

A photograph of a family of four sitting around a wooden table. A man in a blue and white plaid shirt is leaning over the table, smiling. A woman in a red sweater and black headscarf is smiling. A young girl in a white and pink jacket is looking towards the man. A woman with blonde hair, wearing a grey sweater, is sitting across from them, looking towards the family. The background shows a white wall and a window with blinds.

**A good start in
Denmark with a
volunteer friend**

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What does it mean to have a Danish volunteer friend?

A lot of people in Denmark want to help you or your family. Many of them are volunteers in organisations such as the Danish Red Cross or the Danish Refugee Council.

Volunteers are not paid and they have no connection with the municipality or other public authorities. Volunteers are just ordinary Danish people who want to help you and your family find your feet in Denmark. A volunteer

will help you or your family with the same sorts of things as a neighbour, colleague or friend. You and your volunteer friend meet in your spare time because you want to – not because you have to, or because you are paid to meet.



Things are hard when you first arrive in Denmark and you need a lot of help. I felt really lonely because I didn't know many people here. Once you've got a network, you don't feel so alone."

Finan, 19, from Eritrea



How can a volunteer friend help?

Your volunteer friend can help you with many of the challenges you'll face in everyday life in Denmark. You can ask for advice if there is anything you don't understand. You and your family will need to learn about Danish society, Danish culture and, not least, the Danish language. You might need help reading letters, doing homework or searching for information on the internet. Your volunteer friend can also show you around your new town and introduce you to new people and leisure activities.

However, there are certain things that you cannot expect your volunteer friend to help

you with. Your volunteer friend cannot help you with any issues you may have with the municipality or other authorities. Neither can your volunteer friend find you a job or an internship.

Your volunteer friend is not allowed to contact the municipality or other authorities on your behalf unless he or she has a written power of attorney signed by you. There should be no money involved in your relationship with your volunteer friend.



I do all sorts of things with Joan. We go for walks in the woods, look in shops and talk about everything. She helps me understand Danish culture, and she has helped me find out what and where I should study. We'll always be friends.”

Asmaa, 24, from Syria

How to get off to a good start and get to know each other

You won't know each other when you meet for the first time, and it may feel a little weird. It's a good idea to start by explaining why you want to have a Danish friend, and what you hope he/she can help you or your family with.

It's a good idea to discuss early on how often you would like to meet. It's normal to meet about twice a month, but it all depends on how much free time you both have. It may

make things easier if you arrange to meet at fixed times.

The idea of a volunteer friend is that your relationship should be as equal as possible. However, there may be a natural imbalance at first because your Danish friend is on home turf. Think of yourselves as friends, who decide what to do together and who respect each other.



We've gained an understanding of what it's like to be a refugee. Not just Feras is learning; we're learning a lot from Feras too; about his views on life and that sort of things. It's a relationship on equal terms and we both get a lot out of it."

Pia, a volunteer friend with her family



Photo: Marie Louise Munksgaard

Useful tips to a good start

- **Explain why you want a friend**

It's a good idea for you both to explain why you would like to have a friend.

- **Agree how you are going to meet**

Meeting might be difficult the first few times. There can be serious challenges with language, and the whole situation can feel rather "forced". Agree how you will contact each other. Make it clear whether it's OK that you call each other regularly/in the evening/at the weekend/during working hours.

It's important that you both feel you have a say in what you do together, and both take the initiative to meet.

- **When there's something you don't quite understand**

We all come from different backgrounds. There'll be things we don't understand and things we don't know. This can make us unsure about how to deal with them. The best advice is to try to be open. Feel free to ask about anything you are in doubt about or that puzzles you.



What can you do together?

What you choose to do together depends entirely on what you feel like doing, what is needed, and whether or not there are children in your families, for example. You can do everyday activities together. You can also meet

to practise Danish and just talk about how things are going. Voluntary organisations in some towns also arrange joint activities for all the local refugees and volunteers.

Good ideas for activities

Take time off and relax together

- Go for walks in the local area – see where things are like the library, supermarkets, etc.
- Shop, cook and eat together
- Go on an outing to a museum or on a picnic
- Talk about everyday challenges
- Play games or watch films
- Practise speaking Danish, read magazines and books or watch television
- Talk about each other's culture and traditions

Practical help

- Do homework together
- Read letters from the authorities
- Shopping – find out where you can buy the things you need
- Talk about school or work

Activities in the local community

- Go to the local sports club, association or gym
- Go to local and cultural events together



The Danish language

Things can be difficult if you don't speak the same language. Your new friend knows how important it is for you to learn Danish and wants to help you practise the language.

Useful tips on how to practise Danish

- **Homework and reading**

Perhaps you have some homework from your language school that your friend can help you with. You can talk about pictures in books and magazines or watch a film or television. You will also find materials to help you at the library.

- **Talk as much as possible**

Practise as much as possible. You can make small talk or you can talk about more serious issues – all conversations are practice. You can go out shopping together and practise saying the names of the things in the supermarket or go for a walk and practise saying the names of the things you come across.

How long will you have a voluntary friend for?

You decide yourself how long you want your friendship to last. Who knows? Perhaps it will become a lifelong friendship. It is also possible that, at some point, you will no longer need a volunteer friend.

If you cannot continue, or do not want to continue, it's important to talk openly about it and tell your volunteer friend.

If you were introduced through an organisation such as the Danish Red Cross or the Danish Refugee Council, it's important to let them know if you stop seeing each other. This will also mean that you can meet a new volunteer friend if you so wish.



I don't see it as voluntary work anymore. Since we got to know each other, it has just been about being friends.”

Sebastian, 24, volunteer friend



Danish Red Cross is one of Denmark's largest civil society actors. We help to ensure that all refugees granted a residence permit in Denmark receive a warm welcome. We do this by creating local communities in cooperation with municipalities and volunteers from other organisations.