FAITH to ACTION INITIATIVE

RETHINKING ORPHAN CARE:
An Introduction to Family Care

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INTRODUCTION

God's concern for the orphan is among the most prominent themes of Scripture, and the call to respond is repeated throughout the Old and New Testaments.

Christians have generously and selflessly responded to this call since the early church. In Rome, followers of Jesus would rescue children who had been left to die outside of the city wall, taking them into their homes to care for as their own. Christians have continued to respond to this biblical mandate over the years through foster care, adoption, and support of orphan care ministries around the world.

Today, the challenges facing orphaned and vulnerable children are significant with the impact of disease, poverty, war, substance abuse, mental illness, to mention only a few. Children around the world are living without a safe and loving family, including children whose parents have died, as well as those who are living on the streets, or experiencing neglect or violence in their homes.

Yet, despite this dire situation, there are also stories of hope, resilience, care, and sacrifice. Christians around the world are responding to the needs of these children in new and creative ways, adapting to prevent harm to children and ensuring that they remain in or are placed in safe and loving families. The church can step into a new era of support for **orphaned and vulnerable children**. Christians can reject long held misconceptions and instead embrace a vision of God's best for these children.

> ... learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.
>
> —*Isaiah 1:17 (NRSV)*

> Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.
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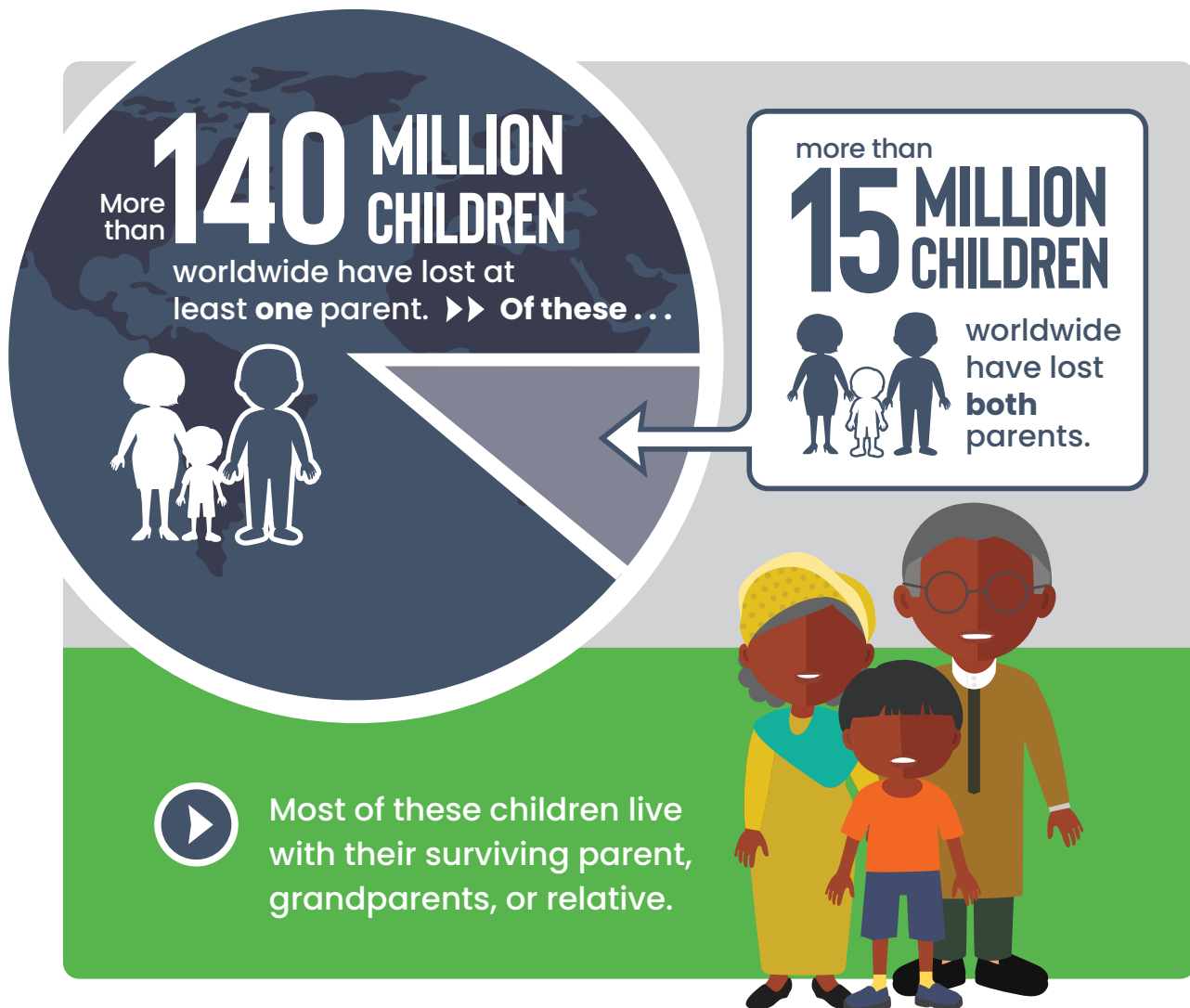> —*James 1:27 (NIV)*

📖 DEFINITION ⋮ "Orphaned and vulnerable children"

A term used to identify children who have either lost one or both parents, or children who face significant risks to their safety or well-being. It is an important term because the word "orphan" is often misused, being applied to children who have living parents, but are for some reason separated from their families.

WHO IS THE "ORPHAN"?

There is a lot of confusion about what the term "orphan" really means. The common understanding of the term orphan is a child who has lost both of his or her parents. However, statistics about orphans are based on the definition used by UNICEF and other global child welfare entities which includes children who have lost one or both parents. This definition is typically not what people think of when they think of an orphan. This is significant because most children who are labeled "orphan" actually have a living parent.

According to UNICEF, there are approximately 140 million orphans in the world[1]. However, this number includes those children who have lost one parent (single orphans), as well as both parents (double orphans). Fifteen million children in the world have lost both of their parents.

More than **140 MILLION CHILDREN** worldwide have lost at least **one** parent. ▶▶ **Of these . . .**

more than **15 MILLION CHILDREN** worldwide have lost **both** parents.

▶ Most of these children live with their surviving parent, grandparents, or relative.

More importantly, the vast majority of both single and double orphans live with a surviving parent, grandparents, or other relatives. In many cultures around the world extended family members, such as grandparents, aunts, and uncles, naturally step in to care for children who have lost their parents. Surprisingly, most children in the world labeled as orphans actually live with their family.

If most "orphans" live with their family, we must ask, "who is living in orphanages?" It's estimated that five to eight million children are living in orphanages around the world[2], however that number is likely very low, as data on children in orphanages is often not available. Of those children living in an orphanage, data from around the world suggests four out of five, or 80%[3], have at least one living parent and almost all have extended family members.

