

NEWS HOME

Push to end orphanage volunteering as World Challenge stops trips for students

BY THE NATIONAL REPORTING TEAM'S RUBY JONES

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PHOTO Antoinette Beaumont (in purple top) spent two weeks at a Cambodian orphanage in 2013.
SUPPLIED

The trend of Australian high school students going overseas to volunteer in an orphanage is about to come to an abrupt end.

Key points:

- World Challenge is ending its associations with orphanages by the end of this month
- It comes after lobbying from Rethink Orphanages, which says volunteering at orphanages causes harm to children
- However, some companies believe there's a need to run orphanage volunteering trips

The world's biggest school-based volunteer travel company, World Challenge, will no longer offer trips to orphanages in the developing world after research showed the practice was harming vulnerable children.

Advocacy agency ReThink Orphanages said a revolving door of volunteers was making abandonment and attachment issues even worse.

The evidence is compelling enough to convince World Challenge to quit the industry.

For 30 years World Challenge has been linking schools to volunteer projects in many countries including Cambodia, Vietnam and Madagascar.

It is big business. In the past decade, the volunteer tourism industry — known as voluntourism — has exploded, and is now worth \$173 billion globally, according to ReThink Orphanages.

'Overall I feel like I did more harm than good'

World Challenge has partnerships with 300 Australian schools and sent 150 children to orphanages last year.

Antoinette Beaumont went on a World Challenge trip in 2012 to a Cambodian orphanage. For two weeks, Antoinette and other students taught English, played sport with the kids and donated desks.

She has conflicting feelings about the adventure.

"To go overseas to experience an orphanage and experience how people really do live, and the struggles that kids our own age face, I think that is an incredible experience," she said.

"On the other hand, if that is at the expense of children in these Third World countries, then I think that is absolutely terrible and horrific."

Keily Dimsey said she now thinks she was a hindrance to the children at the Vietnamese orphanage she visited.

The group of students did things they weren't qualified to do, and there was little supervision or organisation of activities, the 22-year-old said.

"I don't think we had the right to be in kids' rooms that were sick, and playing with them and changing things that likely didn't need to be changed," she said.

"I don't regret that I did it, because I'm glad that I now understand a bit more about why it could be damaging, but overall I feel like I did more harm than good — along with everyone else around me."

Plain and simple, it's not good for the kids: World Challenge

World Challenge said it had realised it was doing the wrong thing, and would end its associations with orphanages by the end of this month.



PHOTO Mark Walters said World Challenge was walking away from the industry.
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"Knowing what we know now and with the benefit of hindsight, potentially not everything we did was constructive," Asia Pacific manager Mark Walters said.

"Whilst it might have been good for our kids in the past, it's plain and simple that it's not good for the kids over there, and it's not something that we can continue doing."

At its peak, World Challenge worked with 12 orphanages around the world. Recently, it had been associated with five in Cambodia, Vietnam, Mongolia and Madagascar.

The last volunteer trips were completed in the middle of the year, and the company is now in the final stages of negotiating its exit from the industry.

"In continuing to go to orphanages we were perpetuating this reliance and dependency on

those sorts of institutions," Mr Walters said.

The company's decision comes after lobbying from Rethink Orphanages, and the organisation's Leigh Mathews is hoping other companies will follow suit.

"There are a lot of companies that facilitate these trips," she said.

"There are a lot of schools that have individual relationships with orphanages overseas, and there are a lot of charities that support and run orphanages."

Do you think we should avoid volunteering in overseas orphanages? Join the discussion.

Travel industry doesn't collect data on orphanage trips

According to research by ReThink Orphanages, 14 per cent of Australian schools had an association with an orphanage in 2016.

More than half of all Australian universities advertise orphanage placements as part of their international volunteering opportunities, the research also found.



PHOTO According to Leigh Mathews, there is no such thing as a "good" orphanage.
ABC NEWS: RUBY JONES

But finding out exactly how much the travel industry is making from orphanage trips is difficult because companies aren't required to report it, Ms Mathews said.

"We simply don't have the data and we don't have the mechanisms in place to collect that data, whether that is at a government level, a regulatory level, or self-reporting,"

she said.

"In my experience, I haven't found the travel sector to be overly transparent in talking about this issue, and how much money they are making off orphanage tourism, and they are not required to report that here in Australia."

According to research from charity Lumos, there are 8 million children living in orphanages around the world, but 80 per cent have at least one living parent or family member.

Many of the children are from poor families, with parents convinced their children will have a better life at the orphanage, according to Lumos.

Parents are often discouraged from visiting or maintaining a relationship with their child, the charity said.

Ms Mathews said the reason orphanages were booming was not because there were more orphans, but because there was a demand from Western volunteers who want to meet and help orphaned children.

"If you were to map the geographic location of a lot of orphanages, and overlay tourist hotspots, you would see a very close correlation," she said.

'Not all orphanages are out to exploit children or volunteers'

At this stage, World Challenge is the only school-based volunteer company to sever ties with orphanages.

Some companies, such as the New Zealand-based IVHQ, have said they would continue to run orphanage volunteering trips because they believed there was a need for them.

In a recent blog post, IVHQ founder Dan Radcliffe wrote that ending orphanage volunteering would be "punishing the good orphanages out there who genuinely need the help".

"In most cases, volunteers in orphanages provide a vital source of hands-on support, energy and skill that makes a huge difference to the lives of children, and has a positive flow-on effect in the wider community," he wrote.

"Not all orphanages are run by bogeymen out to exploit children or volunteers."

But according to Ms Mathews, there is no such thing as a "good" orphanage because all institutional care is bad for a child's development.

Children should only be placed in an orphanage as a last resort, if there are no family-based care options available, and for a maximum of three months, she added.

"We have over 70 years of research to back up that that model of care causes more harm to children than it does help," she said.

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Annette Mansfield

19 hours ago

I totally agree that there is an orphanage "industry" in Cambodia which needs much closer scrutiny as short-term volunteers can harm children.

However, many Cambodians continue to abandon children born with significant disabilities (it is "bad Karma" or due to extreme poverty and inability to care for their increased needs.)

I am unaware of anyone making comments in the media about disability. Most orphaned children are adopted by family members in Cambodia and it is very unlikely that a child with severe cerebral palsy for example would be adopted.

I am volunteer doctor in a small NGO's volunteer management team working in a Phnom Penh government orphanage, caring for 115+ children. We are totally financially independent from the Government management, and fortunately there is no corruption. It specialises in orphaned or abandoned