

# Volunteer handbook



## So you would like to brave the geckos!

There is a big chance if you have come this far that you have had a good look at the green gecko website. If not, it would be a perfect time to do so. The most relevant information for you is on the 'volunteering' page. There are some handy hints and important rules and guidelines that will be essential for a positive volunteering experience.

In addition to the website we have put together this document that will hopefully prepare you even more. If you are a successful applicant and you decide you are definitely coming, then please print off a copy and bring it with you (or keep handy in your email folders) to refer to as needed, some things may not relate to you as much now as they will once you arrive.

### :: STEPS TO GET YOU THERE

1. Once you have read the website and this Volunteer handbook and you are still keen to brave the geckos then,
2. Fill out the attached Volunteer Application form and return it to [volunteer@greengeckoproject.org](mailto:volunteer@greengeckoproject.org).
3. When you hear back from us as a successful applicant... congratulate yourself, brace yourself and start planning your adventure!

### :: PERSONAL THINGS TO DO BEFORE YOU COME

We are hesitant to give you a list of must do's as there is a tonne of travel info out there on the world wide web that is a lot more up to date than what we can give you. Besides, we have found the most valuable volunteers are the most independent. With the everyday dramas that go with 70 street kids and their families, we need our volunteers 'to hold their own' (to be as self sufficient as possible).

### :: THE KIDS

The sad reality is that these children, as young as 5 years old, have been the primary breadwinners for their families. While they are thankfully off the streets and not begging now, for years they were forced to beg and sleep unaccompanied on the pavement, defenceless to abduction, abuse and disease. Their family living conditions are desperate; extreme poverty, alcoholism, substance, physical, emotional and sexual abuse is high.

We have some staggering statistics we hope will put their backgrounds into perspective. 100% of the kid's eldest sisters (not at gecko) are prostitutes. 100% of their brothers have been in jail. The Social Services of Cambodia outlines that "As with many post-conflict countries, Cambodia has a high rate of violent crime. Men typically experience public violence from gang members, peers and authorities. Women are more likely to experience sexual violence and assault and domestic violence from men. For many children, such violence is 'normalized' from an early age".

While there are no stats available on the amount of sexual abuse that occurs in Cambodia, here are some stats from Australia to understand how common sexual abuse is - 1 in 3 women and 1 in 6 men are abused before the age of 18 (source: <http://www.casa.org.au>). If the figures are this high in Australia and keeping in mind Cambodia's high rate if

violent crime we can assume these figures are much higher for Cambodia. Many of the children's parents have died or are dying from HIV/AIDS, for this reason and for general medical safe practices; we ensure you take full precaution if treating a child for wounds and illnesses. The truth is we don't know which child has a transmittable disease (of any type) so it's best not to guess and to be safe always.

Once you meet the children now, it will be hard to imagine the abuse they have encountered, as the majority of time they are happy and healthy and thriving with the love and care they now receive. A word of caution, there will be times the children will act out for 'no apparent' reason. We are not psychologists but we do know that old trauma can be triggered at any time. If you suspect this to be the case, please don't tackle it on your own, let the directors know as soon as you do. It is also important to be realistic about your expectations of the kids.

Our home with 70 kids is larger than the average household so it is bound have more difficulties than a typical family, teenagers will be teenagers and will do what they can to get out of doing their chores, kids push boundaries and ours are no different. While the kids are aware of their boundaries at Green Gecko, it is important that your expectations are realistic when it comes to their behaviour. It is also important that volunteers do not pass judgements on the children or Green Gecko, as mentioned before Green Gecko is a home for these kids and generally people do not usually walk into families and people's homes and make judgements so we request the same respect from our volunteers, enter your volunteering experience with an open mind.



## Helpful hints and strategies to get you thru a green gecko day!

### :: WORKING WITH CHILDREN

By now you have given some thought to why you are coming to Green Gecko, what your expectations are, and how much time and energy you have to give. As you know, children need to be in a safe and caring environment to thrive. They need their carers to show them respect, honesty, patience, and understanding... and a good sense of humour is really important. We have designed this working booklet outlining the children's normal day and what expectations they/we will have of you. Most of it you will already know through your own commonsense, experience or training, nevertheless there is no harm in reviewing them:

**Safety** - The children's safety is everyone's responsibility. Activities need to be safe. Where there is a risk, think about how you will manage that risk. Your own safety is paramount also.

