was fine. Parents can think how to maintain emotional warmth in the family and help the child to accept reality (darkness and cold) while maintaining the quality of life (not letting external circumstances completely affect how the child feels).

Situation 7. My child is slow at completing tasks and very shy. He does not want to disturb the teacher but I see that in some subjects he needs help. He knows Latvian, but it seems that he translates what the teacher says in his head in order to understand what needs to be done, and only then he starts to do the math.

Giving extra time is one of the support measures provided by the school, yet in order to have this support it is necessary to get a written recommendation from a psychologist or other expert. The same type of support is provided for completing most important national level tests. On a daily basis, it is not always possible to offer extra time to complete the task but then the teacher may give fewer tasks so that the child can fit in the time.

Situation 8. My secondary school-age child has been self-absorbed since the move, he doesn't share about his feelings but I can see that something is wrong. When we lived abroad he was not like this. At one point he even had an eating disorder, but it went away. He speaks Latvian, the language is not a problem. He still has not developed friendships with his classmates.

Situation 9. We moved with my husband and child from abroad. My son is still in primary school and soon will attend basic school. He speaks good Latvian. He had a big and close group of friends abroad. Here at school things are going wrong: he is being picked on. My son can't really fit in here. How can I help him?

In both situations parents should focus on maintaining two-way communication with their child. This means that the parents' responses to what the child is saying encourage the conversation to continue. For example, the child tells that he/she does not like the new class. If the parent denies the problem during the conversation (*Hopefully everything will turn out well and you will find friends*), immediately gives advice (*You should be more active yourself*) or criticises (*What have you done yourself to make things better?*), this does not encourage communication and the child may shut down and feel that it is not worth talking about. In response to the child's retort mentioned before, parents can ask what exactly happened to make the child feel that way. This encourages the child to articulate his/her views and emotions and to feel listened to and supported by parents.

Situation 10. The child blames parents of this not being his choice to move to Latvia and that because of parents he has no friends at school. The parents feel guilty that the child is unhappy. If they hadn't come to Latvia it wouldn't be so hard for the child.

The situation suggests that if they had stayed in the previous country of residence, everything would have been fine. We do not know that. Perhaps the move provoked and brought to the fore some aspect of relationship building and social skills that the child already had but that could not be observed in his/her usual environment (e.g., the child had a small circle of close friends but was generally more withdrawn, self-sufficient). It should be respected that separation from friends is a loss that brings sorrow.

Situation 11. The children were born in Latvia. The family went abroad and decided to return several years later. The parents have not allowed the young man to take part in the choice of whether to return or not. The youngster is aggressive towards everything: parents, the school as an establishment, he has no friends, etc.

At young age, self-determination and one's own psychological space are important. Until the time when they will be able to make decisions themselves, situations in which children feel psychological control over events should be encouraged. Parents can find it difficult to overcome their big child's anger, however, it is possible to look especially for small moments of positive relationships. These precedents create a basis for maintaining positive relationship with parents.

2. DEAR PARENTS!

You are great! You have made perhaps the most important decision in your life – to return and live in Latvia! After sleepless nights filled with reflection and conversations, having analysed the pros and cons, after achieving the goals in a foreign country known only to yourselves, after ups and downs, after fulfilling a quiet dream nurtured in your heart for decades, after... Everyone has their own and different 'after'.

You are going to live in Latvia with your children. Some of them still have the playful mood of a pre-schooler, the others – the teenager's views of life, and still others – the seriousness and maturity of youth. Each of them is an independent personality, a person with his/her own needs, attitudes and emotions. In this period of return and the move, respect your child's personality as much as you love and cherish him/her!

We do not often hear that a return migrant family's decision to return to Latvia has been made together with their children. In most cases, those decisions are being made by parents alone, although they mostly concern their children's future. The child accepts it as an inevitable fact and, according to his/her understanding, knowledge or life experience, begins to prepare for the new event – with excitement, fear of the unknown, sadness about being separated from friends. Often, negative emotions arise, there is no desire to go to Latvia, which later causes difficulties to integrate into the Latvian school and is the cause of learning problems, as well as affects getting acquainted with new friends. This could be avoided **if the seed of the desire to return were planted in due time, if everything was done together with the child** (taking into account the peculiarities of the age), – then the child would also feel involved in making this important decision.

Parents want to pass on their best life experiences to the child, including their school and learning experiences (acquired in cooperation with teachers, traditions, etc.). These, though, are your experiences as parents, acquired at a different time, when there were other requirements and the perception of events differed. The child, however, lives and learns in the modern age when opportunities are available and offered in a completely different way, and his personality is different.. The parents' shoes will not fit him/her. Remember this when choosing a school for your child, if there is a choice.

A school with a prestigious name and excellent results in subject olympiads, excellent study results... Undoubtedly, parents want to see the name of their child on the roll of such a school. But will a student with a still imperfect command of the Latvian language be able to successfully master complex subjects? Will the adaptation at the initial stage be so easy that he/she will be able to participate in the Olympiads and will the school have enough experience with return migrant students to explain simple, even familiar issues individually or during lessons – but in their mother tongue? **The prestigious and the fashionable will not always be the most appropriate.** Find out which schools already have students from return migrant families, what is the experience of the school and whether they understand your situation. The child will fit in better and learn more in a smaller class where the teacher can work with students more individually. Perhaps this will prove to be the first successful step towards a further start at a prestigious school.

Contact the potential school in Latvia before you return. It's easy – e-mail at least a year in advance, use the telephone. Let them know your intentions, specific needs, tell about your child's knowledge and skills. Perhaps, he/she will be able to adjust to the school's life and requirements remotely. **Open the school**

door while you are still far away. Your child's school will be your school, too. The school will be only glad to meet you because they plan their work, resources and opportunities, too, and learn from new or less familiar things.

Don't leave learning and fitting in to the school team solely to the school and the child – get involved yourself. Ask questions to the teachers, let them know how your child feels in the evenings after school, what makes him/her anxious or happy, what causes anxiety or pleasure, what the experience was at school abroad, participate with your child in class or school life; share experiences of life and events outside Latvia. Learn Latvian with your child, do the most difficult tasks together. Be partners in a three-way cooperation. You are allowed to do that and it is even advisable.