It's estimated that

5 TO **8** MILLION CHILDREN worldwide are living in orphanages.

80% of children living in an orphanage have at least

ONE LIVING PARENT

that's **4** OUT OF **5**

... and almost all of these children have extended family members. ◄••••
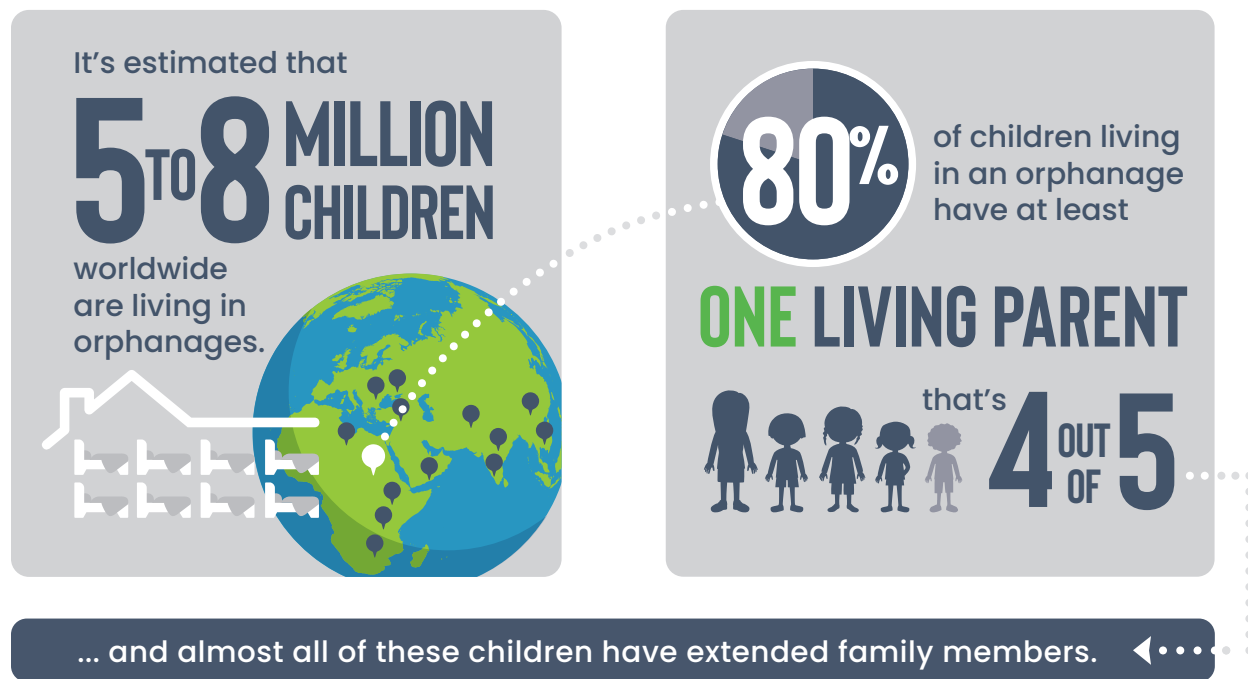
WHO ARE THE CAREGIVERS FOR ORPHANED CHILDREN?

Evidence suggests that the vast majority of children who have lost parents are cared for in families. For example, in Zimbabwe a study found 98% of the country's orphans were living in a family[4]. Primary caregivers include a surviving parent, grandmothers, aunts and uncles, older siblings, and neighbors who act as foster parents, often without the involvement of an outside agent. The duty to care for children often falls on grandparents or older caregivers. However, these older caregivers might be limited in their physical and economic ability or lack parenting skills to care for children. Many families taking in children are impoverished themselves and in need of support to continue caring for children in their home.

If they aren't orphans, why are these children in orphanages?

While there are many reasons a child may end up in what is referred to as residential care, such as orphanages and children's homes, poverty is often the underlying cause.

"Poverty plus _____" is a phrase that helps describe the role poverty often plays as a reason children end up in orphanages. A family who is poor may experience some sort of crisis that leads to their children being placed in an orphanage: poverty plus... illness, disability, divorce, job loss, addiction, natural disaster, conflict, or even lack of access to education. Because the family is living in poverty, it struggles to provide for the children during the crisis. The parents see placing their children in residential care as the only way to meet their basic needs. They are faced with the impossible choice of either caring for their children or sending them to an orphanage to receive food, shelter, or an education. Children may also be removed from a struggling family if their parents are failing to cope with the challenges they are facing and are unable to provide adequate care and ensure a child's safety.

POVERTY +

- [ ] illness
- [ ] disability
- [ ] divorce
- [ ] job loss
- [ ] addiction
- [ ] natural disaster
- [ ] conflict
- [ ] no access to education
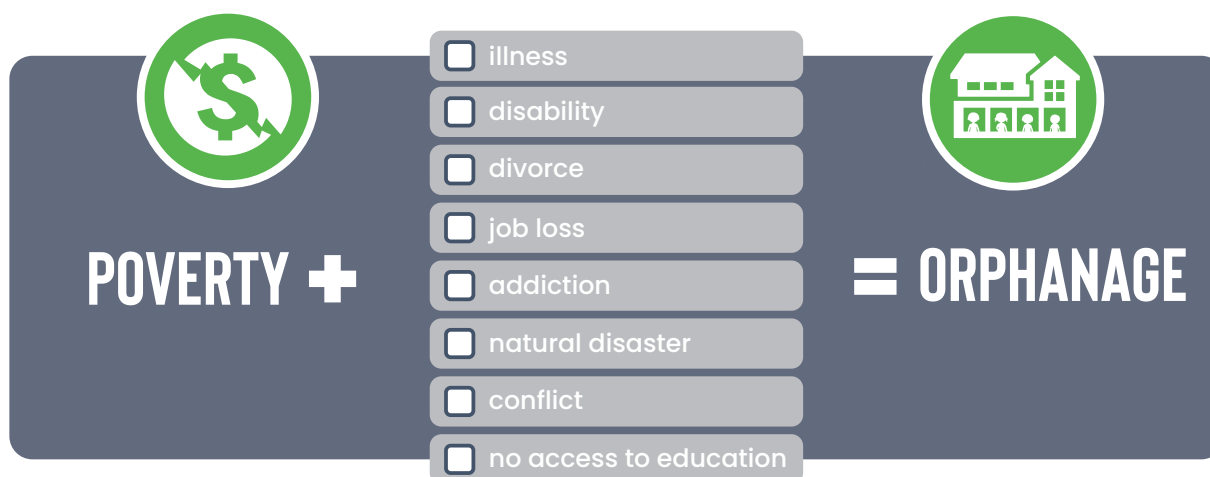
= ORPHANAGE

The factors leading to children being separated from their families and placed in orphanages are divided in two categories: push and pull factors. *Push factors* are difficult circumstances or challenges faced by families making them consider orphanages as a potential way out of their hardships. However, *pull factors* are perceived benefits that lead to children being placed in orphanages—these are things that families want for their children but might not be able to provide.


DEFINITION ⋮ "Residential care"

Care in settings where children are looked after in any public or private facility, staffed by paid care providers or volunteers, and based on collective living arrangements. This includes short- and long-term residential institutions such as children's homes, group homes, and orphanages.

PUSH FACTORS ▶

Family Hardships

- Poverty
- Unemployment
- Natural disaster
- War or civil unrest
- Death of one or both parents
- Domestic violence and abuse
- Physical or emotional disability or chronic illness (of parent or child)
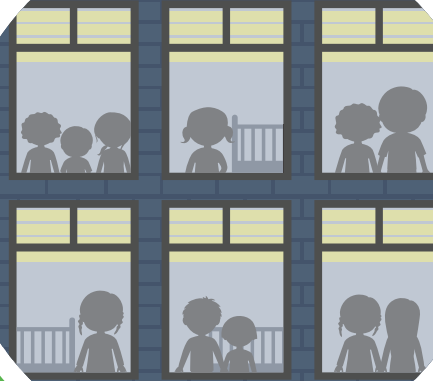
◀ PULL FACTORS

Perceived Benefits of Orphanages

- Medical care
- Basic needs
- Actual or perceived educational opportunities
- Vocational training
- Treatment for disabilities
- Information and technology (TV, internet, libraries)
- Active recruitment by orphanage personnel or community members

Considering both the push and pull factors begins to clarify why many children who have loving families end up in orphanages. One could easily assume that all children in orphanages and children's homes are double orphans without any family or perhaps are coming from abusive situations. While that may be true for a small minority of children in orphanages, understanding push and pull factors helps highlight other elements at play. For example, when an orphanage is providing services that are not otherwise available in the community, even families who desire to care for their children might consider placing them in the orphanage. In many places, orphanages have become a coping mechanism for extreme poverty or other challenges facing families. Understanding the reasons that children are in residential care helps shape responses that prevent children from being placed there in the first place, and allows them the opportunity to grow in a family.

AN IMPOSSIBLE CHOICE

Picture a young mother with four children. Her husband recently passed away. She struggles to put food on the table and can't send her youngest to school without money for a uniform and books. On a walk to fetch water she notices a building under construction. A sign outside reads Children's Home. She sees classrooms being filled with desks. Outside there is a nice playground. She is suddenly faced with a terrible decision. She could take her youngest child to live at the Children's Home to receive the food, shelter, and education she cannot provide him, or she could care for him in her home where those things are lacking. It is an impossible choice that no mother should ever have to face.

