



Integration on the Åland Islands

*Building new contacts with teamwork
and acts of friendship.*

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Background

- Our first refugees from Syria arrived to Åland in November 2015. Many of them had stopped for a period in other countries along the way.
- Many organizations showed interest in helping in different ways. Folkhälsan, where I work, was one of them.
- Our refugees are offered a home, studies in Swedish and support from local families.

Cultural challenges



Folkhälsan and the Red Cross on Åland have arranged several meetings for the refugees, always together with Ålanders. We believe in including and showing them our culture.

Enjoying nature together





Many have asked for something to do, the days are slow and they are frustrated over not being able to work at once not knowing the language.

Feeling included

- For all it has been most important to feel included in what happens.
- Summertime there are no classes in Swedish, while we enjoy holidays there days turn in to a long waiting for autumn and school again.



Folkhälsan offered an opportunity to help me at summer camp, just to have something to do and to get to practice Swedish by using it. For three weeks they came every day.

Simple joy of having fun



What can they learn us?

- Just as important as it is for them to learn our culture and traditions it is important that we show interest for theirs. They have stories to tell and need to tell them, often difficult experiences but also pride in their own culture.
- Music and meals have been a good way of sharing.



We, not them and us

- Meeting a refugee as a father, mother or child instead of as a refugee gives an opportunity to understand each other better.



We on Folkhälsan believe in honestly telling them how the culture is on Åland, but also showing them respect for choices in life they have made, such as religion, child raising and traditions, yet making clear what is legal here.



- Many women can't swim and they feel uncomfortable attending a mixed in door swimming pool because of there Arabic tradition.
- We bought burkinis to lend out and arranged swimming classes with women only in a smaller pool.



At first communicating is important even if we don't understand each other, with gestures, help from Google translate we try, not afraid of failing, many good laughs have come, but laughing together also connects us.



Folkhälsan has a little cottage on an island near Mariehamn. This has become a popular meeting place with a kettle on a bonfire and fishing rods for the children. Doing things together and having something to look forward to makes a big difference.



We are strong together.

1. Learn to know them
 2. Share laughter and tears
 3. Listen to what they wish
 4. Spend time together
 5. Let them know what is possible
 6. See every meeting with a new person as a gift.
- Everyone has a story to tell.