**Maintaining Boundaries** - Clear professional boundaries are essential during your volunteering experience at Green Gecko. Think about the relationships you had with your teachers at school. The role of volunteers is to be 'friendly' with the kids but not 'friends'.

**Honesty** - You need to be honest, do not promise things you cannot deliver, doing so will make the children feel unworthy. Be true to yourself: it will give a good example for them to follow.

**Understanding** - We all need to be shown understanding and these kids are no different. What are they feeling, are they tired, hungry, hurting? Are they confused, distressed or unhappy? Observing each child will help you to pick up on how they are feeling. Take time to make observations and respond to what you see and feel. If a child is sitting alone in the corner gently approach and share their space for a while give them a hug, and reassurance, try to follow their interests.

Remember children go a little step forward, then perhaps a little step back. They may have very little understanding of English. They may be relying totally on your body language to interpret what you want them to do. Give them time and keep calm. If you feel you are losing your patience and you start to feel stressed (it happens!), give yourself some space. Tell the other carers/volunteers and take a little break.

**Sense of humour** - Being in a playful mood is the basis of all play. Any game or interaction depends on our inner mood. You can play with a child without any props if you have a good imagination and you are feeling playful. If an adult is too

serious a child will pickup on this and it will worry them. Children live in the present and they love to play. They learn well through play because it is a happy time without fear or stress to block their learning ability. Adults can live in the past or the future and they forget how to relax and live in the moment and feel playful. So bring yourself into the moment.

[Building self esteem and self reliance](#) - When we are given opportunities to achieve, to learn and take a chance and give something a try without being ridiculed we begin to build a strong feeling of self worth, a good feeling about ourselves. When we live with fear, with abuse and mistrust (as most of these kids have done) our self esteem, our feelings of worth disappears. We become afraid, afraid to try anything new, we are frightened and depressed and so it is hard to open our minds and take in new information because we are in "fight or flight" mode. That is why it is so important that we present the children with the right environment. Unfortunately most of our kids do not get any support at home, little encouragement and not much praise. So at Green Gecko we constantly go into raptures of 'well done' and 'that's fantastic' to the kids, even if they just drew a couple of lines on a piece of paper.

Things we can do to build children self esteem:

- Show respect & kindness & trust.
- Be attentive and listen (difficult when they are all vying for you!).
- Don't pass judgements on the children.
- Call them by their name (it will take a while!).
- Try to give all children equal attention (even the ones quiet ones in the corner).
- Appreciated them just the way they are, enjoy their individuality (these kids certainly have spirit!).
- Give them plenty of eye contact (not something they are use to).
- Give your time to them, (the precious gift is you giving them your attention).
- Give clear uncomplicated messages (not easy when their English is not fluent).
- Use open body language. Open arms, smiling face, eye contact, face to face listening, a gentle hug, or a pat on the shoulder, all give an open interested message.
- Don't tower over them. Coming down to their level works wonders; we are a lot bigger than them and generally so were those that have abused them.
- Help them achieve and praise their efforts (like all kids, they thrive on it and have had little of it).
- Children need to practice what they know and take a chance by trying the unknown. We need to give them positive support to take that chance. What does it matter if that attempt is not perfect? The outcome should be that they feel good about what they did achieve so they will be happy to attempt it again tomorrow.

## :: GUIDING CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOUR

When guiding children's behaviour it is important to give positive guidance. So instead of saying "Don't do that." say "Do this please?" In other words tell them or physically show them what you do want them to do; because of the language barriers communication might sometimes be difficult. If you want them to drink some water, take them to the water and drink some yourself, put a cup in their hand. Lead by example.

