



How to volunteer responsibly: our top tips

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Volunteering is a great thing to do. But if you don't choose your experience wisely, you could end up doing more harm than good - both for you and the people you're trying to help. Here are our tips for how to volunteer responsibly.

With record numbers of students looking to gain valuable work experience, workplaces offering paid volunteer days for their employees, and retirees wishing to contribute after retirement – there is a growing demand for volunteering positions.

If you're interested in volunteering, we want you to have the best experience possible and make sure neither you, or the people you're trying to help, are taken advantage of during your adventure.

Here are our top tips on volunteering responsibly and having a truly positive impact:

1. Research, research, research

Does the organisation you plan to volunteer with have their own website? Do they have annual reports? Are they a registered charity? Everything you need to know should be available online and if it's not, request it. It's important to know as much as possible about the organisation you plan to volunteer with – their vision, their ethics and whether you're a good fit.

2. If there's a participation fee, ask questions

Most volunteering trips have a participant fee, and that's OK – as long as you know where the money is going. Organisations should be transparent about this and if they're not, ask yourself whether it's worth the risk of your hard-earned money falling into the wrong hands.

3. If you're not qualified to perform a skilled job at home, don't do it overseas

You may have read about teenage students building schools, laying bricks and installing pipes – but many of these projects are taking jobs from local tradespeople and some have to be redone soon after the students have gone. The same theory can be applied to teachers, nurses and all skilled positions – they require education and training to be performed well and provide the best outcomes for children. Volunteers also report feeling overwhelmed and stressed when performing tasks that are out of their skillset.

4. Will the community benefit long term?

Is your volunteer role taking a job that could be filled by a local worker? Or are you doing work without building the skills of the community so they're empowered to do it in the future? If the answer is yes, then you should think of other ways you can help the community. Perhaps a donation to a registered, reputable charity who is providing training and long-term sustainable development would be a better option. Or, if you have a specific skill, ask if you can provide training to local staff to upskill them in that area.

5. Sign something

How long is the project? What hours are expected from you? What will the project entail exactly? What is included in the volunteer fee (if there is one) – housing, food, transport? What are the outcomes of previous projects in terms of sustainable development and empowering local communities? How will your project contribute to these goals? Ask for and sign a contract of understanding so you don't run into any trouble.

6. Any voluntourism in orphanages should be completely avoided

A stream of visitors and volunteers to orphanages is psychologically disruptive, increases the risk of children being exposed to sex tourism and creates a demand for 'orphans' – so much so that 80% of children in orphanages are not in fact orphans.¹ The growing number of volunteers wanting to help out in orphanages has led to unscrupulous people setting up fake, horribly run orphanages for tourist demand.

This is such an escalating problem that we've joined forces with **Re Think Orphanages** to help spread the word and stop orphanage tourism.

We don't want to discourage volunteering overseas or at home – **far from it. We just need to make sure the needs of children and communities are put first, and volunteers are protected from corrupt operators around the world. Unfortunately, there are crooked charities, orphanages and schools who are exploiting children and families to make a profit, and we don't want them to take advantage of generous, kind-hearted volunteers.**

You can join our campaign to promote responsible volunteering right now by sharing this blog with your networks, and by reading about **Re Think Orphanages**.

¹ <https://wearelumos.org/the-problem>