Fitting in with peers will help your child adapt to school. If abroad the child learned in grade five, in Latvian school it will be grade three. It is not belittling of your child, nor assessment of his/her knowledge. On the contrary, the child is offered the level appropriate to his/her age. Do not take this to the heart and explain it to your child as well. Will you like the older classmates discuss the impressions of their first parties, current events in teenage life, when your child is still interested in childhood topics?

A family once spoke about the range of emotions their child experienced in Latvia – from the thrilling joy of return to deep pessimism. The family used to visit their relatives in Latvia once a year – in midsummer when there are no everyday duties and responsibilities, when they could enjoy the summer freedom, when you are at home, as it were, but still outside the ordinary. It seemed to the child that life in Latvia would always be like this, so at first he felt very happy. But routine has a tough crust: failures, responsibilities, hard work, difficulties, rainy autumn evenings and sleet in winter. The child became ever less excited about the life in Latvia. He did not get what he had experienced before and what he was looking forward to get during his life in Latvia. His life experience was not big enough to analyse and understand everything in advance. Conversations, watching videos, photos, descriptions, communicating with family members about what would have to be done and what to prepare for, that any difficulties can be overcome if they are together and support one another, would have helped to prepare for the new life. It seems self-evident to parents, but not to the child.

Don't compare! Don't compare your child's learning achievements in Latvia with those in the previous country of residence already in the child's first year. Don't compare your child's level of knowledge and skills with those of other classmates. This is a new situation for your child, new demands and language difficulties. Don't compare your own achievements at the same age with those of your child. They will be different. Don't compare the schools in Latvia with schools in your previous country of residence. Each country has its own traditions, experiences, aims and objectives, economic situation. Undeniably, it is useful to learn from each other, to strive for the best, and the people in Latvia do that, but still – don't compare. People often say that comparison is the cause of problems and misunderstandings. Better ask questions, find out, tell about your experience, explain. The most important thing is to talk, including parents with teachers.

Moving to Latvia is usually an emotional and organisationally stressful event for parents. Do you have enough strength and skills not to unconsciously pass on your worries, uncertainties and problems to children, not to involve them? Keep calm to help the smallest, the youngest in the family, whose life experience is not so extensive; who will need the support, peace and love of his family during the adaptation period. Parental stress and anxiety can stick like thistles to the child's soul. Spare it!

Those family members who are discovering Latvia for the first time, have heard about it in stories or seen beautiful photos but have only visited a few times in their lives, often call it their new home, too. The people who love and respect the traditions, history, virtues, weather and nature of their native country. Like your child, they too wish and need to learn Latvian, to get to know the local community, to feel

Be a partner!

**Don't
compare!**

Stay calm!

accepted in their new home. Speak Latvian in the family, don't adapt when you notice the first language difficulties. Adaptation is the easiest way but their joy at the first words, sentences, stories spoken in Latvian will be as great as the child's joy at the first word spoken. Let dad or mom learn together with the child, helping each other. Don't hesitate to ask the school for advice. School has always been the palace of light, a place to gain knowledge and support.

Let us help the child too – it will be difficult for him/her if the family continues to speak their usual language of communication instead of Latvian and the child's language of instruction at school will be Latvian. The child can be a mentor to his/her dad or mom. Teaching others is the best way to learn.

In families where the traditions and experiences of different peoples are combined, it is important to respect and understand the traditions, history, experiences, differences of everyday life and society of both Latvians and each other. By getting to know and understand what is different, we get to know ourselves. Tell your family about Latvia before you move, to prevent situations when you have to leave the new home again because some members of your family feel uncomfortable both emotionally and physically. It is hard and difficult, and they feel as if they have lost themselves. It is quite understandable that such situations encourage people to go back. Not always will the child put into words how he/she feels at such moments; the burden will remain in his/her emotional experience and will probably hurt, cause confusion and uncertainty affecting his/her life in future.

Children are the happiness of the family, children are the future of Latvia. They are the ones who shape the tomorrow of Latvia with their childhood experience, their knowledge, skills and the richness of their hearts.

We hope that this guide will give you an idea of how to support your children for a successful life in Latvia.

3. (RE) INTEGRATION OF CHILDREN IN THE LATVIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

Access to education, as confirmed by the studies on mobility, return migration and education [Kolčanovs, Tūna, Zankovska-Odina 2014; Ose 2015; Report 2014], and the experience of the author of these recommendations in advising and supporting children and parents who have returned or are planning to return to Latvia, **is one of the key issues that greatly influences a family's decision to come, live and study in Latvia.**

Therefore, this article will provide guidance to help parents address the issues related to their children's access to education (explaining the requirements of laws and regulations, the competencies and work specifics of education and administration authorities, as well as possible actions in case of a situation of choice). As the decision on the type of education and the school is usually taken over a long period of time, the recommendations are grouped into two parts: **what to do when you are still in your previous country of residence** and need to decide on education possibilities in Latvia and/or in the Latvian language, and **what to do when you arrive in Latvia** and start cooperating with various institutions.

1. As experience shows, when living abroad, families often start making inquiries about education programmes on offer, the specifics of different schools in Latvia, opportunities to improve their children's Latvian language skills, etc.¹ In this case, there are several options for action, possible to be done at the same time.
 - If possible, it is advisable to attend classes at the nearest weekend school of Latvian diaspora. The Republic of Latvia supports the activities of diaspora schools [Support for education 2020], has developed Guidelines of Diaspora Education which aim "to promote the preservation of Latvian identity and the Latvian language in the diaspora by providing and promoting Latvian education" [Guidelines 2019, 1]. In order to consolidate the Latvian language skills, the materials of Latvian Language Agency can also be used, especially those on the website Teach and learn the Latvian language.
 - You can choose distance learning programme while continuing education in the country of residence. Some families have used this opportunity. Distance learning, in accordance with the provisions of the Education Law, is "a form of education in which a learner independently and individually studies a school's curriculum using specially structured study materials offered by the school through various technical and electronic means of communication" [Education Law]. Distance learning programmes (starting with grade one) are offered by several municipal and private schools in the Republic of Latvia. Full information on such education opportunities can be found on the website of the State Education Information System [SEIS] under Institutions section by searching for distance learning programmes.