- Use short instructions, one thing at a time. Have realistic attitudes to what you expect of them, remember they are learning and they respond best to being noticed when they are doing well.
- Praise is a fabulous tool. Find the child who is behaving appropriately and praise that child, make a fuss of that child.
- Noisy and very appealing children tend to get a lot of attention (only the squeaky wheel gets oiled). It is your responsibility to draw the quiet children to you. It's not easy to not show favouritism.
- Remember play is exciting and noisy and busy and sometimes looks like out of control chaos.
- Be consistent. If you say no mean no. If you say, no- no- yes, you are giving a confused message.

- Be calm but firm. Children who are disruptive or rude or physically too rough with other children should be told a strong no and if they persist they should be asked to leave the activity. Do not put up with bad behaviour, especially from the older children.
- Never hit or shout at a child. Such behaviour is abuse and something they experience far too much at home. Once you are here we will have guidelines how to conduct discipline and the directors and staff will there to help.
- At Green Gecko we have more of a western approach to children's behaviour management and our Khmer staff are still learning. The way we manage the kids' behaviour is not the same way they would have been brought up or even the way they would bring up their own children. Even though as a volunteer you are the 'new kid on the block' it is ok to be assertive if you see a child not respecting or listening to one of our staff. This will be explained further when you arrive, but if you are unsure at any point please check with the volunteer coordinator.

## :: GROUPS

Because the majority of children have not come from a stable and caring family environment, we have created smaller family environments to belong to. They have their own coloured t-shirts and bandanas that let you know where they belong: Singing Snakes (red), Mighty Monkeys (Blue), Buzzing Bees (yellow), Cool Crocodiles (Pink) and Fabulous Frogs (green), Energetic Elephants (purple) and Terrific Tigers (orange). The groups (families) sit together for lunch, do their chores together and work as teams when they have carnival or sports. They also do their activities together.

## :: GROUP FRIEND

This will be you. Each volunteer will be assigned a group to be a special friend to (this will change each week or so). You will wear the appropriately coloured bandana, sit with them at lunch and speak English. This is your main role, at lunch time we have an 'English only' rule, they kids need to practice their English as much as possible and this is where you come in. Each group has an House Aunt and Uncle, if they are sick, need a new book for school they see their house uncle or aunt, if a child asks you for anything like this, please redirect them back to their house uncle or aunt.

## :: CHILDREN'S E DIARIES

We have found the best way of you getting to know the kids is to provide a small e-diary on the child in your 'group', some interesting conversations you have had with them, something funny they did or said. Or even if they are noticeably quiet or not feeling well. It doesn't have to be much, just a couple of sentences. Please email your e-diary to your volunteer coordinator at the end of each week.

Here is a great example:

*\*\*\*\* is maturing every day and becoming much more confident. She is blossoming into a lovely young lady. Today she has just been elected as the group leader for bees. Well done.*

*\*\*\*\*has been quiet reserved. She tends to sit a bit apart from the rest of the group in the lunch hut, she will always reply if asked something but tends not to instigate conversations.*

*\*\*\*\* has stopped crying before going to New York school in the afternoon, which has got to be good. He has a back to front week, in that every piece of clothing that he has been wearing he has worn back to front, pants T shirts the lot.*

### QUOTE OF THE WEEK:

*When asking \*\*\*\* what happens when we cross the international dateline her reply was "we all die". ☺*

## :: VOLUNTEER MEETINGS AND LESSON PLAN THURSDAYS

Twice a week the volunteers have a meeting. On Wednesday we have our volunteer meeting. We share our adventures of the past week, we discuss issues we might have had...

Thursdays we come together to plan the following week's activities. Because preparation is the key to less stress and more fun! 😊

## :: CODE OF ETHIC

We follow the Early Childhood Australia's Code of Ethic for working with each other and with the children. Please go into their web site and read the Code of Ethics. [www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au](http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au)

## :: BEING PROFESSIONAL

Taking a professional approach to your volunteering is so important that we are mentioning it twice 😊. Some past volunteers have taken a more relaxed approach to their service simply because they weren't getting paid for it. Obviously it is in the best interests of the kids to be as ordered and consistent as we can. We hope you will feel a great sense of achievement from taking a professional approach to your work with us. We have created some guidelines here to make things 100% clear

- No substances (drugs or alcohol) on the Green Gecko premises. Smoking is only allowed outside the Gecko gates and not in full view of the kids
- Please do not turn up to Gecko hung over or smelling of alcohol, if you have a break during the day, do not consume any alcohol. Most of the kids have witnessed the destruction of alcoholism within their families so it is essential that we do not give them any reason to doubt the security they feel at Green Gecko. Having volunteers turning up smelling of alcohol is not comforting for them. Please ensure that you are well rested to have the energy to keep up with the kids.
- Please do not wear your Green Gecko volunteer t-shirts while you are out socialising in the evening. If you are known as a Green Gecko volunteer in Siem Reap, please be aware that your behaviour reflects Green Gecko and behave accordingly. It is a very small town.

