



CHILD SPONSORSHIP AND TRANSITION: INTERVIEW WITH LAURA HORVATH HELPING CHILDREN WORLDWIDE



In this interview, BCN's Senior Technical Advisor, Rebecca Nhep, speaks with Laura Horvath, from Helping Children Worldwide, about the impact of child sponsorship programs on the transition of residential care services and post transition family strengthening programs.

Rebecca: Welcome, Laura, and thank you so much for joining me today to discuss the intersection between child sponsorship programs and the transition of residential care services. To begin, could you give us some background on your organization and explain how you became involved in residential care services in Sierra Leone?

Laura: Absolutely. My name is Dr. Laura Horvath, and I am the Director of Programs and Global Engagement at Helping Children Worldwide. Our organization is based in the United States and supports and partners with a program in Sierra Leone called the Child Reintegration Centre. Initially, it was an orphanage known as the Child Rescue Centre, established to care for children who had been orphaned or separated from their families due to the country's 11-year civil war. The centre began as a street-feeding program, but thanks to an exceptionally generous church collection, it evolved into a home for 40 children who were living on the streets and had lost contact with their families. It operated as a children's home for 16 years before we began transitioning to family-based care. Around 2018-2019, the Child Rescue Centre was rebranded as the Child Reintegration Centre. Today, it works to reunite children who are street connected or separated from

their families, and it runs a family-strengthening program aimed at helping families achieve independence and self-reliance. They also have a small transition support services department that assists orphanages in West Africa and other regions in shifting their care models in a similar way.

Rebecca: That's incredible work. For those interested in learning more about HCW's transition, we have a [detailed case study available on the Better Care Network website](#). In addition to running a residential care service prior to your transition, you also had a child sponsorship fundraising model operating in the U.S. Could you tell us a bit about how that model worked and how donors engaged with the children?

Laura: Certainly. Shortly after the orphanage was established, we launched what we called the Sponsor a Child (SAC) program. It was closely modelled on the child sponsorship programs of larger organizations that people were familiar with. Donors would contribute around \$25 a month, with those funds going into a general pool to support the orphanage's operations, including the children's education and healthcare. Donors, or Sponsors were matched with a specific child, and they would exchange roughly four letters and photographs a year. To be completely transparent, on the Sierra Leone side, the children were often gathered, and a letter template was written on a blackboard for them to copy. The letters typically followed a formula: "I'm in Class 5, my favorite food is rice, my favorite color is blue. Thank you for your letter and support." It was a very standardized process.

Rebecca: After transitioning your model of care to family-based services, you also decided to make a change to your child sponsorship program. Could you explain why?

Laura: My focus at HCW is on the program side—specifically, helping those on the ground deliver the right kinds of services to families and evaluating the impact of those services. Towards the end of our transition, I realized that for over 16 years, we had been focused on the needs of the children. However, now that they were being placed back into families, we had to acknowledge that these families weren't wealthy. Many of them had faced poverty-related challenges that led to the children being separated in the first place, and these challenges still existed. Our program staff in Sierra Leone began to recognize that you can't just reintegrate a child into a family and then continue to focus solely on the child's needs. They had to adjust their social work and case management approach to consider the needs of the entire family.

One of our social workers used a helpful analogy to explain this shift. She described a baby toy mobile, where various toys are suspended by interconnected strings. When the baby hits one toy, it swings and causes the others to move as well. If you cut the string of one toy, the others would also unravel because they're all connected. The same is true for a child in a family. The vulnerabilities of the family affect every member. You can't continue with a narrow focus on one child—you have to engage with the entire family unit.

For Sponsors, however, the focus was still solely on the child. They were receiving letters only from the child, which created the perception that the child was alone, without any adults who loved and cared for them. This perception wasn't accurate and, frankly, felt somewhat dishonest and disrespectful to the parents.

Additionally, we wanted children to be reintegrated into families as quickly as possible, and we aimed to implement best practices that promoted family resilience and independence, rather than perpetuating reliance on

programs. However, our child sponsorship model was working against that goal. On one hand, child sponsorship provided a reliable source of long-term funding, which allowed us to plan effectively, and it also helped us retain committed donors. But this also created a dilemma. Our in-country program teams were trying to help families become self-sufficient as quickly as possible, while our child sponsorship funding model was fostering long-term dependence. We realized we needed to find a new way to engage dedicated donors without keeping families in a state of dependency.

Rebecca: So, you discovered that child sponsorship isn't a neutral funding mechanism. It shapes donor perceptions, and to align programs with those perceptions, child sponsorship ultimately influences program design. Did you see this mismatch during the transition as children were being reintegrated into families, or did it become more apparent after you had fully shifted towards family strengthening and empowerment?

Laura: I wish we had recognized the mismatch sooner and acted faster. Initially, we thought we could simply shift donors' focus from the individual child to the family and create a family sponsorship model. Donors could receive photos and letters from the entire family instead of just the child. What we didn't realize at first was that child sponsorship was influencing the very structure of our programming. It wasn't just about introducing the family to donors—it was about moving from a model rooted in dependency to one that supported growing independence.