¹ For information on Latvian education system see *Izglītība Latvijā (=Education in Latvia)* [online]. Academic Information Centre, 2018 [accessed 02.02.2021]. Available at: <http://www.aic.lv/portal/izglitiba-latvija>

- Contacting the chosen education institution will help you find out the specifics of its activities.² Almost every education institution also has its website, where a description of the school's activities can be found in the annual self-assessment report. These reports summarize information on the school's achievements, its curriculum, specifics of teaching and learning, availability of teachers and support staff (e.g., speech therapist, psychologist, social teacher), accreditation of education programmes (accreditation grants a school the right to issue education documents recognized by the state of Latvia). However, it is advisable to contact the chosen school electronically or by phone to find out exactly what is on offer, the various (support) possibilities, to inform about your child, his/her previous education and the Latvian language skills, to learn about the school's experience in working with return migrant students, etc., accordingly allowing teachers to prepare for the admission of the child in due time. Positive communication with the school sometimes results in short-term study visits to enable the child to get used to a Latvian school, get to know the teachers, receive advice and study materials before arriving in Latvia.

If it is difficult to choose a particular school, it is advisable to contact the local education board or an education expert.³ This communication will also help to find out the possibilities of support and the offer for children of return migrants in the municipality.

Information on higher education possibilities is available not only on the websites of Latvian higher education institutions and colleges, but also on the Study in Latvia portal (<http://www.studyinlatvia.lv/>), which is designed to attract students from abroad.

Information and advice on Latvian education institutions is also available from the Ministry of Education and Science (www.izm.gov.lv) and the State Education Quality Service (www.ikvd.gov.lv).

Advice on access to education, support and assistance is also available from the regional coordinators dealing with return migration issues (<https://www.paps.lv/>).

2. Early identification of education opportunities can facilitate a child's (re)integration into education after returning to Latvia. It should be noted that in Latvia everyone is guaranteed the right to qualitative and inclusive education – it is compulsory to prepare children from the age of five for basic education, and to follow a basic education programme until the age of 18. Pre-school education programmes are implemented by pre-school and other education institutions (for example, primary schools, basic schools) which have licenced the corresponding programme, as well as by the family who can “receive methodological assistance at an education institution implementing a licenced pre-school education programme or a pre-school education advisory centre” [Education Law; General Education Law].

Children start basic education in the calendar year in which they turn seven. Depending on their state of health and psychological readiness, primary school may start one year earlier if the parents wish so, or one year later, based on the opinion of the family doctor.

A child is enrolled in a private school in accordance with an agreement between the child's parents and the school, and in

When returning to Latvia it is important not to lose any time and start school for your child immediately, allowing him/her to receive the support they are entitled to. The situations when, for example, a family returns to Latvia in March and decides that their 12-year-old will continue education only from the new academic year, are not allowed.

Every child of compulsory school age should be in education!

² In the Republic of Latvia, in accordance with the provisions of section 57 of the Education Law, parents have the right to choose the education institution for their child.

³ Visit the website of a definite municipality to find information about the municipal education board or education experts.

a public municipal school in accordance with the enrolment procedure approved by the municipality (especially in pre-school education institutions).

Admission to a general education school is based on an application from a parent, legal representative or a student who has reached the age of majority. If the school refuses admission, the director is obliged to inform the applicant in writing of the refusal and the reasons for it, as well as to inform the municipality of the situation. The municipality shall inform the parents about vacancies in other schools situated in the municipality's administrative territory. [Cabinet Regulations No. 11]

When enrolling a student who has arrived from abroad in a general education school in Latvia and deciding on the necessary support measures, it is important to assess the student's previous education, including the learning experience in Latvia. The admission process at school is presented in the table below.

Admission of a student who has arrived from abroad at a general education institution in Latvia

[Cabinet Regulations No. 11, paragraph 24]

Education institution
1. gets acquainted with the decision regarding the recognition of education documents for the continuation of the acquisition of education, a document certifying the previously acquired education or a document certifying the partial acquisition of education, and the content of learning and the performance of learning of the student;
2. by the order of the head of the institution, a student's performance evaluation commission, consisting of three educators, is established, which, by inviting the student and the parent or the responsible official – the representative of the minor, determine the student's proficiency of languages and the level of the acquired content of learning in order to recognise student's needs of learning and to plan the further process of learning;
3. by the order of the head of the institution, the student is admitted to the education programme in the grade appropriate to his or her age;
4. by the order of the head of the institution, determine the support measures to be implemented during one till two academic years for the acquisition of the study subject "Latvian language" or "Literature", or "Latvian language and literature", and the improvement of the state language proficiency in other study subjects, based on the determined level of student's Latvian language proficiency and the level of the acquired content of learning.

As shown in the table below, a student who has arrived in Latvia, is enrolled in the grade appropriate to his/her age while support measures are put in place. Most often, in addition to the subjects mentioned in the Regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers, assistance is also provided in Maths, while Latvian language skills are strengthened through optional classes and interest-related education (i.e. interest-groups and clubs). There are municipalities where additional support measures for students who have arrived from abroad are offered not only by the school where the student is enrolled but also by children and youth centres and other education institutions, etc. (check your municipality for these opportunities). Quite often, other experts, such as speech therapists, psychologists and social teachers, are involved in providing support.

If one has obtained education documents proving completion of a certain level of education – basic, secondary or higher education – while studying abroad, one must apply to the Academic Information

Centre (www.aic.lv) to have them recognised. On the basis of a statement of this Centre, the Ministry of Education and Science makes a decision on the recognition of the education document – for the continuation of education in basic or secondary education level. A higher education institution makes a decision regarding the continuation of tertiary level studies. [Education Law, section 11.1] [Education Law, Article 11.1]

If the student has completed basic education abroad (i.e. equivalent to nine grades of education in Latvia) and wishes to complete secondary education in Latvia in accordance with the provisions of the secondary education standard (Cabinet Regulations No. 416), – upon starting secondary education he/she has the right to request that the knowledge, comprehension, skills or experience acquired outside the Latvian school curriculum are referenced to the expected results of the particular education level, and, accordingly, be exempted from part or all of the relevant courses. 416].

Another education option available for everyone is to take advantage of international schools. According to one of the most recent Latvian laws, the International Schools Law, it is “an education institution established in the Republic of Latvia and founded by a legal or natural person, which, in the Republic of Latvia, implements an education programme recognized by another Member State of the European Union or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the Board of Governors of the European Schools, or the International Baccalaureate Organization, in the official languages of the European Union Member States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization Member States”. It means that in the Republic of Latvia there are schools offering curriculum in English, German and French. At the same time, these schools are obliged to ensure the learning of the Latvian language, Latvian history and culture, Latvian nature and geography. However, it should be noted that these schools offer their services for a fee.

In conclusion, it should be emphasised that the key to a successful (re)integration of children from abroad is timely communication, which allows the child and his/her parents to clarify unknown and unclear issues and to address specific problems in cooperation with the school. Experience has proved that all difficulties can be overcome sooner or later!

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WEBSITES OF STATE INSTITUTIONS

Academic Information Centre (www.aic.lv)

State Education Quality Service (www.ikvd.gov.lv)

Ministry of Education and Science (www.izm.gov.lv)

II.

EXPERIENCES

4. THE LIFE OF TRIANGLES IN THE KINGDOM OF CIRCLES

A few years ago, my friend Jen from England who had lived in Australia for a long time, was trying to answer the question of who she really was and how she felt returning home after several years. She sent her Facebook friends a link to an article written under the influence of Naomi Hattaway's "I am a Triangle" movement. The Hattaway's vision seems to best describe the situation of return migrants.

I like fairy tales so I will retell her idea as follows: "Once upon a time, in the Kingdom of Circles there lived a Circle who decided to settle in the Squareland where squares lived. The Circle had a hard time with the squares at first, but eventually he settled down. After many years, the Circle decided to return to the Kingdom of Circles, but there was something he hadn't noticed – he had turned from a circle into a different shape, i.e. a triangle. The Circle didn't understand it at first how could that be possible – he had returned home! However, what had happened to him upon arriving in the Squareland had repeated after returning to the Kingdom of Circles – he had to start his life all over again. He found it difficult to fit into his old environment. It turned out that to get along with circles is not easy. The Triangle was very sad..." I would like to finish the tale with ellipsis. What could the Triangle do?

Perhaps, before going back, the Triangle should have imagined another geometric figure – the Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Given the hierarchy of needs, every return migrant would have to draw up his/her own list of questions and answers. The answers should be made clear before return. In the following description, the first level of the hierarchy will be discussed together with the second one.

- Physiological or basic needs and safety, security. **Don't dream, be realistic.** Do you understand where you are returning to? Latvia is a country not rich in resources. Consequently, not much money will be given for social guarantees (especially for the sick and the elderly) and human security. Ask yourself questions (even very unusual): *Where will I live?, Where will I work?, Am I practical?, Do I have a piece of land that would allow me to provide myself with food?, If I lose my job and have no income, do I have relatives, friends in the countryside where I can work in exchange for food?, Am I and my children healthy?, What will be my social guarantees?, What will happen when I am old?, How big will my pension be?, Which country will provide it?* Everyone has a different situation but the State Social Insurance Agency could provide some of the answers.

Fellow people can also give us the sense of protection and security – *will the people you rely on be there for you?* In her blog posts and elsewhere N. Hattaway mentions the fact that the longer you are away, the less you resemble the circles and that when you return to the Kingdom of Circles you do not even get along with your own family and friends.

- The sense of belonging and love. If you are already a triangle, **find other triangles as soon as possible, i. e., find people who have already survived the return process** and can share their experience of problems and solutions. There is no need to reinvent the wheel. There is a Facebook group for Latvian return migrant families. There is a saying in English "Happy wife, happy life". If you are sure you did the right thing, the rest of the family will be sure they did the right thing, too. And sometimes even the people around you don't matter, as long as you are happy, loved and understood in your family. Think about the rest of the family: your partner, your children. *How will they fit in and where will they fit in?*

N. Hattaway writes that the children of triangles are no longer triangles, but stars. So your 'stars' also need to find their environment. If your partner is a square, will he integrate in the Kingdom of Circles? Returning seems to be hardest for teenagers because their first real friends are abroad. Perhaps, **there is a social networking site for young and teenage return migrants** to post their thoughts and stories. Other articles in this booklet have already talked about how to fit in a school, but it's worth remembering that **school is not the only place where children can make friends**. In Latvia, there are after-school interest groups, sports clubs, teen and youth interest groups, scouts and guides, etc. Parents should also be aware of these possibilities because being involved in an area of interest could be **the fulfilment of the child's dream and a successful motivation** for the teenager to get involved. Information and advertising leaflets can usually be found at the entrance to schools, kindergarten or on notice boards. They are also very useful if you are back after a while.

- Respect, appreciation and recognition. As tiresome as it may sound – everyone is the master of his/her own happiness. You have to realise that school, other families or government institutions are not your enemies. They just expect **you to be active yourself**. Ideally, you should not let your child forget the mother tongue. But if it happens that your child has a lower level of language skills than a school with the Latvian language of instruction requires, **improve the language skills before returning**. A Latvian-speaking nanny, for example, can help younger children who do not attend kindergarten in their country of residence. If your child attends pre-school, participation in Latvian weekend playgroups or schools can be very helpful. But if you decide to work with your children on your own, there are various free online learning tools.

The Latvian Language Agency (LLA) website Teach and Learn the Latvian Language contains an informative booklet for parents in diaspora "Parents – the first teachers of Latvian" about the advantages and challenges of multilingualism, which explains what parents can do at home in order to improve their children's language skills. On the same website you will find study materials for different age groups. There is also the sazinastilts.lv website. Skola2030 is the website of the National Centre for Education, where you can find information on curriculum issues. It is also possible to take the state language proficiency test while living abroad. You can join ClassFlow, a distance learning environment organised by the LLA or study with a private tutor. You can take the opportunity to join one of Latvian distance learning schools a year before you move to find out what your child's language skills and knowledge really are. You can check your child's language skills indirectly by watching Your class teaching videos – lessons for children. Make sure your child understands what teachers are saying, what tasks are given, etc. At the moment, the range of possibilities is considerably vast.

You can also gain respect and recognition by demonstrating your family's contribution to society – tell us what makes your family special, why you lived in another country. **Introduce yourself to the community/school**, diminish the opportunities to spread false information. Unfortunately, this is human nature – to talk about what they don't know! If you have learned to make something interesting in your country of residence, teach it to others; if you know a language, help others learn it. Your participation in the life of the school and community will determine how soon you are accepted back. You have to melt the ice of society by your actions.

However, if you feel that someone is hostile or not answering your questions, you should be proactive here, too. There are various organisations (The World Federation of Free Latvians, European Latvian Association, American Latvian Association, Latvian Federation of Australia and New Zealand, The Latvian National Federation in Canada) – voices of Latvians in the diaspora, usually people who are not 'circles'. There is the website Latviesi.com, the radio show Globālais latvietis (=Global Latvian) and various media outlets that can reflect your views. What is more – there are people who are return migrants and work in the Saeima of the Republic of Latvia, including the President of Latvia! **Fight for yourself, you are not alone, there are people who listen to you.**

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- **Self-fulfilment.** If everything else is in order, the need for self-fulfilment is no longer so difficult to implement. Learning about the Latvian spiritual heritage at school and mastering it in afterschool interest groups has helped Latvians to survive in challenging circumstances. Values such as always wanting to do something have saved many foreign Latvians from the problems faced by others in isolation at home (lockdown), e.g. in the restricted situations of the Covid 19 pandemic. The Facebook was flooded with photos of knitted socks, jumpers, scarves, works of art and nature. Some took up gardening, others joined digital choirs, still others videoedited individual dance performances, etc. If a Latvian cannot sing and dance indoors, they can do it outdoors, weather permitting – on rafts, in boats, under shelters or in large, forgotten culture houses with large spaces. Culture came as close to the countryside as never before – people adapted quickly to the circumstances. Such examples are numerous. What does it show? It is an indication that the Latvian has a strong survival gene, that his/her creativity and peculiar introvertedness are their advantages! It turns out Latvia is a place where you can hide from the world and also, thanks to good internet connection, work remotely. **Appreciate what Latvia can give you.** It is time to reassess your priorities.

Certainly, this year has highlighted the problems in Latvia and elsewhere in the world – the lack of workers and attitudes in areas that are so important for life and living. Health workers, kindergarten teachers, shop assistants, drivers and farmers; it turns out that these professions are needed not only abroad, but also in Latvia. Hopefully, these workers will be valued, respected and properly remunerated.

I would like my children to return and experience Latvia once again, to understand that Latvians have a unique genetic code, and this is why they are special! For now it is just a dream, because my children are in their teens. When they finish secondary school, they will be able to decide for themselves, the door is open to them. One of my children who has not decided to move to Latvia yet, at least helps with Latvian lessons at weekends; the other child attends Latvian secondary school, has passed the Latvian language proficiency test and talks to his grandmother on Skype. We have talked about what would happen if we moved. Everyone's opinion has been different. One thinks he would stay and live with relatives in the current country, while the other, who is still attracted to Latvia, is doing his best not to forget the Latvian language. I will accept any solution, **my children's decision is important to me.**

Certainly, like everybody, I sometimes feel sorry about the things my children have lost by not living in Latvia.

I grew up in close contact with my grandparents, these are my favourite memories. Having left for a country as far as Australia, I am definitely responsible for breaking the bond between my children and their grandparents, my especially close people who could have helped my children to grow up to be better personalities. **There are things that only grandparents can give you** – a free moment to parents when they are tired; a slow and sober view of life, long-forgotten handicraft skills, etc. The other thing that was lost when I left was the **connection with nature.** In the Australian education system, many schools are very disconnected from nature, from understanding nature. In Latvia, people of my generation were taught to live in harmony with their surroundings, they knew trees, flowers, mushrooms, etc. This cycle of life can still be felt in Latvia. Things that are an integral part of life – the early mornings and late evenings in summer, the depressingly dark autumn period, burst of energy in spring and the body's tendency to put up weight in autumn before winter frosts, dependence on the power of nature, the patterns of nature – have been lost to my children.

Thirdly, I have deprived my talented child of an excellent education system. And now I have come to a slight contradiction – Latvia is heading in the direction of Skola2030, isn't it? As the education system changes, as it becomes more like the school systems of English-speaking countries, it will be easier for my children to return.

However, there are some concerns – until a while ago, I often heard from families that Latvia's academically oriented education system had been one of the main reasons for a family to return. People who have been

educated in Latvia and left, afterwards have only slightly updated their education abroad. They want to give their children the same good education they received. What about in the future? Will the education system still motivate people to return after the change in approach and curriculum? Time will show. Have I also gained anything by leaving? Only what I wanted to get in Latvia – to change people's attitudes to children with special needs in schools. When I left, I got peace of mind that my child will not be harmed, that classmates will respect him and he will be helped, because he has other talents – good humour, musicality etc. We should believe in the abilities of every child. Not everyone should become a scientist, some need to be able to fix also scientists' toilets. Every child has a value, every profession is meaningful. I have already mentioned that this year we are appreciating this, because all these people who do ordinary jobs of daily life turn out to be essential workers.

If these two or even several parallel worlds of geometric shapes exist, perhaps triangle children in Latvia could have their own environment, or at least a parallel stream of classes in schools?

In this respect, Australia has created a very favourable environment for intensive English language learning, even for children who have no English skills. There are special schools with only one task – to teach the language to a newcomer child within one year and help him/her acquire the socio-cultural skills needed for integration. Other subjects are temporarily suspended or slowed down but the language is taught in a concentrated manner, children are given a first insight into the nature, history and social behaviour of the country. Children are introduced to different concepts, ways of writing them down and terminology. Together they learn popular songs, play sports and games common in Australian public schools. At this stage, an important subject is Arts which is used as an emotional support – a soothing therapy – while the person is still unable to express themselves properly with words. Art is a way for children to express their emotions, they can always draw what they cannot say. These schools have parallel streams of classes also for Australian children; joint events are organised to facilitate faster integration of the newly arrived children in the community. If a child has not mastered the language within one year, he/she can still get help at school but usually not enough. There are cases when assistance is provided but this is done during other lessons, so the child does not know what should have been done at this lesson. Not all schools can afford to have assistant teachers in class. Then parents often choose private tutors or special language learning programmes if they can afford them financially. Finally, a little about myself: I am a primary school and music teacher. I have a Master's degree in Education. In Latvia I did administrative work in different companies for many years. After leaving Latvia I worked for a Montessori kindergarten for several years. At the same time, I also worked for the Latvian Federation of Australia and New Zealand (Head of Schools and Out-of-School Department) for about three years. I am currently involved in coordinating ALS playgroup.

