

Respecting Doorstep families and cultures

Whether it's in person or online, we are invited into the homes of Doorstep Library families as guests. We need to make sure we're never imposing.

The families we visit live in all sorts of different ways and are from a wide range of cultures.

How do we make sure we're thoughtful towards all the different people we visit, and always respectful?

Here are some things to be mindful of.

You're accountable for these rules from day one. That means if you're worried your partner isn't properly respecting families, you must discuss it with them or speak to your team leader.

The family is always in control

We want parents to always be in charge of the situation. Always remember it's up to them whether to invite us in, and what we do.

If you're visiting in person,

- always ask at the door if they would like a visit
- don't go indoors until invited

If you're visiting online,

- always make sure a parent knows you're there on the computer when you admit the family to Zoom
- some parents may not want to appear on screen so be comfortable having a conversation with a parent who's off screen, if it's child above the age of 5

Don't ask for names unless this is necessary e.g. you're helping the parent fill in a form, and explain why you're asking if not obvious. You may get to know names over time.

If the television is on during a visit, don't ask to turn it off. Just carry on. If it's really hard to hear then just say so -- and ask if there's a way to make it a bit easier to hear.

If a new child joins your visit (e.g. a friend or a cousin), include them! You may not have planned for it, but if the parent has included them you should too.

Make sure parents know who they're inviting in to their house, or on the computer. Introduce any volunteers they haven't met before, or haven't seen for a while.

How you appear

You can dress casual but always modestly. Wear long sleeves and higher necklines, and skirts or trousers that are knee-length, even when it's really hot. If reading online, don't wear pyjamas.

You want to keep it neutral, so avoid dressing too showily or wearing expensive jewellery.

If you're online,

- Don't eat on screen. There are breaks between online visits to give time for you to grab a snack if you'd like. (Sips of water are fine of course!)
- Be aware of what's behind you. Check all looks clean and tidy, as you would for a work meeting.

Don't ask to use the bathroom when you're visiting a family's home -- wait until you're back at base.

Respecting different cultures

Often, we know very little about the children we're reading with: who else lives in their house, what their work is, their religion, the other languages they speak and read.

Here are some guidelines to make sure we're mindful of the range of cultures and backgrounds of the people we visit.

Different ways of life

The people we visit live in all sorts of different ways.

Some families sit on the floor for their meals together.

Some are used to living surrounded by lots of things, some don't have much furniture.

Some have a more open attitude to the community/confidentiality than others.

Some have more involvement with their children's education than others.

Some have different views on who's considered part of their large extended family.

Touch

There are different boundaries for how men and women interact. For instance, in some cultures, men and women don't shake hands.

It's best not to put your hand out for a handshake with any family. Don't even shake hands with the children.

Taking your shoes off

You can often tell when to take your shoes off by shoes outside the door, or in the hall. There are notes on the database too.

The advice is just to ask anyway, unless it's perfectly obvious.

Male volunteers

Women of some cultures aren't allowed to be in the presence of men they don't know, or aren't comfortable with it.

If you're new to a house and one of you is a man, they should stand back. Let the female volunteer take the lead and ask: 'I'm with [name] today, is that OK?'

You need to give the parent a chance to say No, or to prepare (e.g. by covering their head), without drawing direct attention to it.

Do the same if you're a female volunteer with a male stand-in.

Bear in mind too that sometimes mothers take a while to answer when you knock, as they need to cover their heads before they open the door.

Food and drink

If you are given food and drink, do your best! You don't have to finish it, just a little shows you're grateful. Feel free to politely decline if you wish.

You could ask for water instead of tea, or for milk/water to cool it down (if you have limited time).

If you're given something you can't eat e.g. because you're vegetarian or have an allergy, just say so!

As a last resort, ask if you can take it with you to eat later.

Choosing books

Be aware when choosing books. Some topics may be contentious or uncomfortable with different families. Watch out for...

- Religion
- Magic and witches
- Politics
- Particular series or authors, e.g. His Dark Materials by Philip Pullman which offers a critical view on religion, or Harry Potter.

If you're in any doubt, show the book to the parent and ask. They have the final word.