



Orphanage Volunteering – Why to say no

Volunteering in orphanages has become a hugely popular way to “give back” when travelling abroad. Placements can be organised in many ways - including through travel agencies, NGOs, churches and missions groups, schools and universities, as well as directly with orphanages themselves. However, many children’s organisations are campaigning *against* this practice. Why?

Volunteering in orphanages is not in the best interests of the children

The majority of people who want to volunteer in an orphanage have very good intentions and the best interests of the children at heart. However, they may not realise that many of these centres that welcome volunteers and allow direct contact with children put children at risk in the following ways:

- **Normalising access to vulnerable children.** Orphanages are a target for those with harmful intentions towards children. Visitors with good intentions normalize the practice of allowing access of unqualified staff to vulnerable children – something that would not be permitted in their own country.
- **Disrupted attachment.** Children form attachments very quickly, particularly when their own relationships with their families have already been disrupted by separation and placement in a residential care setting. Every time a volunteer leaves, children are left behind. This can have a particularly adverse affect as they learn not to trust or invest in relationships. For very young children such disrupted attachments can also have adverse affects on how their brains develop.
- **Lack of appropriate skills.** Most volunteers are not qualified to work with children and have little understanding of the potential of their behaviour to negatively impact upon the emotional and social stability of children.

In addition to the above, child protection specialists, as well as care leavers themselves, have also articulated concerns about how the presence of international

volunteers can disrupt children's routines (such as education), and create confusions with regards to culture and identity. In addition, volunteering can contribute to the commodification of children, where they are seen as something to be "experienced" by a visitor, and can be encouraged to act "poor", or perform for visitors to solicit donations.

The "orphanage" myth

Studies have shown that approximately 80% of all children in "orphanages" worldwide have one or more living parent.¹ Most children in "orphanages" are not "orphans" and therefore the term "orphanage" is misleading, conjuring up images of children with no family to care for them.

Instead, we use the term "residential care" to refer to care provided in a non-family-based group setting, whether on an emergency, short term or long term basis, including small group homes.²

There are many reasons why a child may be living in a residential care centre. In some cases it is due to neglect, abuse, or abandonment. Research shows that in a majority of cases in developing countries, poverty is a driving factor, and centres are viewed as a way for children to access education, food, and healthcare.³ In other cases it is due to discrimination and lack of proper support services for the parents or caregivers of children with physical or intellectual disability.⁴ Whatever the reason, all children in a residential care centre have faced difficult experiences.

Residential Care should only ever be a last resort for a child

Over sixty years of research shows that growing up in residential care (also known as "institutionalisation") can have a negative impact on children's health, development, and life chances. Research has shown that children develop better in a family environment and that long-term institutionalisation is harmful to their cognitive, emotional, and social development.⁵ The risk of children suffering from

¹ Corinna Csáky (2009) Keeping Children Out of Harmful Institutions, Why we should be investing in family-based care. Save the Children.

² NGO Working Group on Children Without Parental Care, 'Identifying Basic Characteristics of Formal Alternative Care Settings For Children: A Discussion Paper', 2013.

³ Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation. (2011). *A Study of Attitudes Towards Residential Care in Cambodia*, 48 – 49.

⁴ Browne, K. (2009). The risk of harm to young children in institutional care. Save the Children, UK and The Better Care Network

⁵ Nelson, C., Zeanah, C., Fox, N. (May 2009). *The Effects of Early Deprivation on Brain Behavioural Development: Bucharest Early Intervention Project*. Oxford University Press.; Tobias, D. *Moving from*

violence, or physical or sexual abuse is much higher in residential care than in any other type of care setting.⁶ The Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, endorsed by the United Nations in 2009, state that governments should, wherever possible, promote family care, and prevent the separation of children from their parents.⁷

Well-managed, small-scale residential care is needed to support children and families at different times. However, if a child needs to stay in a residential care centre, this should be temporary, and as small-scale and family-like as possible until a better alternative (like family reintegration with support or foster care) is found. Institutionalisation is not appropriate for children under the age of three given they are at a critical stage of development where establishing one-to-one interaction and bonding are essential to their physical and emotional growth and well-being.⁸

The majority of developed countries have shifted away from providing support to children in residential care, to supporting instead children in a family environment. In the developing world the out-dated model of residential care remains prevalent, but many countries across all regions have made firm commitments to change the situation, and are moving to eliminate institutional care.

Volunteering in residential care centres is contributing to the growth of residential care

The practice of international volunteering in residential care centres such as orphanages in the developing world has become so popular that it is creating a demand for “orphans” and “orphanages”.

In some cases, these centres are being used as a response to poverty by well-intentioned individuals or organisations who wish to support communities, and do not realize that other types of care are not only cheaper, but also much more positive solutions for children. In other cases, “orphanages” are created as businesses; generating income from people willing to volunteer their time and

Residential Institutions to Community-Based Social Services in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. The World Bank. 2000.

⁶ Browne, K. (2009). *The risk of harm to young children in institutional care.* Save the Children, UK and The Better Care Network.

⁷ United Nations. “Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children”, 15th June, 2009, A/HRC/11/L.13, 9.

⁸ Christie Schoenmaker, Femmie Juffer, Marinus H. van IJzendoorn, and Marian J. Bakermans-Kranenburg - In A. Ben-Arieh et al. (eds.), (2014) *Handbook of Child Well-Being*, Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht

donate their money to help “orphans”. In addition, in countries such as Nepal, there is evidence of such centres being linked to child trafficking.

An increase in the number of residential care centres in a country indicates an increase in the separation of children and families. Volunteering in such settings supports this trend. The more funding that goes toward residential care centres, the more appealing they become for struggling families, who become convinced their child will have a better future in the centre than at home.

This isn't an isolated event, happening in one or two countries. Child protection specialists have expressed concern about the practice of international volunteering in a residential care centres in over 20 countries.

To help children, support their families and communities

There are millions of vulnerable children in the world, at risk of disease, exploitation, abuse, neglect, and death. To support these children, please consider learning about, working with, or donating to programs supporting children in families and at-risk communities. Such programs include family strengthening, economic development, positive parenting, social work training, family-based care alternatives, and the development of laws and policies to protect children.

Support families, not orphanages

If you have volunteered in a residential care centre, or have a connection to a residential care centre and would like advice or support regarding your experience, please contact the Better Volunteering Better Care global working group. This working group consists of organisations and individuals from the development, education, Christian faith, and travel sectors across the world. A member of the group will be happy to work with you, and put you in touch with support organisations in the relevant region

For more information visit:

www.bettercarenetwork.org/bcn-in-action/better-volunteering-better-care

Get in touch: volunteering@bettercarenetwork.org

BETTER VOLUNTEERING BETTER CARE

Other resources for best practice for international volunteering with organisations working with children

- comhlamh.org
- globalsl.org
- learningservice.info
- orphanages.no
- thinkchildsafe.com

This information is endorsed by:

