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# Kids need families not 'voluntourism'

Gary Nunn

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The fictional Oliver Twist dared to ask for some more. Little orphan Annie dared to believe the sun'd come out - and tomorrow would be better. In real life, the children in orphanages today have little cause for optimism.

Orphans are used as cash cows in countries like Cambodia, Vietnam and Nepal. Corrupt orphanage directors embezzle funds and lure volunteers from Australia, deceiving them into thinking they're helping.



Tara Winkler (seen here with Cambodian children in 2007) set up her own orphanage in Battambang, in the west of the country, before turning away from centre-based care for children, which she now calls a "trap". Photo: Supplied

They're not. In fact, they're the problem. That's why the world's biggest school-based volunteer travel company, World Challenge, [has stopped offering orphanage trips for Australian volunteers](#). AsiaPac

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manager Mark Walters said: "Knowing what we know now, potentially not everything we did was constructive."

The ugly truth is unscrupulous operators capitalise on well-meaning Western guilt. Orphanage volunteering is an Aussie rite of passage that fulfils all the needs of the volunteer and none of the child.

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This week's change happened after lobbying from organisations like Rethink Orphanages, which wants to shift Australia's overseas aid engagement, and from people like Tara Winkler.

At last year's TEDx Sydney, Winkler spoke of her experience as a 19-year-old backpacking orphanage volunteer. She discovered kids catching mice to feed themselves, while the orphanage's director pocketed donated funds and abused the kids.

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In response, Winkler set up her own orphanage and learnt some Cambodian, but was horrified to hear the children talk of their mums and dads. Four out of five Cambodian "orphans" still have parents alive. In fact, [80 per cent of the world's 8 million "orphans" have one living parent](#). Winkler was spooked. She closed her orphanage and is now a powerful advocate for family-based care.



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Any Australian considering this sort of volunteering should be equally spooked: they're unwittingly participating in the "stolen generation" of our time. Kids are removed from poor families by force, for money or with false promises of a better life.





Tara Winkler rescued 14 children from their former, corrupt orphanage, where they were the victims of abuse and neglect. Photo: Supplied

But World Challenge is the only school-based volunteer company to stop orphanage visits. Reputable charities – Save the Children, Plan, Child Fund – adhere to UNICEF's guidelines and don't participate in the institutionalised care of kids. Other organisations still do, according to Leigh Matthews from Rethink Orphanages, including 51 per cent of faith-based charities. Fourteen per cent of Australian schools still operate orphanage trips, she says. More than half of all Australian universities still advertise orphanage placements.

A damning vocabulary has been coined around the practice: the portmanteau "voluntourism" and the alliterative "poverty porn".

Voluntourism is big business. In the past decade, it has become a \$173 billion-strong industry globally. The industry booms because of the demand for Western volunteers to meet and "help" "orphaned" children, not a rise in orphans.

Children are losers in institutionalised care. [They're 500 times more likely to take their own lives](#). Attachment and abandonment issues are common, exacerbated by hoards of volunteers swooping in, showering them with the affection they crave, then abruptly leaving.

Some charities shifted direction years ago, when they learnt of the harm institutionalised care caused kids. For almost four years, I worked for Barnardo's UK: long ago, one of the biggest orphanage providers. Their communications problem was telling the public that orphanages had closed and weren't the best model of care for kids. They became early champions of same-sex adoption and fostering, just as Barnardo's Australia did with couples like John Guthrie and Dennis Cash, who featured on this week's *Australian Story*. Widening the pool of potential carers meant less kids holed up in hellholes.

Matthews isn't an advocate for overnight closure of orphanages: "If there's no family-based care available, orphanages should be used as a last resort, for three months maximum."

Ultimately, non-government organisations offering orphanage voluntourism should shift their focus to family-based care agencies,

to promoting fostering and adoption and working within communities if children are genuinely orphaned or families are struggling to provide for their children, rather than removing children from them. Individuals can persuade their schools and universities to sever ties with orphanage voluntourism operators - and be more discerning with their charity donations. Senators have proposed a DFAT "smart volunteer" website.

And unscrupulous orphanage operators should continue to be exposed for treating kids as money spinners and denying them the most important thing every child has a right to: a family.

Gary Nunn is a freelance writer. Twitter: @garynunn1

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