

# HOMECOMING

BECAUSE CHILDREN THRIVE IN FAMILIES



## Short-term Missions and Volunteering: Safeguarding Orphans and Vulnerable Children

Christians have a Biblical mandate to care for orphans and vulnerable children. Scripture emphasises this repeatedly<sup>1</sup>. However, sometimes the outworking of our care can cause more harm than good. Orphanage visiting or volunteering has been a common activity for many churches and individual Christians for decades.

Those who volunteer with children at orphanages usually do so with good intentions and a genuine desire to help vulnerable children, but sometimes give little thought to the means and method of that help (for example, volunteers who do not have appropriate skills or who take a local person's job, or volunteers who unwittingly cause harm to a child's emotional development). Unfortunately, good intentions do not automatically result in best practice.

This guide has been written to help those who are thinking about whether they should volunteer in an **orphanage** (or **residential care institution**, **children's village**, **children's home** or **centre**) and is meant as a starting point rather than a comprehensive response to this issue.

For more information, please refer to the list of recommended reading at the end of this guide.

**Next page: The Big Question**

<sup>1</sup>For example, James 1:27, Mark 9:37, Isaiah 1:17, Proverbs 31:8-9, Jeremiah 22:3, Exodus 22:22, Deuteronomy 24:17-19, Zechariah 7:9-10, and Matthew 25:35-40.

<sup>2</sup>Browne, Kevin. 2009. The Risk of Harm to Young Children in Institutional Care. Available at: [https://bettercarenetwork.org/sites/default/files/The%20Risk%20of%20Harm%20to%20Young%20Children%20in%20Institutional%20Care\\_0.pdf](https://bettercarenetwork.org/sites/default/files/The%20Risk%20of%20Harm%20to%20Young%20Children%20in%20Institutional%20Care_0.pdf)

[Accessed 11 June 2019]

# The Big Question

## Is it EVER appropriate to volunteer in an orphanage?

Child development and child protection experts, governments and non-governmental organisations, as well as Christian organisations around the world, all now agree that it is never appropriate to volunteer with children in an orphanage. Children living in orphanages have suffered the trauma of having been separated from their parents. This often causes attachment difficulties or disorders, where children may be overly affectionate towards complete strangers, forming unnaturally quick and unhealthy bonds<sup>2</sup>.

The revolving door of volunteers visiting children in orphanages and then leaving is extremely detrimental to children, and this stream of broken attachments further exacerbates already-existing trauma and attachment disorders. Children need and deserve consistent love and attention, and these needs should be met by permanent caregivers, rather than volunteers who come and go.

Unfortunately, many overseas orphanages do not conduct background or security checks on those who visit, and whilst most people are well-meaning, normalising access to children can also open the door to those with harmful intentions. When seeking to help vulnerable children, safeguarding and child protection should take precedence as the most important priorities.

Furthermore, the simple act of volunteering in an orphanage can unintentionally support and perpetuate an exploitative system. A high percentage of children living in orphanages are abused, maltreated, exploited, and even trafficked into or out of orphanages (known as **orphanage trafficking**<sup>3</sup>), and many of these institutions are kept open by the support and demand of international volunteers. So visiting and volunteering in an orphanage unhelpfully fuels the orphanage industry, with money being sent to fund orphanages rather than to programmes that strengthen and support families.

Responding to the plight of vulnerable children is part of what Christians are called to do, and short-term mission trips can indeed provide important opportunities to play a part in doing this. There is certainly a place for them, particularly in learning and becoming aware of the challenges facing families and communities to enable advocacy for support for them. However, serious thought needs to be given to how short-term missions are carried out and the ramifications they may have.

Children should not be the “‘means’ of creating an experience for teams, or a ‘means’ of achieving a team or church-centric goal. If due regard is not given for how this impacts children’s wellbeing (long- and short-term), then the practice is unethical.”<sup>4</sup> We therefore need a shift in focus from engaging with children to supporting and strengthening families, with long-term positive outcomes for children being the goal. There must be a strong commitment to child-safe short-term mission trips that do no harm.

---

<sup>3</sup>van Doore, Kathryn E. 2016. “Paper Orphans: Exploring Child Trafficking for the Purpose of Orphanages.” *The International Journal of Children’s Rights* 24(2). pp. 378-407.

<sup>4</sup>Nhep, Rebecca. 2016. *Short-term Missions: Ethical Engagement with Children*. Available at: [https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/accci/pages/145/attachments/original/1462758555/SHORT\\_TERM\\_MISSIONS\\_and\\_childrne.pdf?1462758555](https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/accci/pages/145/attachments/original/1462758555/SHORT_TERM_MISSIONS_and_childrne.pdf?1462758555) [Accessed 25 April 2019].