The Importance of Family

Scripture, life experience, and research all agree that children grow best in families. God created family as told in the first chapters of Genesis and like other things in creation, family represents God's good intentions for the world. In Psalm 68:6, we read "God sets the lonely in families," recognizing God's intention is for families to be the source of belonging.

Studies over many years in a wide range of cultures and contexts have consistently demonstrated the positive impact families have on children's growth and development. Families are the most important source of love, attention, emotional support, material sustenance, and moral guidance in a child's life. Children who are cared for by safe and loving families are more likely to thrive than those reared in orphanages. Children growing up in families generally receive the kind of love, attention, and care essential to their well-being. The daily life and close relationships within a family lay the foundation for a child's social and emotional development, self-image, and sense of belonging. As children interact with members of their households and the wider community, they absorb the patterns and values of their culture and develop the language, customs, and skills they will need in their adult lives. A family is vital for the physical, mental, and social development of a child.

Simply put, children grow best in families.

HOW A TRUSTED PARENT OR CAREGIVER AFFECTS BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

The brain is constructed through an ongoing process that begins before birth and continues into adulthood. The first few years of neurological development are critical to set a foundation for continued development. Development occurs through early experiences, through interaction with trusted adults and sensory experiences in the environment. Much like the games of tennis, ping pong, or volleyball, brains are built through back-and-forth interaction. The ball in this game is any kind of bid for attention from a child to their caregiver—eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, babbling, shared focus, and even cries or words. If the "serve" for attention is not returned, or not returned appropriately, the game is interrupted, and if a child doesn't have many positive interactions each day with a trusted caregiver, development is disrupted.

The interactions that do or don't occur, have a significant and lasting effect on the development and learning that follows. Chronic neglect in residential care settings weakens and disrupts the developing brain structure. In some orphanages full of babies, you experience silence. It might be easy to assume that these children are content and have their needs met. However, this is an example of how a lack of serve-and-return, or a lack of having their needs met, leads to a disconnect of children from their environment.

Adapted from: Harvard Center on the Developing Child and the FrameWorks Institute

Limitations of Orphanages

In the past, building orphanages was often a first response to meeting the needs of orphaned and vulnerable children. However, residential care has not had the outcomes one would hope to see.

Research reveals that living in an orphanage, especially for a long time or at a young age, has negative impacts on a child's physical, intellectual, and social-emotional development. For example, one study found that for every three months in an institution, a child loses one month of development[5]. The first three years of life are a sensitive period when a child must receive intimate emotional and physical contact or else development will be significantly impaired. A groundbreaking study of children who grew up in Romanian orphanages found that these children suffered deficits in brain development and behavioral functioning.[6] The neglect that often happens in orphanages physically changes the structure of children's brains. The negative effects are more severe the longer a child remains in residential care and are most critical in younger children. Human bonds and attachments are the cornerstones of building trusting and sustainable relationships. Infants who live in orphanages have difficulty forming these bonds, which impacts their social relationships throughout their lives.

Orphanages and children's homes separate children from the family and community that are essential for developing healthy social relationships. When orphanages are cut off from the local community, children are prevented from developing social networks essential for adult life. Children leaving residential care are frequently unprepared for independent life.

Supporting **FAMILY CARE** is a better choice.

VS.

$ 5-10X higher

The cost of supporting a child in **AN ORPHANAGE** is **5-10X HIGHER** than supporting a child in a family.

But counting the cost is not only about dollars spent . . .
Studies show that living in an orphanage, especially for a long time or at a young age, has other costs that greatly impact children:

Impact on Child Development

Impact on Social Relationships

Increased Risk Later in Life

They may not know how to cook, handle money, or use their own initiative after following the schedule of the orphanage their whole lives. They struggle into adulthood, as seen in increased rates of unemployment, homelessness, sexual exploitation, and unhealthy adult relationships, including within a marriage or as a parent. A study in Russia found that one in three adults who lived in residential care became homeless, one in five ended up with a criminal record, and up to one in ten died by suicide[7]. Orphanages can meet the physical needs of children, but even the best orphanages are not able to meet the emotional and social needs of a child.

Additionally, orphanages are expensive and only reach small numbers of children. Data suggests they are five to ten times more expensive than programs that serve children in families, including foster families. For example, a study in South Africa found residential care to be up to six times more expensive than providing care for children living in vulnerable families and four times more expensive than foster care or adoption[8].

While smaller residential care facilities with appropriate caregiver to child ratios can serve as a temporary and *last-resort* response for children with no other means of support or in need of intensive rehabilitation, they should never be a long-term solution.

🔍 LEARN MORE

Children, Orphanages, and Families: A Summary of Research to Help Guide Faith-Based Action

faithtoaction.org/children-orphanages-and-families/

⬇ [PDF Download]

Key Research on Orphanages and Family Care: An Annotated Bibliography

faithtoaction.org/key-research-annotated-bibliography/

⬇ [PDF Download]

EVEN THE BEST ORPHANAGES STRUGGLE TO MEET CHILDREN'S NEEDS

Victor was abandoned as an infant and suffered from sepsis, a severe infection, treatable with antibiotics. After a brief hospital stay, he was brought to a crisis nursery run by Alliance for Children Everywhere (ACE) Zambia, where nurses, social workers, and caregivers diligently provided for him. As the Zambian police completed their required investigation and report, months passed. Until the report was complete, foster care, adoption, or reunification with the child's biological family were not possible under Zambian law.

Victor received the compassionate care of ACE Zambia staff. A year passed and though physically healthy and well-cared for, it soon became clear he wasn't reaching the standard developmental milestones for a child his age. By the time the police report was completed, Victor's physical delays made it harder for him to find a family. Eventually, through the hard work of the staff at ACE, a family for Victor was assessed, trained, and

ready to bring him home. Two months later, ACE staff visiting Victor in his new family were astonished to see him walking and realized he was now meeting his developmental milestones! The experience of a loving and responsive family was making a real difference for Victor. ACE has compared the developmental variances between children residing in their emergency care nurseries versus children they support living with their parents, relatives, or foster families. They found that children in a family, even families living in poverty, had notably better development and health outcomes. Though children in ACE Zambia's residential care facilities were provided appropriate nutrition, a more-than-adequate child-to-adult ratio, dedicated and qualified staff, nurse, teachers, engaged social workers, and significant financial investment, they fell behind developmentally.

DEVELOPMENT OUTCOMES **FAMILY-BASED CARE** **VS.** **INSTITUTIONAL CARE**

- Family-Based Care average
- Institutional Care average
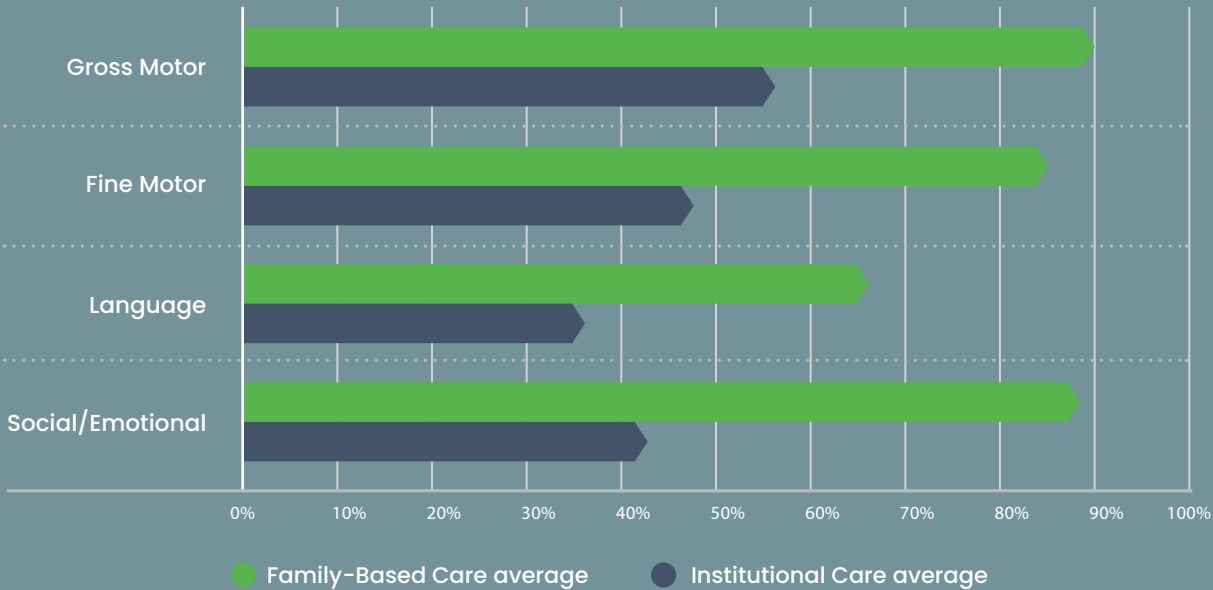
Source: Case Study on Family-Based Care. ACE Zambia, Lusaka, Zambia; Alliance for Children Everywhere (ACE)