May your dreams of returning come true!

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5. 21 TIMES 21: AN EXPERIENCE

There is nothing that can change personal or one's family's views on what it is like to live in Latvia and abroad, because the people have different experiences and perceptions of situations. People make their choices as a result of certain circumstances, preferences and coincidences. Should we and our children, who have changed countries of residence several times, be called third culture, diaspora or return migrants? Everyone who was born in one country, grew up in another one(s), then returned, perhaps went elsewhere again, has their own answer to this question. Nowadays, parents of a child often each represent a different country and culture. In this sense, the world has become smaller, more accessible and relaxed. But this does not mean that changing a country of residence is always natural and easy.

Our family has changed residence six times in its 21 years of existence, moving from country to country. Whether it is a lot or a little, let everyone judge for themselves. Six times we carefully packed our belongings, not always knowing what exactly to expect at the final destination; we always preserved the sturdiest boxes and packing materials because we never knew when they would come in handy; we learned to live with a small child and make do with things you can fit in two travel bags...

In the following I will briefly describe the experiences and cases from which I have gained some life insights or lessons that has made me reconsider my assumptions, change my beliefs or have been useful in life later, both when I leave Latvia and when I return. These years have been interwoven with **family values** of which I will mention twenty one as a symbolic reference to each year of our ever-changing life. These values determined our decisions and actions also in those cases when the changes in the flow of life did not depend only on ourselves.

Education is one of the most important values, therefore my story is largely based on experiences in education institutions. With the implementation of competency-based approach and the increased exchange of experience between countries, a lot of the methodologies described below are beginning to take root in education and upbringing in Latvia. However, they did not exist in Latvian schools at the time when our children were learning there. Some observations, even if they seem surprising, are meant as illustrative material reflecting the values that have helped us understand the importance of the process of change in education. For example, it was in the Latvian education system that our family experienced taking state examinations remotely, a normal phenomenon today, for the first time.

When we arrived in France in 2002, moving between countries and changing the place of residence was not as common as it is today. I experienced a profound shock arriving in France, a world-famous cultural superpower, where society viewed the cleanliness of streets and public places with relatively high levels of tolerance to non-observance of hygiene requirements. We learned to watch carefully where we stepped or sat before we admired the architecture, the art, the way people dressed and the wonders of nature. It also turned out that shops in France have lunch breaks for which the information signs were hidden behind sliding shutters (the information not visible when the shop was closed). There were also lunch breaks at schools. At the time, our foreign colleagues were joking that this was the way how to solve the employment issue in France by reducing the number of job seekers. How could a parent afford to work if Wednesdays were free for students of junior grades but on other weekdays learning lasted from 8.00 to 11.30 and then again from 13.30 to 16.00? It became clear that **flexibility** would be the key-word from then on, because it was not possible to do without adapting to new environments, societies and habits.

At that time being a young woman, who had not seen much of the world and had a child of one and a half years, I had to face the peculiarities of the local culture that I could not even imagine when I lived in Latvia: until then, everything was understandable and commonplace. However, after a short time spent in France, the mostly relaxed approach to life there made me look away from the over-organised, always immediate-result-driven post-Soviet mindset. I gradually realised that seemingly insignificant everyday things also needed attention and time, such as family dinners or a leisurely conversation with a neighbour, during which one could both improve one's French and get useful information. **Keeping a balance** between obligations and a moment of respite for myself and my family provided relaxation, calmed the mind and reduced the anxiety that inevitably comes with constantly adapting, acquiring new information and finding oneself in unprecedented situations.

Professional approach to things has helped at times such as representing my country when Latvia joined the European Union. Not so long ago, in 2004, I had to spend many hours explaining to crowds of interested visitors what Latvia is, where it is located and what kind of national costume on me it was.

After three and a half years in France, we returned to Latvia. Certainly, it was difficult to explain to our eldest son that at the age of five he would no longer be going to school as he had been doing for two years in France but would be going back to kindergarten. In 2005, to find a vacancy in a kindergarten in Riga was relatively difficult. So we tried to see this and other **challenges** as a value of life. Taking into account the peculiarities of human personality, we may try to cope with the challenges offered by life or look for new limits of our possibilities. Certainly, in an ideal world, finding a place in pre-school should not be on the list of complications but today, as well as then, the choice of an education institution is not a simple matter for families. Back then, it resulted in driving all over Riga, because a different pre-school educational institution was offered for each child and the jobs of both their parents were also in completely different areas of the city so the dropping the children off at education institutions in the morning and picking them up in the evening developed into a serious second shift job. At that time, working 10 or even 12 hours on week days I often only saw my sons awake for a couple of hours, therefore the help and support of our relatives was invaluable, without them personal **achievements** at work simply would not have been possible. The benefits at work were undeniable – professional experience and stamina, as well as a lot of nice colleagues who became close friends at the time. With some of them we are still in touch fifteen years later.

During the stay in Latvia, the sense of stability provided by family, relatives and friends, which remind and strengthen emotional ties and create a familiar social space, should not be underestimated. Experience in Latvia and abroad has made us realise that without the understanding and support of **family and friends**, it would have been harder to survive in any of the situations.