It took us about a year after the transition to fully grasp that our funding model and our family empowerment programs were at odds with each other. That's when I proposed the idea of shifting to what we now call our Family Empowerment Advocacy model. It's taken us five years of internal design work and ongoing donor education to make this change, and the process is still underway. New advocates come in without the same preconceived notions, but for donors who transitioned from the child sponsorship model, it's a continuous and ongoing re-education effort.

We encountered resistance in certain areas. We even lost staff who were running the sponsorship program because they couldn't adapt to the new approach. It was similar to the transition from an orphanage to a family strengthening program. Some donors couldn't make the shift either, so we lost donors when we transitioned the orphanage and again when we moved away from child sponsorship. Despite these challenges, we felt the change was necessary because we strongly believed that child sponsorship wasn't neutral—it was harmful. It was steering programs in ways that weren't in the best interests of the children or their families. I firmly believe that if you're transitioning an orphanage, you also need to transition your child sponsorship and short-term mission programs.

Rebecca: They're all interlinked, aren't they. These mechanisms create donor experiences with individual children that don't align with the goals of reunifying children with families and empowering families to care for their children. When you came to this conclusion, how did you approach making these changes internally with your staff?

Laura: We had numerous internal discussions, particularly between the development and fundraising departments, to address the conflict that child sponsorship was creating. I can't recall the exact percentage of our budget that came from child sponsorship, but it wasn't something we could just cut off overnight. We had to transition from one model to another, and we needed to have a dedicated donor program of some kind. Child sponsorship provided dependable, regular funding that we relied on to run our programs, so this wasn't a simple process. We needed to carefully consider what we would develop to replace child sponsorship and how we would implement that change.

One major challenge was managing the time frame—how could we engage donors to support a specific family for, say, three years, and then transition them to a new family once the previous one became independent. My initial instinct was to gather insights from other organizations who had already made this shift and other resources. We

collected ideas, conducted research, and then proposed new approaches. The outcome was somewhat of a compromise. I advocated for a model that created more distance between the donor and the individual family, while our marketing team wanted to preserve that personal connection. What we ended up with is a model that keeps that connection between the Advocate and a specific family, but the program is still evolving and will continue to.

Rebecca: How did these changes impact your funding? Did you see an increase or a decrease, and how has that evolved over time?

Laura: When we made the shift, we announced it to all our former sponsors and launched an educational campaign. We sent out letters, emails, and did a lot of social media outreach to explain what we were doing and why. We emphasized that the change was intended to better align with our programs in Sierra Leone and to honor the parents and caregivers. We were bold in asking donors to consider increasing their support during this transition. Initially, we saw a spike in donations. We've done a "back of the napkin" analysis of this. The last two years, our Family Empowerment Advocacy program brought in about 7 - 10% less than the average annual amount when it was a child sponsorship program, but it hasn't dipped below our lowest child sponsorship year which was 2020 – during the pandemic. We hit our highest level the year after that as we were transitioning to the new Family Empowerment Advocacy program, but that boost may have been because we were putting a heavy focus on messaging through that process.

I think this dip happened at least in part because, while donors initially thought they understood the change, they struggled over time. Family strengthening and empowerment is a more abstract concept, whereas the idea of an orphanage is well known and clear to people. The same goes for child sponsorship—thanks to the large organizations that have promoted it for decades, it's a familiar concept. But family advocacy isn't as well known or as easy to grasp.

Rebecca: That's an important point. Part of the sustainability of child sponsorship funding comes from the emotional appeal of helping a vulnerable child. When sponsoring families face financial difficulties, they're less likely to stop supporting a vulnerable child because child sponsorship creates a quasi-parental relationship, making it a more emotional decision rather than a purely pragmatic one. That dynamic doesn't necessarily carry over to a family advocacy model. Also, as you've pointed out, child sponsorship and orphanage models are deeply embedded in society due to decades of messaging, particularly through churches. The re-education you're doing now is laying the groundwork for making family strengthening a familiar concept. I hope that, in the future, many organizations will benefit as this approach becomes more widely understood.

Laura: I hope to see that day too. It's crucial not only to educate people about family advocacy but also to raise awareness about the flaws of child sponsorship. We've had some very candid conversations with donors about this. Child sponsorship models place donors between children and their caregivers, which can be problematic. For example, we've had sponsors approach us wanting to transfer a child they sponsor to a better school, offering to increase their donation to make that happen. But we must explain that it's not their decision to make—it's the parents' decision, even if that means the child stays in a school they don't prefer. This highlights one of the harmful aspects of child sponsorship: it creates a perception of a parent-child relationship that isn't real. And that really harms the dignity of the child's actual parent.