# If volunteering in an orphanage is not appropriate, what should I do instead?

The best way to help vulnerable children is to support programmes and organisations that strengthen families and communities, or that promote family-based care alternatives such as local fostering or adoption. This important work helps to prevent family breakdown and children being separated from their parents or relatives, and helps to find the best family-based alternatives when family reunification is not possible. It is important to find ways of supporting children that are sustainable and in their best interests, while also respecting their rights, privacy and identity. This should be the overarching motivation, far superseding the preferences, desires, and expectations of those volunteering.

A **good model** is one where there is no direct contact or interaction with children, but instead focuses on supporting parents, caregivers, staff, and the local community. We suggest a four-step model where you **investigate** the issue, **evaluate** your skills and the intended partnership, **participate** as a volunteer, and return home to **dedicate** yourself to continue to learn, support, and advocate for the needs of vulnerable children.

## The Big Answer

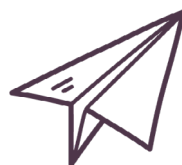
### Volunteer FOR children, not WITH children



**Investigate**



**Evaluate**



**Participate**



**Dedicate**

### Investigate

#### ...the issues facing orphans and vulnerable children in each context

Do thorough research and learn about the current issues facing orphans and vulnerable children in the context in which you are thinking about volunteering. Read extensively, making sure that your reading includes the voices of local child experts and, if possible, the children themselves. Find out about the specific challenges and obstacles that are negatively impacting vulnerable children in that context.

#### ...the need for overseas travel

Decide whether it is necessary to travel overseas in order to volunteer. Can the skills you have be used from abroad (e.g. graphic and web design, social media, marketing, fundraising, or finance), and the money you would have spent on travel be given to the project instead?

## Evaluate

### ...your motivations and expectations

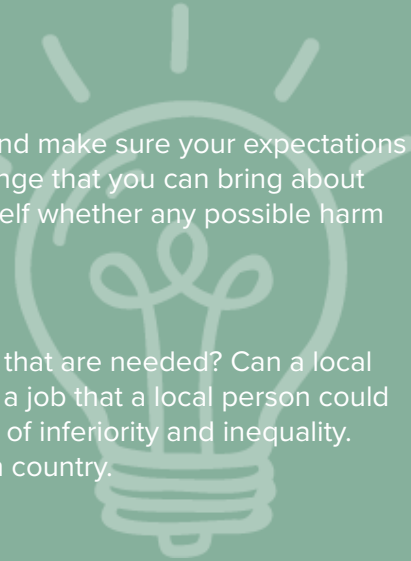
Be honest with yourself about why you are wanting to volunteer and make sure your expectations are realistic. Sustainable change takes time, so the amount of change that you can bring about on a short-term mission trip is most likely to be minimal. Ask yourself whether any possible harm could result from your actions.

### ...your skills

Think realistically about what you have to offer. Do you have skills that are needed? Can a local person provide the skill instead? It is important that you do not do a job that a local person could do, as this disempowers local communities and reinforces notions of inferiority and inequality. Think about what would be appropriate for volunteers in your own country.

### ...the partnership

Conduct a due diligence check on the partners and projects you are wanting to support, to ensure that they comply with best practice and good development principles (see the recommended reading list at the end of this guide for due diligence checklists). Partnerships cannot be based on friendship alone – there needs to be evidence of good practice, financial integrity, accountability and transparency. Longer-term partnerships are preferable, as this is more sustainable and can bring about lasting change.



Once you have thoroughly investigated and evaluated the reason and purpose of your mission trip, as well as your skills and on-the-ground partners, think through the following before and during your trip:

## Participate

### ...by learning

Lay down your assumptions and go with the desire to learn as much as possible about the context, culture, history, issues and challenges in caring for vulnerable and orphaned children. Ask questions and listen to the wisdom of local people working on-the-ground. Learn about development theory and practice. Make sure you do not fall into the trap of donor-driven programmes, where projects are chosen and run by donors and volunteers instead of local community members. Shadow and talk to local staff or members of the community, asking questions and building equal relationships where information is shared.

### ...by using your skills for good

- **to strengthen and support local capacities**
- **to support an orphanage transitioning to family-based care**

Help staff working with children in ways decided by them, making sure that you are not taking a job a local person could do. You could help local staff with website development, social media, English lessons, admin support, marketing, fundraising, parenting and business skills courses, accounting, finance, setting up databases, financial systems, etc. You could also use your skills in similar ways in order to assist staff from an orphanage that is transitioning to a family-based care model.

continued on the next page >>>

## Participate (cont.)

### **...by strengthening families**

Volunteer in a programme that focuses on strengthening and supporting families and preventing family breakdown and separation. This could include practical projects like improving sanitation and access to clean water, medical and nutrition support, food security, housing assistance, parenting courses, micro business skills, finance and budgeting skills, and education support. This would help families become self-supporting and would therefore enhance outcomes for their children. Similarly, you could also support family reunification programmes and, perhaps, lend practical help to a family who are getting ready for the return of their children.

