

Erin Dunn
November 7, 2017
Community Comment

This is Erin Dunn of the Fortuna Chamber of Commerce with a Community Comment.

This comment is Finished. It's about our Finnish exchange student. She had some revelations this week about her exchange in America that I thought were worth sharing.

First I should tell you that in Finland, interrupting people when they are talking is one of the rudest things you can do. She would get so frustrated when Ross or I would comment as she was talking, with a "oh really" or "yes" or "uh-huh." She would say—"let me finish." At first, we were a little startled by her strident tone and then worked hard not to seem like we were talking over her.

This week it came clear to her—Americans aren't interrupting when they say those things, they are letting you know they are interested in what you are saying and encouraging you to continue. She came to that conclusion all on her own. Her initial frustrations, though, made sense to us then.

She is constantly amazed at how strangers talk to each other here—clerks in the grocery line, or people passing by giving random compliments "I like your hair," or "those shoes are cool." Honestly, they probably don't say "cool" but you know what I mean. People don't do that in Finland.

One of the first things she told us when she arrived is that she is not good at small talk. The Finns don't make small talk. One day she came home from school after being here about a month and proudly proclaimed "I made small talk today!" That was a huge accomplishment.

Someone told me that if you go to a store in Finland, you put your money on a tray, the clerk picks it up, makes change, then puts your change back in the tray. So there is no true interaction. I asked her about that and she paused and said, “well, if you’ve known someone since school, they will hand the change back to you directly—so I guess yeah, that happens in stores.”

One thing that almost all exchange students notice is that “school spirit” is about sports. Kids wear their uniforms and cheerleading outfits to school on game days, there are pep rallies, and everyone goes to the games. In Finland, and a lot of European countries, sports are a club activity separate from school. And they don’t make a fuss about it while in school.

Speaking of school, the saddest observation that she made is that students here don’t respect the teachers. Even if they aren’t being noisy—and some kids do talk while the teacher is talking—they are on their phones texting or on the internet.

I want to end on a more “up” note. When our student first arrived, she made it clear she did not like spicy food. We tried to keep things as bland as possible for her. She’s not only grown to like spicier food, the other day, she asked for more!

Now, I’m really finished.

This has been Erin Dunn with a Community Comment.