Another issue is that we had a policy allowing only two children per family to be sponsored. Think about how that affected the other children in the family who weren't sponsored. On a broader scale, it can strain community relationships when some families have sponsored children while others don't. Hunter Farrell raises another important point in his book on congregational missions: How would we feel if complete strangers were writing letters to our 11-year-old daughters? He challenges donors to consider whether that's something they would allow in their own homes.

Ideally, I'd love to see our Family Empowerment and Advocacy model evolve even further, where communication is with the caseworker, not directly with the family. Caseworkers could select updates from the families they support, offering a more authentic and diverse range of stories about how families are being strengthened and supported on their path to independence, thanks to the participation and generosity of dedicated donors like our Advocates.

Rebecca: As your story highlights, transitioning from a child sponsorship to a family advocacy funding model isn't without its challenges. While it's a positive shift programmatically, it can impact funding levels. With that in mind, what advice would you give to an organization that operates a residential care service and relies on a child sponsorship funding program? What would you suggest they do?

Laura: When we started our orphanage, we were running it from the U.S. It was a simple model—Sponsors contributed \$25 a month, and children received the same depersonalized support: education, school supplies, access to healthcare, and the same food. It was straightforward. But when you transition to family-based care and support, everything changes. You need a much higher level of skill in your local team, and they must be more directly involved with families, each of whom has unique circumstances. Instead of a one-size-fits-all package, social workers need to be able to personalize the support based on each family's needs. Some families require intensive, wraparound services, while others may only need help with school tuition.

In this model, the funding needs to go into a pool that the program team on the ground can access, based on their assessments and decisions about what each family requires. Essentially, as we transitioned our orphanage and child sponsorship model, we also localized our efforts and shifted to a development approach so that local leaders had the autonomy and authority to make the program decisions they needed to be able to make. My advice to other organizations is that if you're transitioning from an orphanage to a family strengthening or family-based care model, you need to transition your child sponsorship

program too. The two are not compatible, and if you try to maintain the child sponsorship program, you'll end up in a tug of war between your program goals and your funding model.

Rebecca: We often hear this argument with orphanages, and I imagine it applies to child sponsorship as well: "Isn't something better than nothing?" Without sponsorship, we can't run our programs, so shouldn't we settle for a compromised, not-quite-best-practice approach because it's better than nothing? What do you think?

Laura: I hear that all the time: "Isn't this better than nothing? Isn't an orphanage better than kids living on the streets?" And my response is, why are we settling for that? Why is the bar we're setting for ourselves the *least* we can do? For my own children, I want the best—I want to do everything I can for them. Why should we settle for less for someone else's child? We need to stretch ourselves beyond that, and honestly, I don't think it's even that much of a stretch.

Rebecca: Human nature tends to resist change and discomfort. We shy away from it as much as possible. But if we keep the children's best interests at the forefront of our minds, then we're obligated to pursue best practices. It might sound harsh, but if we're inserting ourselves into someone else's story, we need to be committed to what's in their best interest, not just accepting that "something is better than nothing."

Laura: I completely agree. These are children and families we're talking about—vulnerable ones at that. We can't afford to play games with their lives. We have an obligation to pursue excellence, even though I'll be honest, that's hard. Making changes in pursuit of best practices is challenging. It's been complex for HCW. We had to prepare ourselves for tough conversations and for working through complicated issues. We're knew we were going to lose people along the way, and that was painful, but we had to do it because it was the right thing to do.

Rebecca: Absolutely. At the end of the day, our compass must be set toward what is right, just, and in the best

interests of these children and their families. I appreciate your honesty about the bumpy road organizations may have to travel to pursue that. A strong evidence-based, best-practice in-country program requires a funding model that aligns with and supports it. What encouragement would you offer to organizations that are beginning this journey?

Laura: Two things. First, reach out and collaborate with others. Connect with organizations that have already gone through this transition and learn from their experiences. HCW, for instance, would be more than happy to share our lessons to encourage others along the way. Glean as much information as you can from those who've walked this path before—it will help you prepare.

Second, keep your goal in focus. As a mom with children in their 20s, I love seeing them branch out into the world and build their own lives. It's rewarding. I have a special place in my heart for the parents and caregivers raising these children. I want them to experience that same pride, to watch their children develop and forge their own paths, knowing it's because of the care and nurture they've provided. In child sponsorship, the sponsors often wear the hero's cape—it feels good to play that role in providing for a vulnerable child. But shifting to a family advocate position gives donors the chance to take that cape and place it around the neck of a parent or caregiver. It allows them to become the hero in their child's story, highlighting the crucial role they play in their child's life. I was a child sponsor myself, and I find handing the cape over to a parent and watching them thrive in their caregiving role even more rewarding than wearing it myself.

Rebecca: I love that thought. There's nothing more disempowering than being a parent and feeling like you don't have the means or power to provide for your children. Supporting parents, rather than standing in front of them, to enable them to care for their children is an incredible and rewarding opportunity. Thank you, Laura, for sharing such wisdom in this interview. I believe this will encourage and offer practical insights to many organizations considering transitioning their residential care service and child sponsorship program.

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