



CHILD SPONSORSHIP & TRANSITIONING RESIDENTIAL CARE SERVICES

In this interview, BCN's Senior Technical Advisor, Rebecca Nhep, speaks with Phil Aspegren, Founder of Casa Viva, about transitioning residential care services with child sponsorship funding models.

Rebecca: Welcome, Phil, and thank you so much for taking the time today to discuss child sponsorship models and their interaction with residential care services undergoing transition. Phil, could you start by telling us a bit about yourself and your background, particularly your work with vulnerable children in Latin America?

Phil: I live in San Jose, Costa Rica. After getting married, I started out in business while my wife was a teacher. We eventually decided to move to Latin America and work with children. We did what we thought was the right thing: we became the directors of an orphanage in the Dominican Republic. It was rewarding but also concerning. The statistics about kids growing up long-term in orphanages were troubling, especially since all the children had families wanting to visit them. We noticed the tendency for children to become institutionalized despite our efforts to prevent it, and there was a lack of alternative care options. After six years, we moved to Costa Rica and started a foster care agency that also focused on family reunification and adoption, aiming to get children into permanent families as quickly as possible. That's a bit about me and my last 27 years in Latin America.



Phil Aspegren, Casa Viva

Rebecca: From what I understand, the children's home you ran in the Dominican Republic had a child sponsorship model. Can you tell us a bit about how that worked?

Phil: Like most children's homes using a child sponsorship model, we had families and individuals from the United States, the UK, and Canada giving a set amount per child per month. Each sponsor received the child's picture, story, and 4–5 letters per year, and they could write to the child as well. This was 20 years ago, and the monthly amount was based on rates from larger organizations like Compassion and World Vision. However, unlike them, we provided 24/7 residential care, which required 5–7 sponsors per child to cover the costs. Residential care was 5–6 times more expensive. I'm not sure if sponsors were fully aware that other families also received letters from the same child, but it was necessary to make the budget work.

Rebecca: When you started Casa Viva in Costa Rica, you intentionally moved away from the child sponsorship model. Why was that?

Phil: First, some sponsors referred to the child they sponsored as ‘my child’ or ‘the child I have in the Dominican Republic,’ which led to unhealthy assumptions about the relationship. The most important thing a child needs is connection, and that can’t be met by someone in a different country. The connection must be local, primarily with the family caring for the child, not a sponsor. Additionally, child sponsorship programs are resource intensive. I remember visiting a large NGO in the Dominican Republic that employed seven full-time staff to translate letters from children to their sponsors. We learned from our experience and wanted to avoid that in Costa Rica. Also, child sponsorship creates an assumption of long-term support and relationships, which doesn’t reflect the reality of most children’s needs. Most children come from broken families, and we need to work on family restoration. Children come and go, which doesn’t align well with child sponsorship models.

Rebecca: What can happen when a child goes home to their family, and the sponsor’s expectations are not met?

Phil: In one of my first experiences with reunification in the Dominican Republic, we worked with a biological family to reunify a child. When we notified the sponsors, one reacted almost with hate mail, shocked to learn the child had a family. Often, to sell the story of these children, certain details are omitted. For instance, there was a case where children had an abusive father, but they also had a mother, who was never actually married to the father, had married, and was doing well. We worked with her to reunify her children, but sponsors only knew about the abusive father. This kind of partial storytelling can create problems when the full story is revealed. These experiences led us to move away from the child sponsorship model when starting Casa Viva.

Rebecca: How can child sponsorship models impact the process of transitioning a residential care service?

Phil: It can have a huge impact. Organizations may need to change their funding model when transitioning. At Casa Viva, instead of child sponsorship, we developed Friends of Casa Viva, which works off the same recurring monthly donation but connects donors to a program supporting numerous children and their families in different ways. This approach educates sponsors on family-based care and avoids creating unhealthy relationships. Each child’s needs are individualized, unlike the one-size-fits-all approach of children’s homes. Sponsors see the range of solutions and understand the importance of family strengthening and support.

Rebecca: What do you advise organizations with existing child sponsorship models when they are undergoing transition?

Phil: We assist organizations in developing a strategy to phase out their child sponsorship program. There’s often fear because child sponsorship is institutional and their lifeblood. Some organizations make a blanket switch to a new model, while others grandfather the sponsorship program for existing donors while bringing new donors into a different program. Clear and positive communication around the reasons for the change can help transition sponsors to ‘friends of the program’ status. Many have successfully made this transition and even increased their funding.

Rebecca: What might communications with existing child sponsors look like if done well?

Phil: In one other example, I was having lunch with a director of a project, and he was at the beginning of learning about family-based care and the importance of transitioning models, and he said, “I’m going to have to send that letter to my donors to let them know we’ve been doing it all wrong, but we’re learning new things and we’re going to do better in the future.” My first reaction was, never send that letter! It’s important not to demonize children’s homes, demonize directors of children’s homes, and the donors that have been supporting all these years.

That is the wrong way to win people over and bring them along the journey towards a new model of care. The right thing to say is, when no one else was working in this rural village in Kenya, we are the ones who stepped in and were caring for children. Now we're learning new and better ways to care. The messaging must celebrate the past and build excitement for the direction of the future. That's much more appealing. That is how I communicate transition to boards, and directors of organizations and staff. As we write our letters to child sponsors, that is also the type of message we want to send to them too.

Rebecca: How can organizations manage the temporary spike in costs that often comes with transitioning residential care services?

Phil: We advise setting up a capital costs fundraising campaign to cover those spikes, especially for setting up new programs. Larger donors often love investing in capital campaigns, but instead of having them focus on buildings, we have the campaign focused on expanding services. Organizations should refocus their communications around the question: Who is this child in our care, and what do they need? This shift in thinking helps organizations realize they don't exist to build and fill up children's homes but to care for children. This mindset allows for diverse programs, from family preservation to foster care, and these programs can be promoted through the fundraising campaign.

Rebecca: What do you do when children have direct communication with their sponsors, and how do you manage that in the transition process?

Phil: This goes back to the fundamental problems with child sponsorship. It was developed at a time when the world was a very different place. Those direct channels of communication didn't exist when child sponsorship was created. The challenge is that children can manipulate those channels.

We saw this with teams visiting children's homes too. Children look at the visiting teams and think, 'What are you going to give me? What is in that suitcase?' Teams think there is going to be some kind of altruistic relationship and connection formed. Visiting teams would leave in tears, yet the children were like, 'Ok, who's next? What's in the next suitcase and what am I going to get out of it.' For them, it's not a real connection or relationship. The same thing happens with child sponsorship. The relationship is perceived differently by the sponsor and the child.

If you see this child as your child, and you think you have that type of connection and relationship, then it can be manipulated. Unintentionally or otherwise, it can become an unhealthy relationship. So, it's good to try to prevent that. We tell our donors that it is not their job to connect with the children. It is their job to support the connection between the child and the family, which involves supporting the staff and services that nurture that child and family relationship. Even for teams, their job is not to connect with the children. Their job is to develop an activity that the children and their families can enjoy together that encourages connection. They may facilitate an outing to the national park that children and their families all go on together. The team might also be there, but their job is not to connect with the children directly.

Rebecca: Have you ever had to coach organizations on providing information to donors about what to do if they have concerns or if children raise concerns directly with them during the transition or reintegration process?

Phil: No, but that's a great idea. Informing sponsors about the right way to raise concerns can help manage challenges. This approach creates healthy boundaries and allows concerns to be addressed by the social workers overseeing the child's reintegration plan.

Rebecca: Drawing on all your wisdom and experience, what are your top 5 tips for organizations considering transitioning their model of care and child sponsorship fundraising model all at once?

Phil: My top 5 tips for organizations considering transitioning their model of care and child sponsorship model are:

- **Listen to the children:** Understand that children always prefer to be with their families. When I was running a children's home, it came as a shock to me that all the children, even the ones I had a close connection to, wanted to go back to their families. Ask the children, listen to their response. Children always want to be out of the children's home and in a family.
- **Commit to the importance of family:** Develop a positive communications plan that helps everyone understand the value of family. You can't start by saying orphanages are bad and we've been harming children. That's going to build walls and fences and cause people who have been supporting you for years to question and step back when you need them to make this change.
- **Celebrate the past and point to the future:** Highlight the organization's history and exciting future plans. Lots of organizations have already been doing exciting things in the community with biological families. Pull out some of those stories and highlight them.

- **Move away from the child sponsorship model:** This allows for personalized care for each child. Focus in on individual children. Share their full stories, and highlight stories that involve family reunification, mentoring, fostering or adoption. Tell personal stories that help people say 'yes, that makes sense.' Focus less on 'transitioning your model of care' and more on 'doing the right thing for each child individually.'

- **Promote local responsibility:** Encourage local engagement and support for vulnerable children, reducing dependence on foreign aid. We've taught this to churches as a discipleship approach. Local responsibility looks like churches, individual and corporations all engaging with the social needs in their own communities and partnering with local solutions. That's what we do with Casa Viva and the Friends of Casa Viva program. This approach has enabled us to grow our local donor base and create a more sustainable and positive model to support the monthly operations of our organization.

Rebecca: I love the philosophical shift from overseas dependence to local responsibility.

Thank you so much, Phil, for sharing your insights on why organizations should consider shifting away from child sponsorship models and how to manage that in the context of a residential care service transition.

To access resources, tools and additional learning on the transition of residential care services visit the [Better Care Network Transition Hub](#)