Then life took another turn. Our eldest son finished kindergarten, could read and write, was good in maths and music, and was ready to go to school in Latvia. But instead he ended up in the second grade of a Swiss school because, due to my husband's job, so after two years spent in Latvia we went to live outside Latvia again after living two years here. I still consider Swiss schools to be the best education system I am at least a little familiar with. If the seemingly relaxed French approach to medicine and education appeared too relaxed and indifferent for my Soviet and post-Soviet experience of the plethora of requirements and rules, the particular Swiss school in the French-speaking part of the country struck the perfect balance between the two. Rules and requirements had to be respected by all, however, there was an individual approach to each child. At that time, perhaps, it depended also on the age of our children because an experienced teacher in primary school could easily see the similarities, problems and their solutions.

In both France and Switzerland, we had the unusual experience that the class did not exist as a collective body. They don't have the usual way of children in the same class studying together for at least four or eight years. Instead, children are regrouped every year and every year there is a new class teacher. Assignment of children into new groups is performed carefully: an appropriate proportion of newcomers

to regular students is observed; too close friendships are often broken up (justifying it by the formation of dominant groupings, as well as friendship opportunities outside school). Certainly, during the first years it was a surprise for us parents: we had just settled down a bit, got to know the people when everything had to be started all over again. The truth was different: the children's friends and their parents, with whom we had things in common and liked to keep in touch, never disappeared. **Building new relationships and new friendships** helped both parents and children to adapt. There were more gains than losses. It was evident, both in the classroom and the community context, that this approach prevented unnecessary groupings, and that members of the community learnt to cooperate with others. These skills are equally useful for newcomers and for those who are used to dominating, but suddenly do not feel supported by their usual sympathizers and have to develop their leadership skills or, on the contrary, tamp down their unreasonable ambitions.

Teachers in Switzerland work with a definite age group for several years. They know their study topics and work tactics even waking up at midnight, as the class teacher put it. The greatest benefit of this approach is the teachers' ability to quickly and accurately see the talents and areas for improvement of each student of the given age. The analysis of observations and sharing findings with colleagues, as well as communication with parents facilitates children's learning and development. Due to his lack of French language skills (the language skills he had acquired before had not been used during his two years in Latvia) my eldest son started school in the second grade in order to adjust to the language and to let the teachers make out the level of his knowledge and skills in other subjects more precisely. Within a few days, it became clear to the teacher that the boy was bored and he had to be among his peers. So a decision to transfer him to the third grade was taken in two days time.

This class stream was also the one in which my child studied for the entire four years he spent in Switzerland. A great help for a child not knowing the language but wishing to learn it at school was the supplementary language classes practised in many parts of the world. While other classmates were learning the language as their mother tongue, my son was learning the same topic individually or in a small group together with another teacher in a separate room. Often it was not even a room but a table with some chairs placed in the corner of the hallway.

An interesting and unprecedented experience was regular discussions with class teachers as an ever-present process of mutual cooperation. The teachers asked parents questions and informed about their observations of their child's education and development. One example with a lifetime benefit: instead of simply reproaching the child of being disruptive by making noise during maths lessons, the teacher told her observations. My son had been the first to complete the task and drummed his fingers on the table to different rhythms which, of course, disturbed the others. The teacher had noticed that the rhythm was regular and precise, so she suggested I take my son to drum lessons. It started a passion that not only eliminated disruptive behaviour in lessons (as we found out the next time we talked about our child's learning achievements and behaviour in lessons) but developed into a hobby that has lasted for 12 years already. This event helped to strengthen and develop the child's **creativity**, personality, interests and growth.

The conversations with teachers in foreign schools were very useful the next time we returned to Latvia, when it took **courage** to speak with the English teacher at whose pronunciation my child had laughed (thank God, only at home). Yet the teacher had the opportunity and power to cross out with red two pages of the text my boy had rewritten from a book, in one go, although he had sat at this exercise until late at night. It turned out that you weren't allowed to write with a pencil...

At that time we could not be sure the information at the disposal of school administration or the class teacher was also known to subject teachers and other persons involved. It turned out the English teacher had not suspected that the child, who did not look different either in terms of language or appearance and was in the fifth grade, had not been at school in Latvia even for a day and did not know that you do

not write in a notebook with a pencil and did not understand that you have to indent a few centimetres from the edges of a page.

School-parent **cooperation** is not easy to define, especially if the school sees parents' efforts to defend their children and their interests as mere attacks and accusations, without looking into the substance and relevance of the information. However, when our children went to school in Latvia or abroad we always tried to attend all meetings with their teachers, especially if the discussions were individual. Often it presented an opportunity to prevent ignorance which, strange as it may seem in this information-abundant age, is a common phenomenon.

We have tried to teach our children to take **responsibility** for their actions. My son had diligently accomplished his task, because he was aware that this was a requirement of the school. However, we also agree with and support the **rationality** of judgements when the usefulness of what has been done is weighed up, namely, what was more important in that situation – the content or the form? When we asked the teacher and later the school's management how it was possible to know the number of boxes to be counted from each margin of a page, the school finally established elementary written rules, because the absurd requirement in the Latvian education system existed in a verbal handbook named "Everyone knows it". Unfortunately, at that time it occurred to no one that for a ten year old child, who had changed his country of residence, place of residence and school and hence also habits several times, the centimetres or the number of boxes from the margin of an exercise book certainly was not a priority, and he might forget it even if a teacher had reminded him a couple of times. At that time cooperation and explanations helped; other conversations with teachers have also helped to solve problematic situations successfully. Teachers have started to appreciate the skills and knowledge children have acquired abroad, to see the benefits of their experience rather than perceive them as a nuisance (which was not so obvious in 2010).

Latvia is a great place to develop artistic talents, learn technologies and sharpen your mind. We have always tried to encourage our children's **curiosity**. The robotics club at the Riga Schoolchildren's Palace (and several victories in city and national competitions), as well as the Riga Chess School classes our boys attended, have been a great help in this endeavour. What was not available or possible in every school and city in Latvia ten years ago, is now a norm: interesting exhibitions for students, various museums, interest groups, websites, TV channels and broadcasts in Latvian on various topics that help to learn subject terminology in different fields of science. A natural interest in a subject or area contributes to an indirect learning of language and raises motivation.

