

→ The Better Care Network Netherlands strives for better care for children.

Better care for children means that children should grow up with their parents and in their own community for as long as possible. Help should thus be aimed at the support of vulnerable families. Sending volunteers to children's homes is in conflict with the vision of better care for children as laid down in international guidelines. However reality shows that many volunteers without relevant educational background still go abroad and work with vulnerable children for a short period of time. In response to this situation Better Care Network Netherlands has developed the guidelines below. Through these guidelines we hope to prevent unintentional harm to children and to promote that exclusively those who can transfer their knowledge and experience to local professionals are deployed as volunteers¹ working with vulnerable children.

THE REALITY

Many organisations work with western volunteers. This includes volunteering with vulnerable children in children's homes, 'orphanages', youth centres, shelters, care facilities for children and/or families that live on the street, in refugee camps, schools, and similar projects. Volunteers offer organisations 'free' extra hands and provide additional resources, both financially and in the form of new knowledge, skills, games and activities. Many volunteers bring sponsorship money with them to the project and become project ambassadors or fundraisers after the volunteering experience.

Volunteers get an understanding of the difference between their own and other children's childhood and discover new cultures and customs. For them, this is an unforgettable experience. It can be challenging physically, but also mentally because of the difficult situations they experience and hear about. Additionally it is often a great opportunity to see a different country and do something useful.

To make sure that the presence of volunteers has a positive effect and does not do any harm, guidelines have been developed that could help the sending and hosting organisations consider and prepare for the support of volunteers thoroughly. It is important to develop policies through these guidelines that put the best interest of the child at the centre. In this way the deployment of volunteers will not only become an unforgettable experience for the volunteers themselves, but also a positive factor in the lives of children.

1. Be aware of the importance of children's attachment

Children who don't grow up with their parents have gone through a traumatic experience: they have been separated from their parents and sometimes even from their entire family. Especially when living in a children's home, chances are high that children miss having contact with their family. Attachment occurs naturally in every child. From this protective attachment a child develops itself and explores the world. Each child therefore needs permanent caregivers with whom he or she has a long-term reciprocal relationship, which forms the foundation for other relationships. In a children's home with changing caregivers who have limited time with the child, children subsequently miss these attachment figures. Children and adults with attachment problems lack confidence in themselves and others, which results in having difficulties building friendships and relationships. Because volunteers cannot function as attachment figures, the deployment of volunteers for a short period of time harms the child.



¹ Although focused on 'volunteers' these guidelines can also be applied to students who carry out international internships. The 6th section of this document describes specific guidelines relating to international internships.

2. Ensure trained and experienced volunteers

In order to be able to work with vulnerable children in a children's home in the Netherlands, for example, it is necessary to have followed specialized training and have gained practical knowledge through supervised internships. However, while volunteering abroad 18-year-olds, who have recently finished secondary school, are sometimes functioning as caretaker in a children's home or with street children. These are the most vulnerable children. From a 'best interest of the child'-perspective, this is not a good match. These children in particular need well-trained and experienced personnel. A volunteer can be a good volunteer if he or she is screened and selected based on knowledge and experience.

Criteria for the selection of volunteers:

- Has relevant knowledge and experience with the target group and can demonstrate this with certificates and/or references. Suitable courses include: social work, psychology, pedagogy, support of the target group, medical care, education, etc.
- Has suitable life experience to be able to understand difficult stories and events, such as assaults, abuse, severe disabilities, and can respond to this adequately.
- Is able to leave the daily care of children to local staff and promotes children's attachment to permanent staff by putting himself/herself in second place while being constantly aware that the he/she will be leaving again.
- Is able to support the children in their own culture, without cultural prejudice.
- Is able to transfer knowledge in a respectful manner, while acknowledging the knowledge and experience of local staff.
- Is able to work in such a way that he/she is not indispensable both for the individual children and for the host organisation.
- Agrees with the [Code of Conduct](#) and the [Child Protection Policy](#) of the host organisation.
- Has a (international) Criminal Record Check and a doctor's statement declaring that he/she is physically and mentally fit enough to take on the tasks required.
- Is prepared to take the necessary medical preparations and has been adequately vaccinated to prevent infections and diseases.



Volunteers should come for specific tasks: for example to support the set-up of a psychosocial support project for children processing the death of parents (e.g. psychologists), or to set-up a workshop to create tools for children with disabilities (e.g. occupational therapists). During their tasks they should work together with local professionals to exchange knowledge and experience. Volunteering in this way becomes sustainable and can truly contribute to the improvement of a project by transferring knowledge that fits within the local context.

Young volunteers should only contribute as a supplement to the project, such as through recreational activities, domestic help or transport, and should never have final responsibility for a task or be left alone with children as the primary caregiver. It is important to consider whether volunteers can actually contribute to the improvement of the local care and whether this care can be provided, possibly better, by the local community. Volunteering should never negatively affect local employment opportunities.

