

Maintaining boundaries

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As volunteers, the relationship we have with the families we visit isn't really social, nor exactly work.

As friendly reading volunteers our relationship with families is closer to what is often described as befriending. This means that we offer a supportive, reliable relationship to people who might otherwise be socially isolated while offering books and conversation. We need to define this relationship and consider certain boundaries. There are a few hard and fast rules which we will discuss below.

The guiding principle is that we are always guests whether in person or online. We want our families to feel that they are always in control.

On every visit

For home visits in person:

- **At the front door, always ask if they would like a visit this week. Don't go indoors unless you're invited.**
- **You can only go in if there's an adult at home. That includes a sibling over 16 if that's been pre-agreed with the parent. They need to know you're in the house, so even if a child tells you someone is around, make sure you call Hello so they know you're there then wait to hear their response – if they're upstairs or in another room, you don't need to actually see them.**
- **There's no need to ask the names of people you haven't seen before unless it's relevant, for instance for a consent form. You may get to know names over time.**

For home visits in person:

- **An adult needs to consent to the Zoom call before you can proceed. They don't have to be visible on screen if they don't want to, but you need to hear their voice acknowledging you're there.**
- **For children under 5, an adult needs to be present throughout the session.**

When you get to know families better

You might see a parent every week for literally years. You might know a lot about a family, and get attached to both children and parents, but you cannot behave as if they are friends. As a Doorstep volunteer you **must not**:

- swap contact details with families, or give out any details that might identify you or where you live, specifically. If you are an online volunteer, we also ask you not to use your surname on the zoom calls.
- arrange to see or speak to them outside your Doorstep volunteering hours
- follow them on social media or accept friend requests from them, adults or children
- take screenshots, photos, or (if you're out on the ground) take selfies of yourself which identify the location, unless our marketing team have asked for specific pictures and the family have signed a consent form
- while you might occasionally need to ask for the phone number of parents or carers on behalf of Doorstep Library (for example, to fill in our consent form) in these circumstances the phone number should always belong to an adult (over 18). Never take, save or use the phone number of anyone under 18 under any circumstances.

If you're an Online Reading Volunteer, you may be asked to use parents' phone numbers during your shift to remind them about their session or to help them with tech issues. However, you should not be in any contact -- by phone, text, email or in-person -- with the families outside your volunteering shift. If a family texts you on your phone during a shift, you should not text back from the phone, but use your dashboard to communicate with them. (If you are doing visits in person, they will not have your phone number so this won't arise.) Their phone numbers will be saved with a coded label in your phone, but if a family calls you outside your shift, don't answer the call. Just let your Team leader know so they can follow up.

Your responsibilities

You're accountable for these rules from day one, for the families you visit.

That also means if you think your partner isn't maintaining boundaries properly, you need to discuss it with them.

If that's a difficult conversation for you to have, talk to your team leader about your concerns.

Why boundaries are important

It might seem contradictory to talk about boundaries this way, at the same time as building warm and friendly relationships with families. There are reasons for this, to protect both you and the families. It's about knowing what we expect of you - guidance for these relationships that are neither social nor paid work -- and the families coming to understand what to expect of you too.

- **The risk of spoiling the relationship**

Something could go wrong in the relationship if you give advice or information that turns out to be inaccurate or unsuitable. This could have repercussions for you, the family, their relationship with Doorstep Library and our reputation.

- **Protecting you personally**

We can't take any responsibility for your safety if you meet up with family members outside your shift. It's part of the commitment that you undertake not to do this because it blurs the boundaries for the family as well as for you.

Our reputation is also therefore at stake – if something happens to you, you will be seen as a Doorstep Library volunteer, whether you intended to be in that capacity or not. We have facilitated that relationship.

Lastly, while you might have honourable and well-meaning intentions, another volunteer might not, or might not act in such a careful way. We cannot set a precedent for volunteers to be able to do this, as we need to retain control of our relationships with our families.

- **Avoiding creating a dependency on particular volunteers**

Volunteers may need to move on or leave, over time, and we want families to feel supported by Doorstep Library as a whole rather than bonding with a specific person or pair of volunteers.

A final note

We're always friendly. We're there to look at books, read and listen, but conversations with parents is an extremely important part of our service.

Conversations with parents should not regularly exclude reading with the child/ren. If it seems to be taking over, or if it is going into areas that you are uncomfortable with for any reason, talk to your Team Leader at the end of your shift for help and advice on what to do.

If someone in a family needs additional support we may signpost to other services. Usually, this is the result of a request for help from the family, but there may be times when Doorstep Library staff will react to situations that you have discussed with your Team Leaders. Never be tempted to give advice in response to a request for help, but pass the request to your Team Leader who will see what help is available.

Some families may need specialist help, which we are not able to give, and in these circumstances also we will look for an appropriate service which can give the kind of advice which neither we nor you are qualified to offer.