## :: RESPECTING KHMER CULTURE

Khmer culture is quite intricate and while our kids and staff are great at making exceptions and understand that 'barang' (western people) do not always understand their complex culture, the kids at Green Gecko have come up with a few tips on what they find important and are happy to share some of these with you! It's ok if you forget, but it is nice to make an effort!

In Khmer culture, as in many Asian cultures, it is believed that **the head holds positive energy and the feet release negative energy**. It is good to keep this in mind as you may notice that some forms of manners are based on this belief. Some examples include:

- Never hitting someone (especially if older) on the head
- Not pointing your feet at someone when you are sitting down, folding your feet under you or directing them in another direction (this is especially important if you go to a pagoda or are around a monk or older person).
- Never throw a shoe at someone or hit them with it (has happened in a joking manner before!)
- Not stepping over people if they are laying down, including over their legs as this is giving them your negative energy!
- You may notice that a younger person will never sit on a higher level than an older person or someone important like a monk
- It is impolite to throw things at people. To be polite people will pass something with 2 hands if it is someone old or in an important role. With people younger than you it is ok to pass with 1 hand.

**Khmer people are traditionally modest**; although you may see things changing slowly it is still considered polite to dress modestly. Therefore it is important that you wear clothes that cover you: ie, no cleavage, bellies or butts poking out! We have made this easy for volunteers by supplying gecko crew t-shirts that you are required to wear when you are at Green Gecko. By wearing long shorts or skirts (not above knees) and by being careful how you sit when wearing skirts, you will be sure not to offend anyone.



## Rules of Conduct with the children

These rules may seem harsh and unnecessary at first, but please be assured we have very serious reasons behind them. If you would like to learn more about the reasons why we are so protective, please don't hesitate to ask management.

- PLEASE DO NOT SOCIALISE WITH THE CHILDREN OUTSIDE GECKO UNLESS IT HAS BEEN APPROVED AND ARRANGED BY THE DIRECTORS.
- PLEASE DON'T BUY/GIVE INDIVIDUAL PRESENTS TO THE CHILDREN THIS INCLUDES PARENTS OF THE CHILDREN ALSO (favouritism causes jealousy and self esteem issues).
- NO ADULT IS TO BE ALONE WITH A CHILD AT ANYTIME (for your protection as well the child we ask you to be with another adult or be in clear view of another adult).
- PLEASE DO NOT TAKE PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE CHILDREN WHILE THEY ARE SHOWERING OR IN A STATE OF UNDRRESS (this is to protect their privacy and you from allegations).

We understand that our volunteers have the best intentions, but to go against these practices could make the children vulnerable to people who are not as trustworthy as you. The children's long term safety and wellbeing are our highest priority. We are sure you can understand our position.



## Time Table

The Green Gecko Centre is a 24 hour/365 day operation. The main hours for Volunteers are Monday to Friday 8:15 to 4:15pm (although there may be some special outings or events outside these hours). Saturday is mostly a free day; the kids play sport, do a little art, ride their bikes, play on the computers and hanging about. We ask each volunteer to spend a couple of hours at gecko every second Saturday... just for the fun of it.

### :: MONDAY TO FRIDAY

#### MORNING SESSION

- Older kids go to Khmer School from 7am - 10.30am Monday to Friday.
- Younger kids are at Gecko for Activities, Khmer studies and English class.

#### AFTERNOON SESSION

- Younger kids go to Khmer School from 1:30pm - 4:30pm Monday to Friday.
- Older kids are at Gecko for Activities, Khmer studies and English class.