Learning From History

The history behind the use of residential care is important to understand why some say: we don't have an *orphan* crisis, we have an *orphanage crisis.*

The origins of residential care come from medieval Europe and the orphanage model expanded throughout Europe and the United States in the 19th century. In the mid-20th century, most Western countries moved away from institutions in favor of foster care and adoption. However, the orphanage model was exported to other regions around the world through colonization and early missionary efforts. While these cultures had previously addressed death and crises in families through extended family and community members stepping forward to care for orphaned and vulnerable children, the orphanage model quickly became a source for accessing Western support.

More recently, an overwhelming charitable response to the HIV and AIDS crisis in the 1990s and early 2000s led to a proliferation of orphanages in Africa. When Christians responded with empathy and generosity to the "AIDS orphan crisis," they focused funding on the building of orphanages. A study in Zimbabwe found a doubling in the number of registered orphanages and that 85% of the funding for those orphanages came from faith-based sources[9]. This doesn't include orphanages that weren't legally registered. Most donors and volunteers were not aware of the limitations of orphanages in meeting the needs of children. A similar story is told in the response to the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. American Christians responded with astounding generosity by building, volunteering in, and funding orphanages. Christians were hopeful their financial support and visits to orphanages would mean children were protected. However, a lack of experience in disaster response and little understanding of the context contributed to placing children in these facilities when they could have been cared for by their families. Today, more than 30,000 children are living in orphanages in Haiti, primarily due to poverty, rather than the loss of a parent[10].

Residential care has become deeply embedded in societies around the world. This historic framing explains why millions of children are in orphanages even though they have families who could care for them if they had the support to do so. This model persists in part due to significant private donor support. One study found that individual U.S. Christians provide $2.5 billion every year to residential care[11]. Additionally, orphanages are a popular destination for mission trips and volunteering, further solidifying the notion that residential care is an important way to access Western funding and support.

Christians must be aware of how history has impacted the current situation and the urgent need to focus future efforts on proactively supporting vulnerable families to avoid unnecessarily separating children from families.

WHO WOULD YOU WANT TO CARE FOR YOUR CHILD?

Imagine your child or a special child in your life. What if you or the child's parents were not available? Where would you want the child to live? Perhaps with an aunt and uncle or with grandparents? Imagine those family members were not able to care for the child either—where would you want him to live? Maybe with a church friend or a neighbor? What if those options were not available? Perhaps you imagine another loving, Christian home opening its arms to the child. At what point would you want that child in an orphanage? Most people never imagine that.

Out of Orphanages and Into Families

Around the world, there is a growing movement to replace orphanages with family-based care. Resources that were once used to build and maintain orphanages are now being used to reunite children with their families and, when this is not possible, to identify and equip relative caregivers, foster parents, and adoptive parents. We call this effort "care reform."

The governments of almost every country in the world have committed to the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child, which protects a child's right to live with a family. Their commitments became even more targeted when they ratified the 2019 UN General Assembly Resolution on the Rights of the Child, pledging to end the institutionalization of children in their respective countries and prioritize family care. At the same time, Christian organizations who have supported family care efforts for years are rallying together like never before to see support for children in families grow.

Kenya, Rwanda, Bulgaria, and Cambodia are just a handful of the many countries that have made progress in care reform. In Rwanda, specifically, care reform efforts have led to the closure of all orphanages and the transition of more than 3,000 children and young adults into families[12].

As a part of this effort, orphanages around the world are transitioning the way they support children, from caring for them in facilities to supporting children in families. To avoid putting children in danger, it is vital that those involved in this effort learn from others and follow best practices. Fortunately, there is abundant guidance available on transitioning to family care,

DEFINITION : "Family-based care" or "family care"

Family care options include care in the child's birth or adoptive family, kinship and relative care, legal guardianship, and foster care.

AN ORPHANAGE TRANSITIONS TO FAMILY CARE

Heaven's Family, a Christian missions organization, started in 2002 when the founder was invited to Myanmar where he met directors of local orphanages. The organization initially responded to the needs of struggling orphanages in Myanmar by launching a child sponsorship program. However, a chance encounter between one of Heaven's Family's sponsors and Strengthening Families and Children (SFAC) compelled the organization's leaders to reconsider their approach. SFAC's founder traveled to Myanmar to share information about the adverse social and emotional effects orphanages can have on children and about God's intention for children to be cared for within families.

Heaven's Family decided it needed to forge a new path away from orphanage care, with child wellbeing undergirding both the end goal and the means of achieving family care. SFAC then provided training to orphanage directors in Myanmar. Many were hesitant to alter their long-standing models of orphanage care; others were compelled to take a step of faith but didn't know how to begin. Acknowledging their need for further technical support, Heaven's Family connected with Australian Christian Church's Kinnected Program, which specializes in the transition process from residential care to family-based care. Kinnected led frequent and extensive meetings and trainings with orphanage leadership regarding reintegration of children and transition of the organization's models of care. Leaders hired a social worker who conducted a formal assessment of the children and their families and began reintegrating children.

The program focused on partnership with other organizations to help families improve their financial sustainability to provide for their children. Over 100 children have been successfully reintegrated back with families, other children worked together with a social worker to transition into independent living, and ultimately several orphanages were safely closed.

including tools, case studies, and networks of support. The transition process should focus on:

- understanding the primary causes of separation for the children in their care,
- assessing the national policies and community contexts,
- developing a clear vision and plan,
- developing individualized care plans for each child and preparing children to join families,
- tracing children's families to determine if reintegration into biological families is possible,
- recruiting and preparing kinship, foster, and adoptive families, and
- monitoring children and families to ensure that their needs are being met.

Each transition is unique to its context and depends on the support and engagement of multiple stakeholders, including staff, donors, service providers, and the children and families themselves. Just as contexts vary widely, so too will the timeline and action plan for each transition process. Transitions take time, a commitment to excellence, and donors who are willing to invest in the transformation of how an organization provides care for vulnerable children. However, transitioning orphanages and children's homes from residential care to family care is proving possible in almost any culture and context.

> After my father died in the civil war, my mother and I were separated. I later found my uncle, but he could not care for me, and I went to live on the streets. I was taken to live in an orphanage for ten years. It was a good orphanage with caring adults. At the orphanage, I became a Christian, received three meals a day, shelter, education, and even went to college. But I longed to be back with my mom, brother, and other family members. I missed my community, and I missed my home.
>
> —Mohamed Nabieu, Sierra Leone

LEARN MORE

Transitioning to Family Care for Children:
A Guidance Manual

faithtoaction.org/transitioning-to-care-for-children/

⤓ [PDF Download]

SHIFTING TO FAMILY CARE

The shift from residential care to family care and the end of the orphanage era is a reality today. All this change requires a concerted effort and focus on increasing family-based care options for children. Donors, volunteers, church leaders, mission teams, missionaries, organizations, community members, and governments all play a role in changing the way we care for orphaned and vulnerable children. Everyone's efforts must shift from supporting children in orphanages and children's homes to supporting children in families. Championing family-based care includes supporting efforts to strengthen families, increase alternative family care options, and empower communities.