When changing our places of residence, we have always tried to give our children the opportunity to continue education in their areas of interest. Here's an example of a school in the USA which had to diagnose the child's level of proficiency in French. We went to the USA from Latvia; our son's proficiency in French was almost at the level of his mother tongue. However, after living in Latvia it had to be slightly updated. At the new school my child was included in the beginners' group although French had been his language of instruction for seven of the twelve years of his life. However, the school did not have a proper test to determine the level of foreign language proficiency. This time, talking and explaining did not help. **Efficiency**, namely, getting the most out of the current situation by using the offered resources was considered a value in our family but was not respected in their system which was inert. It took my son five months until he was finally able to study at the level he should have been from the start because of his language skills. The transition was gradual, the teachers were not able to assess his performance earlier than after a month of studying in another transition group. This is the experience with the school in the USA; apparently, native English speakers have accepted that learning a foreign language is necessarily difficult and requires a lot of time and effort.

For all that, the mentioned school had very serious views of the usefulness of music in the process of learning: every primary school student had to take part in music lessons. It had seemed to our family that

the youngest son had no interest in music, however, under the guidance of teachers who were authorities to children and were passionate about their subject, children could achieve a lot. Within a few years (the musical instrument was played only a few times a week) our boy was playing so well that when we returned to Latvia he was admitted to a jazz band. We are still happy that our son has joined a band in Latvia because the concerts we attended and the recordings of the band are a testament to the leader's passion and ability to educate young people and motivate their interest in jazz. **Discipline**, regular practice and concentration that learning a musical instrument requires, definitely helps in general education and in life, creating an understanding that nothing can be achieved without work.

The discipline learnt through music was useful in continuing education in Latvian (also outside the country). Certainly, the decision about parallel studies in Latvian was made because we knew – after several years spent in foreign countries our family would return to Latvia. So we had to find solutions how to make this step easier for our children. The only answer was – by making the life outside Latvia more difficult. In 2013, distance learning opportunities in Latvian at basic school level were not widely offered. After some unsuccessful experiences, we finally chose Brocēni Secondary School, which both sons graduated from at basic school level, acquiring a corresponding document of the Republic of Latvia. At that time, the school and the Ministry of Education and Science managed to accept the proposed **innovations** and to tackle the problem, for example, by allowing the 9th grade state examinations to be taken remotely.

My eldest son took the Latvian language proficiency test the summer before he graduated from school abroad, because Latvian higher education institutions have a formal procedure for validating education acquired abroad and a system for assessing the state language skills.

After the time spent in the USA, we returned to Latvia in 2017. Admittedly, the opportunities offered by **volunteering** (for example, representing class parents on a school council) to help raise awareness of the school's activities are still not fully exploited here. By volunteering for these roles, which are not popular with parents, you can learn a lot more about how the school works, what families have experienced so far, what the challenges and what the strengths are. In addition, the school's administration always listens to parents' representatives with more interest than to those who come to solve individual family issues. Certainly, while working full-time, visiting parents outside Riga regularly and trying to adapt to the new situation, not everyone can find a few more free evening hours for social work. But if we consider how much time we spend watching TV programmes and visiting social networking sites, it seems we can also find time to communicate with the school. At least that has been my rationale. However, we should not overdo ourselves with initiative and demands, because, judging from my work experience in public organisations, the proud title 'president of an association' actually means 'the one who does everything' (from the organisation of meetings to dusting and mopping the floor).

Our family has had the privilege of accumulating experience in different countries. I have tried not to forget the life lessons I have learned in other countries. I suppose that returning to Latvia from the country where we have spent a long time is more difficult than regularly changing countries of residence, because when you stay in one place for a long time, you start to take the customs and traditions of society for granted, you don't appreciate them from the point of view of a newcomer. Nevertheless, the experience and life lessons learned can be used to fill gaps or to improve what is happening elsewhere. I often come across the opinion that the proposed changes or solutions are not really acceptable, but later it turns out they are very useful.

The noise, rush, stress and high cost of living in American cities has taught us to evaluate opportunities in Latvia – serenity outside the city, beauty of nature close by, opportunity to grow our own vegetables in the backgarden – thus showing a different world to my children raised in cities. Everyone who has decided to return has their own motivation: family, people, nature, culture or something else. Each family has its own values and its 'red lines' making an impact on the decision.

Latvian traditions and language play an important role in my value system. There was a moment in Switzerland when our children, at that time ten and seven years old, started to use French now and then when playing, which was understandable, there were no peers they could invite to play in Latvian, and their parents were not always able to appreciate Lego monsters and their super powers (neither in Latvian nor in French!). However, we could celebrate Easter and other Latvian holidays, play board games and read books in Latvian, and we spoke only Latvian in our family. We are very happy when both our sons, now young men, argue enthusiastically at the dinner table about linguistic, political or economic issues in their mother tongue. They also discuss nuances of the use of Latvian, the accuracy of expression and the fitting in of certain language elements. So, wherever we are, it is important to preserve, maintain and pursue the moral (and physical) values that are important to ourselves and our families.

These examples show that adapting to any new situation is not easy for parents or children. It has been an unprecedented experience for all, something to forget and something to start again. Perhaps integration into Latvian society and the education system should also be seen as a completely new experience which many of us are not able to do because of emotional attachment. We expect our reintegration in Latvia to be easier, more familiar and more loving because we are back in Latvia, the land of our childhood and our native homeland, imbued with dreams and positive emotions. Instead, we are faced with the reality: we ourselves have changed, the environment and the society have changed, the country itself and the land of our dreams has changed.

When trying to adapt in a foreign country, we see it as a norm that we are considered immigrants (sometimes helped and supported, sometimes outright ignored or rejected). We do not want and cannot accept this attitude when returning to Latvia, because we hope for something different and cherish illusions. Perhaps the return to Latvia is also worth rational evaluation: to identify the potential drawbacks and benefits in advance, to prepare for this process as a new test and challenge, and accept that it will not be so simple and easy, i.e. it has not been and will not be easy to leave or to return.

Moving from country to country, it becomes clear that **stability**, the family – the minimum social unit – has great value in the current, rapidly changing circumstances. Moving around the world, the nation, the state and the homeland for children are often embodied by the family who in such cases must be able to adapt to new and unprecedented circumstances while at the same time maintaining stability and core values, being strong and always ready for new challenges.

The guide for parents: returning to Latvia and sending children to a Latvian school

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