## Dedicate

### **...yourself to continued reflection**

Reflect on what you have learned on your trip and what some of the ongoing actions could be, as you focus on building a long-term relationship with the partner programme. Are there any changes that you could make that would positively affect vulnerable children? For example, by becoming a responsible donor and supporting charities with good development practice.

### **...yourself to regular fundraising**

You could continue to support the programme by raising funds for their projects through organised events and campaigns.

### **...yourself to becoming an advocate**

Become a voice for the voiceless and advocate on behalf of children. Raise awareness of the need and become an advocate for child-safe short-term mission trips.

### **...yourself to continue using your skills to volunteer from home**

There are many skills that you could use from home in order to continue supporting work on the ground (e.g. graphic and web design, social media, marketing, fundraising, and finance).

### **...yourself to prayer**

Commit to praying for the staff and people in the community that you met on your trip. Pray for the work of the organisation and the children and families they are working with. Pray that children who are currently living in orphanages would find and experience the love and commitment of a family for life.

# Short-term mission centred on family-based care

## **ROK KERN – Children in Families – Cambodia**

Rok Kern is a short-term missions programme run by Children in Families, a local Cambodian NGO dedicated to providing high-quality family-based care for orphans and vulnerable children in Cambodia. It offers an ethical alternative to orphanage volunteering for groups who are interested in supporting vulnerable children, but without the harm caused by visiting children in orphanages. The programme focuses on child protection, missions, development and volunteering best practice, and equips school students and church members with the knowledge they need to become family-based care advocates. Before the trip, team members spend time together in interactive sessions, where they learn about the Biblical call to care for vulnerable children, theories of transformational change, the history of orphanages, and Cambodia's specific context. This study period culminates in a two-week trip where participants engage in hands-on cultural learning, visit significant historical and religious sites, and spend time with staff from some of Cambodia's leading family-based care NGOs. Groups come away with a personal knowledge of the work being done in Cambodia, relationships with local NGOs, and an advocacy, fundraising and partnership plan so that they can put their skills into action when they return to their home countries. Foundations are laid for long-term partnerships that ensure that vulnerable children in Cambodia are cared for in healthy, responsible and sustainable ways.

## Ten best practice principles

- 1 Put the wellbeing and best interests of children first in every decision**
- 2 Set healthy expectations and clear objectives**
- 3 Learn about orphans and vulnerable children in context**
- 4 Work with organisations that strengthen families and communities**
- 5 Conduct due diligence checks on the organisations you support**
- 6 Pursue sustainable and long-term partnerships**
- 7 Use your skills to support and strengthen the capacity of local staff**
- 8 Safeguard and protect children from harm (abide by safeguarding and child protection policies and procedures)**
- 9 Share stories, photographs and videos with permission and caution**
- 10 Advocate on behalf of children and their families**

“Desire without knowledge is not good, and whoever makes haste with his feet misses his way.”  
Proverbs 19:2 (ESV)

Visit [homecomingproject.org](http://homecomingproject.org) to sign up to our Homecoming email learning journey and to access more resources, videos, stories and guides.

## Further reading and resources

- **Checklists:**
  - › [Due Diligence Guidelines](#) – ACCI Relief
  - › [Partnership Due Diligence Check](#) - ACCI Missions & Relief
  - › [Ethical Short-Term Missions & Volunteering: Selecting an Ethical Trip \(for Individuals\)](#) – ACCI Missions & Relief
  - › [Avoiding Harm Self-Check](#) - ACCI Missions & Relief
- [Protecting Children in Short-Term Missions](#) – ACCI Missions & Relief (a guidance manual for churches and Christian organisations overseeing or coordinating short-term missions programmes)
- [Ethical Short-Term Missions Online Training and Toolkit](#) – ACCI Missions & Relief
- [Short-Term Missions: Guidance to Support Orphans and Vulnerable Children](#) – Faith to Action Initiative (best-practice guidance for churches, organisations, mission agencies, donors, educational institutions and faith-based organisations)
- [Standards of Excellence in Short-Term Mission](#) – S.O.E. (a code of best practice for short-term mission practitioners)
- [When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor...and Yourself](#) – Brian Fikkert and Steve Corbett
- [Helping Without Hurting in Short-Term Missions](#) – The Chalmers Centre (video resources for small groups based on the book listed above)
- [Ethical & Responsible Student Travel](#) – Save the Children and World Challenge (a self-assessment tool for schools and universities)
- [Going on a Short-Term Missions Trip](#) – ACCI video
- [Orphanage Volunteering: Why to Say No](#) – Better Care Network (infographic on orphanage volunteering and why it can be harmful)

We wish to acknowledge the following two documents that provided essential guidance in the writing of this guide: ACCI’s Protecting Children in Short-Term Missions and Faith to Action’s Short-Term Missions: Guidance to Support Orphans and Vulnerable Children.