Family-based care means:

1 strengthening families

2 increasing alternate family care options

3 empowering communities
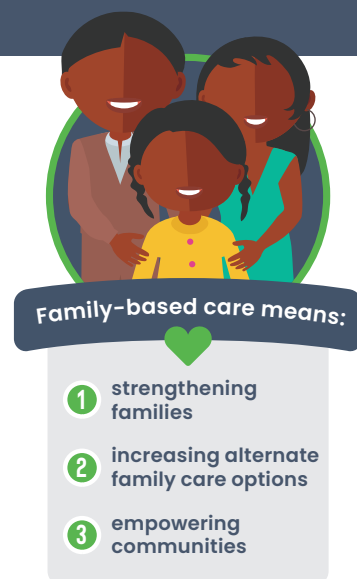
Strengthen Families

Strengthening the capacity of families to provide and care for children is the best way to prevent separation of children from their families, to reduce placement in orphanages, and to ensure successful reunification of children from orphanages back into their families or placement into alternative family care.

It is critical to help families gain support and access to necessary services to meet the material, educational, and emotional needs of their children.

Given the possible range of a family's needs and circumstances, there is no "one size fits all" solution. Generally, **strengthening families** is about building their resilience and addressing their unique challenges. Family strengthening, or what is sometimes called family preservation, includes things like: livelihood support, material support, cash payments, food and agricultural support, access to education and health care, daycare, after-school programs, mentoring, special education services, counseling, parent education, support groups, resource centers, youth centers, temporary family shelters, and spiritual support.

These solutions help ensure families can properly care for their children, while also decreasing risk of mistreatment, neglect, or abuse.

DEFINITION : "Strengthening families"

The provision of services that meet economic, educational, psychological, spiritual, and special needs of families to minimize family separation and improve care of children.

STRENGTHENING FAMILIES IN THAILAND

When Som was only 13 years old, her parents sent her away from her poor tribe in Northern Thailand to the city to make money to support the family. But Som was tricked by her new employer and forced to work as a prostitute in an urban brothel. Som was trapped there as a sex slave for two years before she was able to escape the brothel and find safety and freedom. She then settled in the only home she could find—a room in Bangkok's biggest slum. Som worked hard to make a life for herself, build a family, and stand on her own two feet. But it wasn't easy. Trauma, poverty, domestic violence, and instability continued to plague her home. Som was married, had a child, and then took in her nephew while his mother was in jail. Som struggled to provide for the children in her home with the little money she could make collecting trash and selling flower wreaths Buddhists buy to earn merit at the temple. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the schools sent children home to curb the spread of the virus, and she struggled to make enough money while looking after them during the day.

Fortunately, Som's story took a different turn, when a neighbor told her about Step Ahead—a nonprofit that works to help strengthen families in the slum. Step Ahead strengthens the capacity of vulnerable adults so they can raise their own children. In the midst of the challenges of 2020, Som joined Step Ahead's Keeping Families Together—an 18-month long program designed to give families the basic tools they need to succeed in sustaining a safe and nurturing home for their children. Som joined workshops on how to build a strong family, had weekly home visits for coaching, goal setting, and planning with the social worker, and financial literacy training. Som also received relief from Step Ahead and other organizations in the form of goods, dried food, and much more. This support helped her stay on her feet and care for her family through the economic fallout of the COVID-19 shutdowns. One day, Som asked the Step Ahead's social worker and the church volunteers why they were so kind to her. They told her God loves us all so much it inspires them to share that love with others. Som became a Christian that day!

Increase Alternative Family Care Options

When children are separated from their parents due to death, abuse, or other causes, priority should be placed on ensuring they are cared for within families. Because every child's needs and circumstances are unique, this requires a "continuum of care" offering a range of family-based options that are carefully matched to each child's best interests. Building up support for kinship care, foster care, and adoption offers those children the opportunity to find alternative care.

> " Not to romanticize the families—I grew up in a family where violence happened. But I believe there are better families out there. So we try to make sure that children are connected to people who love them. You, me, and whoever is on this journey has to make that become a reality.
>
> *—Stephen Ucembe, Founder of the Kenya Society of Care Leavers*

Kinship care

Kinship care includes care by aunts, uncles, grandparents, older siblings, and other extended family members. The majority of children living outside parental care live with their relatives and extended family members. It is the most prevalent and most indigenous model of alternative care throughout the world.

Foster care

Foster care is the full-time care of a child within a non-related family, who has been selected, qualified, and approved. Foster care providers agree to meet the developmental, psychosocial, medical, educational, and spiritual needs of a child who is not able to live with his or her own parents or extended family.

Adoption

Adoption is the permanent legal transfer of parental rights and responsibilities for a child. In efforts to ensure a permanent placement for a child, adoption is a vital option in situations in which it is absolutely clear that a child can never again be cared for by his or her birth family.

DEFINITION ┊ "Alternative care"

Alternative care is the formal or informal care of children who are not able to live with their parents while permanent family care solutions are sought. Alternative care includes kinship care, foster care, adoption, supervised independent living, and residential care.

FOSTER CARE IN MEXICO

Soon after moving from Colorado to Mexico in 2008, missionaries Chris and Heather Nickerson, felt their hearts break for the children of Chihuahua City. Their first thought was to start an orphanage. However, as they made steps toward that goal, God brought people and information to them that revealed he had something better in mind—family-based care. They formed Familia LightShine to develop foster care for children who were not able to stay with their families. Moving toward family-based care was complicated on nearly every level, but one challenge appeared insurmountable: a legal framework for foster care in the state of Chihuahua. Fortunately, Chris and Heather knew a dedicated teacher, Alejandra Carbajal, whose background with the Mexican child protective services, combined with her expertise and skills, were perfect for directing this new work.

Chris explained, "In every circumstance, it's absolutely best for there to be a national who establishes those relationships with the government. Even if you're perfectly fluent and understand the culture, there's just a tremendous difference. It changes the equation."

Alejandra attended training to learn best practices in family-based care and began investing hundreds of hours in developing relationships with government officials. Familia Lightshine modeled family-based care through the transition of a small orphanage into a foster care model. It took time, but eventually Familia LightShine gained approval from the government to start a foster care program. They began recruiting, training, and supporting foster families from the local churches as part of the government work to transition children from orphanages into family care. The program was a success and just two years later the Familia LightShine foster care program has not only expanded in Chihuahua City, but was launched in the state of Durango.

LEARN MORE
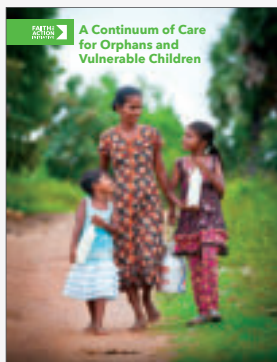
A Continuum of Care for Orphans and Vulnerable Children

faithtoaction.org/a-continuum-of-care/

⤓ [PDF Download]

Empower Communities

Community empowerment helps create an environment of increasing stability and layers of support and protection for children and families. A strong community will support families in crisis to ensure they receive the support needed to properly care for their children.
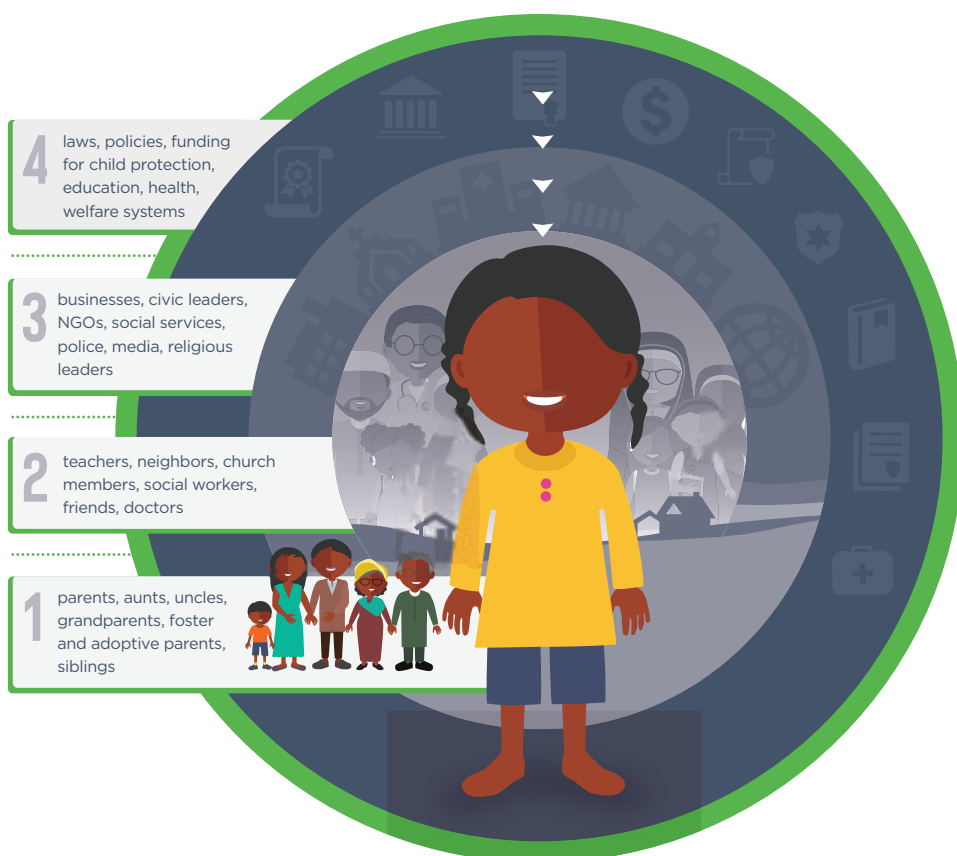
It is essential to respect local leadership if communities are to become strong and independent. Individuals most directly involved in a situation are best equipped to develop their own solutions and learn from best practices. As each local community determines the form of assistance that best meets its own needs, the approaches and activities used to address the challenges families face will vary.

Churches and organizations play an important role in community empowerment by bringing people together to address the broad challenges families face. When groups work together in partnership, they increase their reach and effectiveness. While each individual group may serve a relatively small population or provide a specific service, the collective force of these local initiatives is tremendous. Leading in collaboration includes building the capacity of others in the community, making vital connections among different actors in the community, impacting local and possibly national government, and filling gaps when needed. This kind of collaboration results in a strong safety net, an interwoven network that catches children before they fall through the cracks.

> "
> The secret is to empower, to make that community strong… If the community is strong they will be able to look after their own orphans.
>
> *—Dr. Jephat Chifamba, Zimbabwe*

4 laws, policies, funding for child protection, education, health, welfare systems

3 businesses, civic leaders, NGOs, social services, police, media, religious leaders

2 teachers, neighbors, church members, social workers, friends, doctors

1 parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents, foster and adoptive parents, siblings

COMBATING POVERTY IN GUATEMALA

Potter's House is a nonprofit that works with communities at the edge of Guatemala City's garbage dump. The work is Christ-centered, aiming to combat poverty in Guatemala through heart-level transformational development. This approach empowers community members to overcome poverty and thrive. Potter's House takes a holistic approach to development, valuing psychosocial and spiritual changes, as well as material changes. It promotes community participation and collaboration to identify solutions to the problems children and families face, training community leaders to improve their own community. Resulting efforts include programs for education, health and nutrition, microenterprise, and spiritual support.

Potter's House helped Natali and Ricardo, who had three children when they were quite young and faced the typical challenges of raising a family in the slum. Ricardo was an alcoholic, drug user, and member of a violent gang. At 30 years old, due to poverty and an unstable relationship, Natali found herself in danger of being unable to care for her children. She started attending a Bible study at the Potter's House Community Center where she found faith in Jesus and the will to make a drastic change in her life. She joined the Potter's House vocational school, where she learned to make jewelry. She had a natural talent for the work and became so skilled that she could provide for her family financially. Eventually, Ricardo was invited to a Potter's House men's group. He stopped drinking and left his gang. He also decided to make jewelry! He joined Natali and they created their very own family business, working side by side, defying the destinies that the garbage dump assigns to most people in their circumstances. Their children benefited from the Potter's House education program, which provided them with school scholarships and tutoring. Natali and Ricardo have succeeded in building a strong foundation for their family, as they pass on healing and wholeness to the next generation.

LEARN MORE

Maximizing Your Impact: A Guide for Taking a Systems Approach in the Care and Protection of Children

faithtoaction.org/systems

⤓ [PDF Download]

BE A FAMILY CARE SUPPORTER! ▶▶

Donors and supporters play an important role in family-based care for children around the world.

① Invest in organizations that strengthen families to care for children or that provide high-quality alternative family care.

Find an organization who aligns with your desires to see children cared for in safe and loving families. Intermediary organizations that serve to connect donors to churches and smaller organizations on the ground provide an extra layer of support and accountability. Be sure to commit to long-term partnership, providing consistent financial support for the progress of efforts on the ground. To find organizations supporting children in families visit **www.faithtoaction.org**.

② Take mission trips that rally support for family-based care.

Mission trips have enormous potential to bolster support of family-based care for orphaned and vulnerable children. Use mission trips to increase funding for family-based care, create advocates for orphaned and vulnerable children, and increase the capacity of families and communities to care well for their children. For help considering how mission trips can best support family-based care check out **www.faithtoaction.org/missions**.

③ Share what you have learned.

Tell others about the importance of family care and invite them to join in supporting efforts that strengthen families, increase alternative family care options, and empower communities. Find concrete ways you can raise awareness at **www.faithtoaction.org/take-action.**

IF YOU ARE CURRENTLY FUNDING AN ORPHANAGE … ▶▶

Donors who already have a partnership with an orphanage or children's home should not immediately withdraw funding, which could lead to diminishing quality of care for children in that setting. Instead, a donor can work in partnership with the orphanage or children's home to encourage and fund efforts to transition children to family care and to strengthen community ties, such as:

donating funds to hire a social worker or supporting staff to build their capacity to implement the safe reintegration of children into families,

providing training, material support, and connection to local leaders who guide the transition and help strengthen families and communities, and

funding programs, such as parent training, education, and livelihood or microfinances.

It often feels intimidating for donors to engage their partners in conversations about transitioning to family care, or it feels like trying to tell a partner on the ground how to do their job. However, by taking a humble approach, asking questions ("is every effort made to find living relatives before a child is admitted", "what programs are available or what can be done to prevent children from the community from being admitted", "could some of the children be supported to go back to family"), sharing educational resources, and being willing to support and fund change, donors are a part of improving practices, and allowing their partners to be more effective at serving orphaned and vulnerable children.

A MISSION TRIP THAT CREATES FAMILY CARE ADVOCATES

Children in Families, a local Cambodian NGO, has created a short-term missions program they call Rok Kern to inspire participants to become family-based care advocates. Rok Kern is a Khmer phrase meaning "to come and see." The program invites students to assume a posture of learning as they are immersed into Cambodian culture. The participants' discoveries, however, start well before the plane takes off for Cambodia. Pre-trip orientation covers a variety of issues including poverty, aid and development, challenges of orphanages, Cambodian history and culture, and how to communicate about the trip with friends and family in an ethical manner.

Once in Cambodia, staff of the Rok Kern program facilitate their 12-day visit, which includes sessions with Children in Families staff, meetings with Children in Families partner organizations, language classes, cultural briefings, and visits to important historical sites—including the famous temples of Angkor Wat. By providing an all-encompassing historical, cultural, and community development curriculum, Rok Kern helps participants develop a deep respect for the community's ability to provide family-based care for children. Throughout the trip, Rok Kern utilizes Children in Families' expertise in family-based

care to teach the students about the importance of keeping children in families.

By meeting with the Children in Families staff in charge of these programs, trip participants are given a behind-the-scenes look at how family-based care organizations support the process of building healthy children, families, and communities. Children in Families partner organizations graciously open their doors to share with the Rok Kern program participants, as well. This allows the participants to gain an even more robust understanding of the variety of ways best practices are being implemented in family-based care organizations in Cambodia. This innovative program creates family-based care advocates that support the global movement as more people work together toward family-based care for children around the world.

10 STRATEGIES MAKING A DIFFERENCE

To better understand family-based care it is helpful to explore tangible examples of work being done around the world. The following pages highlight a range of strategies that have been proven effective for strengthening families, increasing alternative family care options, and empowering families.

"Orphan care" has been narrowly defined in the past, but now is the time to expand the definition. Orphan care includes anything that helps orphaned or vulnerable children stay in, find, or reunite with a safe and loving family.

The most helpful way to care for orphaned and vulnerable children is through supporting efforts to empower their families and communities to care for them. These strategies are used by organizations around the world and are built on evidence-based best practices and are making a difference in caring for orphaned and vulnerable children around the world.

▸▸ 10 STRATEGIES MAKING A DIFFERENCE ◂◂

Support economic strengthening

Support children with disabilities

Provide parent support services

Raise awareness and eliminate discrimination

Empower churches

Support social and emotional needs

Enable access to education

Protect children

Ensure access to basic services

Engage governments

1. Support Economic Strengthening

Strengthening families' economic security keeps children with their families and provides stability to families who are being reunified with their children or who are caring for children through kinship care, foster care, or adoption.

Many organizations create income-generating activities for caregivers, offering livelihood development, community savings groups, microcredit loans, and small business training. These programs provide caregivers with the skills and resources to engage in work that will help shelter, feed, clothe, and even pay the school fees for the children in their care. Other organizations provide agricultural supplies such as seeds, tools, and livestock to families in rural areas. In some cases, direct material support to families is important. Churches and organizations often provide material resources such as food, blankets, and clothing to vulnerable families. In the context of emergencies and disasters, cash transfers and vouchers for immediate relief are an effective way to keep families together, but should not be a long-term solution, as it builds dependency and decreases sustainability.

VOCATIONAL TRAINING FOR YOUNG ADULTS

When young adults learn marketable trades, they provide for themselves and their families. Churches and organizations can assist youth in the community with the tools for economic survival and independence by offering vocational education, apprenticeships, and skills training. When young adults become income generators, they contribute to the financial stability of their families, overcome poverty in their own future families, and avoid becoming vulnerable to prostitution, labor exploitation, and other dangerous activities.

2. Provide Parent Support Services

Programs that ease the burden on parents and other caregivers—such as daycare services and support groups—help children remain in families. It is difficult for those who care for children to work or attend school when they are caring for children who are young or have special needs. Parents and caregivers, especially those who are elderly or ill, often require respite. Daycare programs provide caregivers with time to work, attend school, or manage other needs while giving children opportunities to play and learn.

Parent support groups give caregivers the opportunity to share their hardships and learn how to better meet the emotional and developmental needs of children. The psychosocial needs of caregivers are important because caregivers must be healthy enough to provide psychosocial support to their children. Support groups provide for the emotional and social needs of caregivers. Positive parenting training equips caregivers with skills to respond to

their children's emotional needs through positive interaction, improving children's behavior and avoiding abuse and violence in the home. While the care of children most often falls onto the shoulders of women, churches and organizations can nurture men's roles as care-givers, teachers, and mentors. Older caregivers who might lack the physical and economic ability or parenting skills to care for children may need special assistance.

ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT KEEPS FAMILIES IN KENYA TOGETHER

Margret unexpectedly found herself as the sole breadwinner for her five children—three girls and two boys. She was overwhelmed and left with little hope. Her oldest daughter Mwende had just become a candidate to advance in Kenya's primary school with the hope of continuing secondary education the following year. However, Margret struggled to make ends meet by going from house to house looking for cleaning jobs. The idea of Mwende actually going to school was a distant dream. Over time Margret decided to join a group of women who were earning money by weaving and selling ropes. She started making and selling them, which gave her some financial support.

Fortunately, Savings for Life, a savings and loan program through World Relief, was introduced in her village in Kenya. The program is built on a century-old way of saving and borrowing. The rotating savings and borrowing system called "rosca" has been a way for people to come together, put the same amount of money in the pot, and gain a loan through a lottery system. Savings for Life gives the group members flexibility by allowing them to choose how much money they want to save rather than requiring a set amount, as well as allowing them to choose when and how much money to loan based on need. To increase trust and accountability, the group members are self-selected, a five-person leadership committee is appointed, and the group is self-managed. Margret and the other women joined the group, and it gave them the opportunity to save money and access loans.

After four months of saving and taking several small loans, Margret decided to take out a loan to open a tea shop in the middle of a busy market. Initially, it was difficult for people to consider Margret more than a woman who cleaned houses, but her hope never wavered. Margret's persistence paid off and with the combination of her growing savings and income from her business, she took another loan to pay for an entire year of school fees for Mwenda at the Mukomeni Secondary Day School. Now her tea shop is one of the most preferred shops in the market. Margret's family could have fallen apart due to unforeseen circumstances. Savings for Life transformed Margret's life, and her family has been able to stay together and thrive.

3. Empower Churches

Local churches are well-placed and suited to serve as safety nets for families in crisis and to encourage support for caring for children who need a safe and loving family. The church helps care for sick or dying parents and caregivers, recruits foster families from within the congregation, and makes plans for children to live with extended family members. Churches offer not just spiritual, but physical and emotional support, for children and their families like food, home repairs, or counseling. Local faith communities have often demonstrated that they have great capacity to mobilize limited resources and funding to benefit orphaned and vulnerable children. They identify needs in the community and connect with organizations to address them and help provide resources to families caring for orphaned and vulnerable children.

4. Enable Access to Education

Families who are poor or in crisis cannot afford school for their children. Parents and caregivers sometimes place children in orphanages as a way for children to access education. Churches and organizations help children stay with their families and go to school by covering the cost of uniforms, textbooks, supplies, and exam fees, or by negotiating with local schools to reduce or eliminate fees. They can address other issues of access to education by investing in quality local schooling in the community, as well as advocating to the government for the universal and unrestricted right to an education and removal of both formal and informal school fees, as well as other challenges to ensuring access to education for all children.

> When my father had an accident and couldn't work anymore, things got worse for us. Then my mom told me I couldn't go back to school because we couldn't afford it. I cried. I had dreamt of so much more. We were trapped. One day my mom saw a way out. She got a small loan and started a business. After a month, she had repaid her loan and taken out another. As soon as she could, she sent me back to school. My mom and dad worked hard, and I started to believe again that I could have the life I wanted.
>
> —*Genevieve, Southeast Asia*

LOCAL CHURCHES MENTORING THE 'FATHERLESS'

Coptic Orphans' foundational program, Not Alone, works to restore children with the protection, provision, and confidence they may have lost after a father's death or abandonment. They seek to use each child's unique gifts to develop children into agents of change in their communities. The program operates closely with and through the Coptic Church, all over Egypt. Bishops and priests recruit leaders from their local diocese to volunteer as Coptic Orphans Representatives. After they pass an extensive interview process, they are trained by the organization in how to conduct outreach to children and families in their communities.

Each week, the Not Alone Representatives visit the children they are assigned to support, all who are living without a father. They develop strong relationships and provide caring guidance and support to the whole family. Representatives continue to receive ongoing, extensive training on issues such as parental empowerment of children, building strong character, and developing a sense of volunteerism. Not only has this model helped to meet the needs of thousands of children and strengthened their families, but it has also served to support the local Coptic Church. Because this vulnerable and marginalized population has virtually no safety nets, the church is often the only source of provision for those in need. Coptic Orphans provides the church with a sustainable way of supporting vulnerable children and families by establishing a formal structure for Christians to help their own community.

5. Ensure Access to Basic Services

Most parents, when presented with some support from the community, government, or social services, would resoundingly choose to keep their children at home instead of placing them in an orphanage or children's home. Organizations and churches work to advocate for and develop basic services, and ensure families have access to those services. For example, programs that provide access to health services—including home-based care, medications, mental health programs, and disability services—reduce the risk of family separation due to death, disease, mental illness, or physical disabilities. For families in crisis, effective case management plays a key role in matching needs with the appropriate support available in the community, and ensuring children are not necessarily separated from their families.

6. Support Children with Disabilities

Children with disabilities make up a higher percentage of the children in orphanages and children's homes around the world. They face additional vulnerabilities and are often overlooked by communities. Special effort must be concentrated to support families with children who have learning challenges or physical disabilities. It is important to note that special services, rehabilitation, therapies, and integration support from schools, are all important aspects of supporting families who have children with disabilities. Families need to have sufficient community support in place to care for the children. This includes addressing discrimination against children with disabilities, providing access to counseling and psychological care, assistance integrating into school, daycare services, equipment, specialized training for families (such as children's care or how to communicate through sign language), and respite care for caregivers.

7. Raise Awareness and Eliminate Discrimination

Individuals, churches, and organizations can inspire others to act by raising awareness about the importance of family care for all children. Despite the overwhelming needs in vulnerable communities around the globe, individuals are willing to step forward when they have the necessary information and tangible ways to help. Communities are sometimes resistant to moving away from a reliance on residential care. For example, families and communities see orphanages as a solution to difficult circumstances, while local governments and communities see them as quick and easy fixes. Therefore, it is important to explain why this change is

necessary and to address common misconceptions that lead to the inappropriate use of residential care in a community.

Not all families and communities are immediately open to caring for orphaned and vulnerable children due to cultural beliefs, superstitions, and stigmas. Many children suffer discrimination, including those whose parents are affected by HIV and AIDS or with disabilities, those who have been sexually exploited, associated with armed forces or groups, or those living on the street. In these situations, identifying and responding to problematic mindsets within the community should involve people of influence, including church leaders and school and government officials, in addition to caregivers.

THE LABEL OF "ORPHAN"

The term "orphan" carries connotations of misfortune and a loss of social status. A child labeled an orphan suffers both from external discrimination as well as internal distress of not being accepted. Caregivers charged with caring for such children are not immune to these deep-seated cultural beliefs and may be a threat to the healthy development of children. Additionally, many children labeled orphans are not actually orphans at all, but suffer from the stigma of the label, nonetheless. Christians can recognize and describe the circumstances of children more specifically and avoid generalizing a group of children with a troublesome label. Some helpful descriptions include orphaned and vulnerable children, or perhaps better—children without parental care, vulnerable children, and children in residential care.

A FAMILY TO CALL HIS OWN

Jason was born to a mother with schizophrenia, and he suffered from fetal alcohol syndrome, causing behavioral and learning disabilities. Because of the family's lack of resources, and Uganda's lack of services for adults with mental health issues, he was placed in an orphanage. Fortunately, social workers at Ekisa, an organization in Uganda working with children with disabilities and their families, found Jason and began working with his family to reunite them. Social workers helped Jason's mom get support for her mental health challenges and resources to help her care for her children. However, over time it was apparent that she couldn't care for Jason. Ekisa worked with the rest of Jason's family to find the best option for him. They found an aunt who was willing and able to take Jason in and care for him as her own. Like in any family, there are still challenges in supporting Jason's disabilities, but Jason was able to thrive in his new environment. Ekisa specializes in serving families in Uganda who have children with special needs, ensuring all children have the opportunity to grow in a safe and loving family.

8. Support Social and Emotional Needs

In the past, church and organizational support for vulnerable children and families tended to focus on material needs; however, social and emotional needs also require special attention. Children and families in crisis have emotional and social needs that may lead to devastating outcomes if left unmet, including violence, abuse, neglect, or abandonment.

Children who have been separated from their parents, even those in family-based alternative care, need specific support. They need help coping with the trauma of separation from or loss of a parent and the possible separation from their siblings. When placed in an alternative family care setting, it is important that children maintain a sense of identity to prevent losing a connection to their history and heritage. Social and emotional support is equally important for parents and caregivers, ensuring their ability to care well for the children in their lives. Providing counseling and bringing groups together to pray, sing, and worship offers spiritual renewal and support.

LISTENING TO CHILDREN

It is important to listen to the voices of children, respond to their concerns, and involve them in decisions that affect their lives. Children bring valuable ideas, information, and viewpoints that adults often overlook. When children are included in decision-making, they feel a greater sense of control and ownership, and are less fearful about what the future holds. The most effective programs recognize the right of children to participate in ways appropriate to their age and maturity. Community organizations foster participation by including youth in leadership roles, providing ways for children to share their observations and opinions, and responding to the needs expressed by the children themselves.

9. Protect children

Every effort must be made to ensure children are protected from abuse, neglect, exploitation, and other forms of violence. Churches and organizations play an important role in supporting the safety and wellbeing of children within family care. They can monitor vulnerable families in the community and report issues of abuse and neglect or provide support when appropriate. It is important to understand the existing mechanisms for protection in the community first and then decide on ways to strengthen them. This may mean developing or promoting a child abuse hotline, training teachers and others who work with children on how to identify and report abuse, or training police on how to engage with children and keep them safe without unnecessarily removing them from their homes. Awareness campaigns in churches, schools, and other community centers aimed at recognizing and preventing child abuse help make the protection of children a shared responsibility and concern.

DON'T FORGET YOUTH AGING OUT OF ORPHANAGES

When children reach a certain age, usually 18, they must leave an orphanage. These youth and young adults, often referred to as care leavers, are frequently unprepared for independent life. This can result in unemployment, homelessness, conflict with the law, sexual exploitation, and poor parenting, requiring increased expenses associated with health, education, and legal services that may result in longer-term costs to society. Research has shown that this can be a very difficult, isolating, and high-risk time for youth, especially when this transition occurs without the appropriate planning and support. Support should include material or financial assistance to the youth, as well as a preparation period to ensure that the youth is helped to be independent and self-supporting in the community.

Youth moving into independent living require individualized care planning and follow-up. They should be actively and fully involved in developing their care plans, identifying solutions to any obstacles as they leave residential care and what will need to be in place for them to be successful, identifying their strengths and needs, and discerning goals to attain. A care plan developed in response to these needs may include assistance in strengthening life skills, budgeting, cooking, job seeking, and integration into the community. Identifying and preparing mentors, linking youth with peer support groups, and arranging work apprenticeships in the community can provide youth with key relationships and support as they navigate their individual paths to independence.

10. Engage Governments

Taking time to build relationships with government officials produces long-term value for the benefit of children. Engagement to improve laws and government mechanisms to care and protect children enables sustainable impact. Understanding local and national policies as they relate to children and partnering with the government helps organizations engage in ways that are appropriate, support national strategies, and stay aligned with the law.

Almost every country is working to reform and improve their system of care and protection of children. Often organizations help governments implement national policies at the local level. Organizations in collaboration with the government, civil society, and the community are effective at identifying weak areas in the current systems and strengthening them. By working in partnership with local and national government agencies, organizations help build capacity and strengthen compliance with policies in a community. A valuable way to start is by building a relationship with government agencies by simply asking, "How can we help?" Doing so requires humility, patience, and adherence to the law.

QUESTIONS TO ASK TO UNDERSTAND GOVERNMENT SYSTEMS

- Which national laws are in place to protect children and prevent family separation?
- Is there a national policy mandating the transition of children out of institutional care, and if so, what resources if any exist to inform and support this process?
- What national regulations regarding child placement will need to be followed?
- What national strategies are currently in place to respond to risks faced by children?
- Who at the national level is responsible for child care and protection? What are their roles and responsibilities?
- What government services are functional and can be utilized? Where are they located? Who implements them?
- What public resources are available for child care and protection?

AN INVITATION

As Christians seek to express their faith through loving action on behalf of the orphaned and vulnerable children of the world, the most important thing is to help ensure that every child receives the nurture and care they need in a family.

Today, the church can step into a new era of supporting orphaned and vulnerable children. The growing movement among the global church has recognized the importance of family in the life of every child and strives to ensure that children are cared for within families, rather than in orphanages and children's homes. It's time to shift from prioritizing orphanages and children's homes to strengthening families so they can better care for their children.

> The biblical vision of God setting the lonely in families gives us a pathway to transition from a compassionate response to an even more compassionate response.
>
> —*Cara Taylor, Outreach Director at Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church, USA*

A PRAYER FOR EVERY CHILD

We thank you, Heavenly Father,
for your great and unending love
for each and every child.

In your perfect wisdom,
you have created us for family—
that every child may grow surrounded in love
and with a sense of belonging.

May your heart be our heart,
and your plan be our guide:
For every child's heart, joy.

For every child's soul, meaning.
For every child's body, protection.
For every child's mind, peace.
For every child, family.

Amen.

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FAITH TO ACTION INITIATIVE

faithtoaction.org

The Faith to Action Initiative, a project of Tides, is a coalition of organizations seeking to elevate best practices in care for orphaned and vulnerable children, with free educational resources and support for churches, faith-based organizations, and individuals who want to help. To learn more about family-based care and how you can get involved visit www.faithtoaction.org.