### What to do during the following events:

Classes: In one session (morning or afternoon) the kids rotate between 3 different activities. Khmer studies (taught by Khmer teachers), English class (taught by a permanent English teacher) and Activities (taught by YOU ☺). The only day that is different from this structure is Thursday when the kids are studying boxkator (an ancient martial art). This day we use for activity planning , organising, duties...

The Traffic Light System: Activity time is started with a one minute traffic light system and brain gym exercises, we do this by using movement activities to enhance the kids full potential as learners; the children are to start with one minute

at red including brain gym exercises, where they are silent and clear their thoughts before green and starting the lesson or activity.

Assembly: Children sit for assembly, please encourage them to sit down and calm down. Please do NOT chat with other volunteers at this time, as you will see any little thing is the greatest distraction to these children. During assembly time we meditate, introduce new volunteers and sadly say goodbye to the ones who are leaving, present awards or have a sing song. Assembly is also a general house keeping and information time. Volunteers are welcome to raise any issues they feel is important at this time.

Children's lunchtime: All group friends are invited to sit and chat with their group for lunch. Please remember to wear your coloured bandana so they know you are one of them. Again, your main role here is to speak English with the kids and try and encourage the quiet ones to practice also. This is also a good opportunity to get info on the kids for your e-diaries.

Chore time: All of the kids are responsible for keeping Green Gecko clean, emptying garbage, watering the garden, cleaning the playground. There is a schedule of cleaning that the kids follow, with an elected Group Leader (one of the Geckos) and the house uncle and aunties are there to check that the Group Leader has supervised the chores properly. If you see some kids hanging around, check they have done their chores and if not gently guide them to getting their chores done.

Shower and hair washing: The Khmer staff will organise the showers but if you see some kids running a direction AWAY from the shower block, a little redirection would certainly be appreciated. The children wash in the open with a traditional 'krama' (checked scarf) wrapped around them like a sarong. Volunteers are **not allowed** to be in the wash area at this time.



## Planning Activities

At green gecko we want to make sure that our volunteers give 100% of their energy 100% of the time at the centre so they AND the kids make the most of their visit. Preparation is the key to less stress and more fun. Below are a couple of sample activity planners To give you an idea on how simple they can be.

### Things to remember when planning an activity

- Firstly, is it safe, if not, what are the risks and can you manage them?
- The kids have their own activity groups based on their ability. So you would change your teaching techniques accordingly. Each group would have around 10 kids
- How will you manage it with children who have little English? Think about holistic communication, your body language is a valuable tool
- We base our activities around a 3 monthly study theme.
- What materials will you need for this activity? Remember you can buy things here and they are mostly very reasonably priced. Green Gecko does have some materials but if you think your activity needs certain items that you can easily gather and bring from home then please do so. Being flexible and resourceful is the key, improvisation is often required.
- Don't underestimate the power of creative play as a learning tool.
- Will it be fun for you? If you enjoy it they will too, so choose things you enjoy doing.
- Don't get stressed-out about your activities, it's not about being perfect. It's about the journey, so make the process happy and relaxed for you as well as the kids. We also have weekly evaluations to make sure your activities are on track and to discuss any issues you might have.
- If the plan is not working make some changes and go with the flow... or ditch it altogether and start something new.
- Remember to trust the children to take ownership of an activity. They are normally enthusiastic, but sometimes not. If they lose interest gather them back and give them more of a role to play, make them important to the activity.
- One of the main prerequisites for our volunteers is flexibility and this is especially important within our activities. Things often change and you need to be flexible with fitting into wider plans within the centre, you might make a lesson plan that you never get to use, we need volunteers who can 'roll with the punches'.

## Sample Activity Plans

These two examples are kept very basic. In Green Gecko we would plan out much more detailed, and have variation for the different ability groups etc.

