

Teaching Self-Sufficiency

TIP 1: Start early. Dependency is learned quickly when a family is handed everything within the first few months. It becomes easy for them to call the agency or volunteer to take them to their doctor's appointment rather than going themselves. With each appointment teach the family what you are doing.

Example: At the doctor's office show the family where to wait in line for their appointment. Show them what documents to bring and what to give to the front desk in order to check in. If they do not speak English show them how to ask for a translator. Show them how to get to the appointment, by bus or walking. Tell them that children must always be accompanied by a parent to Doctor's appointments.

TIP 2: Set goals with your family. As you meet with them ask them what they would like to learn how to do. Write it down and write down the steps to achieving that goal. Set a time limit. Sign the goals sheet. When the family has reached the goal, celebrate and do something fun.

Example of a Goal: Using public transportation

Step 1: Go with the family on a bus ride. Pick out a destination and show them how to use the map and bus guide.

Step 2: Drive them to a bus stop and show them where they would get on the bus. Then drive them to the ending point and show them where they would get off the bus.

Step 3: Ask them to meet you at a familiar destination.

Step 4: Ask them to meet you at an unfamiliar destination. When they arrive celebrate their commitment to self-sufficiency. (Have them meet you for ice cream ©)

TIP 3: Talk with family and determine where they are lacking self-sufficiency. You as a volunteer might notice a pattern of dependency.

Example: The family always calls you when they have a renewal appointment at the DES office for their food stamps. Tell the family you would like to help them learn about the DES office. When it comes time for their next appointment use tip 2 to create and achieve their goal.

Common dependencies: paying bills (electricity, gas, rent loans, car payments), making and keeping doctor's and dentist appointments, renewal appointments for DES office, using the bus, going to ESL classes, holding down employment, looking for new employment, taking and getting children from school, day to day activities.

Non-dependent activities: cultural questions, financial matters with severe consequences, questions of US law, immigration papers or questions, taxes, learning English, etc.

TIP 4: Remember the refugees' past. Refugees were at one time very self-sufficient people in their own country. They have survived a great deal in their lives. Most of them have moved several times during their life and have experienced many different cultures and traditions. They have traveled halfway across the world to live an entirely new life. They are very capable people. Although the family is blessed to have you helping them adjust to life in the US, remember they will survive without you. It is ok to say; "no I cannot help you with that." Or even better yet "I really believe that you can do it on your own, why don't you give it a try."

TIP 5: Any place of business that receives Title V funding from the government is by law required to provide appropriate translation. This includes the DES office, medical offices, police department and schools. Refugees have the right to receive these services. Show them how to get these services, so they can become self-sufficient when going to these appointments. Many times the service is done through a phone translation service. Often the person at the front desk is unaware that such a service exists. Remind them to ask.

TIP 6: Teaching self-sufficiency has the greatest long-term effects. It not only empowers refugees to take bold steps, it gives them self-confidence and self-worth. It frees you from the day to day worries of the family and allows you to share with them fun and cultural activities. After all that's why you signed up to volunteer!

TIP 7: One final thought- put yourself in their shoes.

Example: Your family has a doctor's appointment and they have been there before. How do you suppose they are feeling? Are they scared? Are they anxious? Are they feeling helpless? Do they feel like it would be easier if you just did it for them? Do they feel embarrassed asking for help all the time? Is this dependency cutting away at their self-worth?

Suppose you empower them to go by themselves. They go and are successful, now they feel self-confident and self-reliant. You have given them a bigger gift than you would have if you had just taken them and done everything for them. You have taught them self-sufficiency!

"Give a man a fish; he'll eat for a day. Teach a man to fish; he'll eat for a lifetime."