3. Provide Codes of Conduct and child-focused policies

The sending and host organisation should have a strong and clear policy to which all volunteers must comply in respect of the safety and the protection of the Rights of the Child. Clear procedures should be designed to report violence against children and other concerns on children's safety and privacy. The organisation should have a strict confidentiality policy to protect the information on the backgrounds of the children. This means a ban on the use of pictures and sharing information from the children on the internet, in social media, within reports for the volunteer's school or personal contacts unless written permission from the children's parents or legal guardian has been granted. Volunteers should understand and sign these guidelines before they arrive at the project site.

4. Prepare volunteers well with specific training

The training should discuss children's rights and needs, the importance of attachment in children's development, and the attitude of volunteers towards the children and local staff. The following points should be clearly explained:

- What the roles and responsibilities are within the organisation.
- What the volunteer's tasks and responsibilities are in the project.
- What the working hours are and who the contact person for the volunteer is.
- How to deal with confidential information.
- What type of information can be communicated to the outside world: film, photographs, reports, and blogs.
- Restrictions on the tasks of volunteers (for example: viewing the children's files, speaking with parents).
- How to ensure the good attachment of children with permanent local staff and why volunteers should not function as primary or direct support to children.
- How children's rights are safeguarded within the organisation and where to report possible children's rights violations.
- How the organisation deals with complaints and any mistakes made by the volunteer.
- What to do with donations, materials, and presents brought from the home country (such as balloons and candy)? How to regulate the distribution of the presents and the organisation of additional trips without emphasising the wealth inequality between the 'international visitor' (volunteer) and children.
- How to take account of the vision and mission of the host organisation and how to show respect for the religious background of the organisation, children and/or parents.
- How to behave in case of an emergency (for example fire).
- How to deal with children that show undesirable or inappropriate behaviour: what is the policy within the organisation and how are punishments and rewards used.
- How the volunteer is introduced to the children and how to say goodbye when the volunteer leaves.



The host organisation must provide a good introduction training at the project location during which all these topics will be discussed again, but with greater focus on the specific culture and location. This training ends with the signing of a [volunteer contract](#) that states themes such as roles and responsibilities, attitude towards children, children's privacy and rules on confidentiality.

Every sending organisation must have a protocol in which different scenarios are described linked to actions that need to be taken if and when they arise. These scenarios are:

- The volunteer does not function well / there are complaints about the volunteer.
- The volunteer has complaints about the supervision and support he/she receives.
- The volunteer is concerned about a child / children.

The drafting of a protocol for the above scenarios consists of several phases:

- Description of different scenarios (creating cases).
- Design of actions that need to be undertaken (roadmap).
- Identification of in-country stakeholders (assistance, police, NGOs) who should be consulted or informed if a child is in danger.
- Establishment of agreements with important parties in order to respond adequately.

5. Ensure adequate supervision during the volunteering period

- The sending organisation should be in regular contact with the volunteer.
- The volunteer should have a contact person who familiarizes the volunteer with practical issues.
- There are clear agreements on the performed tasks, duties and responsibilities.
- The volunteer forms an extra support and will never substitute a local professional.
- There are clear agreements on working hours, days-off and holidays.
- There are clear agreements concerning religious obligations.



6. Specifically for international internships

In the case of international internships there are often additional requirements made by the educational institute to enable the student to achieve specific learning objectives to meet course requirements. Often the internship is specifically focused on transferring knowledge (subjects for training professionals), or the development or introduction of a specific skill (e.g. therapy) or methodology (e.g. education). In this case it is wise to consider which of the points mentioned above are relevant and irrelevant to the intern. However, educational institutes should be aware that, while the training of the intern is their primary interest, the best interest of the child should always be the primary focus of the project and the presence of interns should never hinder the development of vulnerable children. Good preparation is essential.

7. Choice of your project partner

For sending organisations it is important to work with local partners who endorse these guidelines and follow the rules set by the local authorities in the partner's country. Advice for sending organisations:

- As a sending organisation, ensure that you are informed of current government policy at the project location:
 - If authorities aim to close children's homes or institutions, the deployment of volunteers should not impede this. Be aware that receiving volunteers is seen as profitable business which could hinder the implementation of such policy.
 - If authorities do not want volunteers to sleep in children's homes, make sure that the partner is able to accommodate them outside the home and local staff is present in the children's home at all times.
- Only work with a partner on the development of projects that stimulate the upbringing of children with their parents and/or within their community. Prevent contributing to any (unnecessary) residing of children in children's homes, and further institutionalisation.

- Maintain a local network and don't be dependent on a single informant when receiving local information. Involve large NGOs and UN agencies in-country (such as UNICEF, Save the Children, Terre des Hommes and others) in the partner selection by requesting their knowledge or experiences with the intended host organisation. NGOs can also offer information on government policies and other local organisations. For international internships it is therefore advisable to connect with local education institutes.
- Thoroughly assess the partner and ask many questions: on security and safety, on local support and on training for the volunteers, supervisions, etc. Ensure organisational policies are in place on paper, but especially in practice. Assess the situation at the project location in person.
- Formalise an agreement with the local partner, stating your requirements for the deployment of volunteers. Conduct post-volunteering reviews with volunteers to assess partner's adherence to the agreed terms.
- Ensure that the local partner organisation requests and receives documentation on criminal records checks at the project location, and that each volunteer signs a [code of conduct](#) upon arrival.



Want to know more?

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