



Setting and Keeping Boundaries

This list of tips for setting and keeping boundaries was created by Lutheran Family Services in Nebraska.

Boundaries are an important way of protecting both you and your mentee, and your relationship.

Make boundaries clear early on and keep them consistent

Doing so will help prevent problems in the future. Every volunteer-client relationship is different, so it is important for there to be a clear understanding from the beginning. Sometimes refugees have a hard time differentiating between agency staff and volunteers and they expect the same of both.

Boundaries are essential for both you and the client

Even agency staff can have a difficult time with boundaries! It is very difficult to undo a problem that has been created by blurred boundary lines.

Do not be afraid to say “No”

This can be very difficult at first but it is essential. Is the refugee asking you to make a phone call even when his or her English is sufficient to do it alone? Are they asking you for money or material goods? As a volunteer, you have the right to say no.

Boundaries help prevent burnout

Refugee resettlement work can be stressful, even for volunteers who do it once or twice a week! It is a high burnout field and the primary way to prevent that is to care for yourself. Don't feel bad if you need to take a week off for a little personal time. The best helpers know how to keep a balance between themselves and the people they are helping. If you start to feel yourself burning out, please let us know quickly.

Detached compassion

This Buddhist concept is defined as “a way of entering into the situation of the person being helped that enables the helper to continue to function effectively in the helping role.” Although it is important to form a bond with the clients, remember that taking on their problems as your own will only hurt both of you in the long run.

A few ways to recognize that there are boundary issues...

- Your gut says, “Oh no not again!” to a refugee request but your mouth says, “One more time can't hurt.”
- You begin to feel the refugees' fear or sense of urgency as your own.
- You find yourself wanting to “solve” refugees' feelings of anger, disappointment or loss.
- You want to “buffer” refugees from the very real difficulties of starting life over again at the bottom of a new culture.
- You insert yourself as “middleman” into a refugee's relationship or disputes. You

realize that you are afraid that refugees won't like you or might be angry if you don't meet their expectations.

- You try to force solutions to a problem rather than giving the refugees the information and tools needed to solve it for themselves.
- You start to think that no one can solve a refugee's problems as well as you can.
- You catch yourself thinking, "It feels so good to be needed."
- Your own family, work and/or relationships are suffering because of time or emotional attention given to refugees.

Questions to consider when setting boundaries:

- Which phone numbers do I want to provide to the family? Which days and times are acceptable for them to call?
- Do I want to go places with the family that cost money? How much am I willing to spend per week? (Spending money is NOT a requirement of volunteering!)
- Do I want them to visit my home? Is there a possibility I will feel uncomfortable about the differences between our homes?
- Will I meet with the family only certain times each week or will it be flexible? What if they call and ask me to help them today?
- What will I do if I begin to feel stressed about the relationship?