



**Getting off to
a good start in
Denmark with
a voluntary
friend**

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Danish Red Cross

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What does it mean to have a voluntary Danish friend?

There are a lot of people in Denmark who would like 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 do not have any connection to the municipality or other public authorities. They are just ordinary Danish people who would like to help you or your

family find your feet in the early days.

A volunteer will be able to help you or your family with the sorts of things that a neighbour, colleague or friend helps with. You meet in your spare time because you want to – not because you have to, or because you get paid for it.



When you first arrive here, it's hard and you need a lot of help. I felt really lonely because I didn't know many people here. So when you get a network family, you don't feel so alone."

Finan, 19, from Eritrea



Photo: Mathilde Bech

What can a voluntary friend help with?

Your voluntary friend can help you with many of the challenges that arise in everyday life. You can ask him or her for advice if there is anything you don't understand. There are a lot of new things that you or your family 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 online. Your voluntary friend can also show you around your new town or city and introduce you to new people and leisure activities.

However, there are certain things that you cannot expect your voluntary friend to help you with. Your voluntary friend cannot help you with your case with the municipality, find you a job or an internship.

Your voluntary friend must not contact the municipality or other authorities on your behalf either without a written power of attorney signed by you. There should be no money involved in the relationship with your voluntary 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 how I can find out what and where I should study. We will always be friends.”

Asmaa, 24, from Syria

How you get off to a good start in getting to know each other

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

We also recommend that you discuss early on how often you would like to meet. It is normal to meet about twice a month. But it all depends on how much free time you both

have. It can make many things easier if you make some fixed arrangements.

The idea of a voluntary friend is that your relationship should be as equal as possible. However, there may be a natural imbalance from the start because your Danish friend is on home turf. Think of yourselves as friends, who decide together what you are going to do, and respect each other.



We have gained an understanding of what it is like to be a refugee. It's not just Feras who is learning; we are also learning a lot from Feras and his view on life. It is an equal relationship that we both get a lot out of."

Pia, a voluntary friend with her family



Photo: Marie Louise Munkegaard

Useful tips on how to make good arrangements

- **Explain why you would like to have a friend**

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

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

Meeting might be difficult the first few times. There can be serious linguistic challenges, and the whole situation can feel rather "forced". Agree on 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 work hours.

It is 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 will be things we don't understand, things we don't know, and we can be unsure about how to deal with them as a result. The best advice for you is to try to be open. Feel free to ask if there is 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 meet and do various everyday activities together.

You can also meet to practise Danish and just talk about how things are going. In some places, the voluntary organisations also arrange joint activities for all refugees and volunteers in the town or city.

Good ideas for activities

Take time off and relax together

- Go for walks in the local area – see where the different things are, e.g. 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, traditions and celebrations

Practical help

- Do homework together
- Read letters from the authorities
- Shopping – find out where you can buy the things you need
- Talk about education/training and jobs

Activities in the local community

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



The Danish language

It can be difficult when you don't speak the same language. Your new friend knows how important it is for you to learn Danish and would like to help you to practise the language.

Useful tips on how to practise the language

- **Homework and reading**

Perhaps you have some homework from the 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 how long your friendship should last. Who knows, perhaps it will become a lifelong friendship. But it is also possible that, at some point, you will no longer need a voluntary friend.

If you cannot or do not want to continue to meet, it is important to talk openly about it and tell your voluntary friend.

If you found each other through an organisation such as the Danish Red Cross or the Danish Refugee Council, we urge you to let them know if you stop seeing each other. That way, you also have the opportunity to meet a new voluntary 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, voluntary friend



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