**Current 3 monthly subject: "The Olympics"**

### :: ME AND MY PLANET ACTIVITY

*Me and my planet we study on Monday, it's a theoretical class about our theme (keeping the planet green). It often sets the flow for the rest of the week's activities.*

<b>Time:</b>	45 min
<b>Goal/Objective</b>	Study the history of the Olympics
<b>The process:</b>	<p>The volunteers are dressed as ancient Greeks in a toga. From "scroll" they announce that the Olympics are coming to Green Gecko.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Writing out a timeline so kids understand how long ago the first Olympics were held. We put flashcards on that are related to the kids (when Ankor wat was build for ex.)</li> <li>- We use the globe to show where Greece is. How far is that from Cambodia?</li> <li>- We tell the old legend of the origin of the Olympics (story about Zeus). Afterwards the kids write the story in their own words. We make a word list of words that are new.</li> </ul> <p><i>This activity could be used for all our classes. You would change your teaching style, and difficulty of the words and your story though.</i></p>
<b>Materials:</b>	Toga - scroll - flashcards - story - globe - activity books - stationary box

### :: LOGIC ACTIVITY

*"logic" is an activity to enhance the problem-solving part of the children's brains. Eg: maths riddles, bingo, word associated games etc. Also for Logic we use our current theme ("keeping the planet green"). It could be as simple as changing the words of an existing game.*

<b>Time:</b>	45 min
<b>Goal/Objective</b>	Using maths in a creative form. Trigger creative and logic thinking.
<b>The process:</b>	<p>We have prepared different math riddles (based on Olympic games) witch we give the kids as a class challenge/ individual challenge/ challenge for pairs...</p> <p>ex.: The 100 meter freestyle swimming during the Olympics games of 2010 we have Pov, Saron, Kunthea, Kory and Siengly competing. Pov came in ahead of Saron. Pov finished after Kunthea. Kory beat Kunthea but finished after Siengly.</p> <p>Where did Kory finished? Where did Pov finished? Who won the gold medal?</p> <p><i>This example would defiantly be used for our older and advanced class!</i></p>
<b>Materials:</b>	Stationary box - Activity books - prepared math riddles in Olympic style!



## Final note

From experience, the volunteers who enjoy themselves the most (and we have the most fun with) are independent, flexible, quick thinking resourceful souls, with an innate ability to go with the flow. Despite our organised appearance (looks can be deceiving ☺) we are still fundamentally a big raucous home for 70 former street kids in a developing nation. We have no prior experience and are by no means a well oiled institution. Programs will change at a moments notice, we will improvise and be spontaneous as need arises. We have no human resources department and times may get tough. There will likely be tantrums, traumatised children and even the odd victim of domestic abuse. The children have head lice and snotty noses. There is seldom poo and vomit, but it does happen. Travelling in a developing country (for those new to the experience) is not a walk in the park and dealing with 70 formerly abused street children makes the path even rougher. BUT in saying that, if you have what it takes and are not faint hearted, then being a Green Gecko Volunteer can be one of the most rewarding experiences of your life.

**We will leave you now with a few words from a past (and returning) volunteer:**

*"We all live our lives day-to-day & in doing so we often don't take time of give thought to the full impact of that which we do. I once read 'Everyone has a past which drives their future' & I believe these few words reflect the Green Gecko Project. Green Gecko provides hope & opportunity where previously there was none & the children there benefit so much from their experiences, education, & care provided them. As these children grow, Green Gecko will be perhaps the most singular influencing experience of their past & I have no doubt in my mind their futures will be so much brighter for the love & the opportunities created for them by Tania & Rem & the staff & volunteers fortunate enough to find themselves at Green Gecko.*

*I feel so privileged to have had the opportunity to spend time with this amazing Organisation. But it's certainly no picnic. You need roll with the punches, think on your feet, change & challenge your ideas at a moments notice. It is physically challenging keeping pace with the children, in what can be very hot uncomfortable conditions at times. Mentally & emotionally challenging because you are only too aware of very hard/abusive conditions these children suffered prior to arriving at Green Gecko. This manifests daily in the behaviour of individual children as/when something triggers memories of their past. You will work, you will teach, you will tend to cut, scratched & bruised bodies, you will cradle them when they are sick, you will cry, you will hurt deep in your heart, but in a most rewarding way... if you are up to it. Reward for self & life opportunity for the children of Siem Reap does not come easily but I for one look forward to returning time again.*

**Doug South Vic Australia**