Volunteering in orphanages has become a hugely popular way to “give back” when travelling abroad. However, many children’s organisations are campaigning against this practice. Why?

1. The problem with volunteering

The majority of people who want to volunteer in an orphanage have very good intentions and the best interests of the children at heart. However, they may not realise that many residential care centres that allow volunteers direct contact with children put children at risk in the following ways:

- 60 years of research shows that growing up in an orphanage can have a negative impact on:
  - Children's health
  - Development
  - Life chances

- The risk of children suffering from violence, or physical or sexual abuse is much higher in orphanages than in any other type of care setting.

- If a child needs to stay in an orphanage, this should be temporary, and as small-scale and family like as possible until a better alternative is found.

- The Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, endorsed by the United Nations in 2009, state that governments should, wherever possible, promote family care, and prevent the separation of children from their parents.

2. The orphanage myth

Many volunteers don’t understand the real situation of children in orphanages. Studies have shown that approximately 60% of children in orphanages worldwide have one or more living parents. The term “orphanage” is misleading, conjuring up images of children with no family to care for them.

- There are many reasons why a child may be living in an orphanage.

3. Volunteering is contributing to the growth of orphanages

The practice of international volunteering in orphanages in the developing world is becoming so common it is creating a demand for “orphans” and “orphanages”.

- An increase in the number of orphanages in a country indicates an increase in the separation of children and families.

- Volunteering in such settings supports this trend.

- The more funding that goes into orphanages, the more appealing they become for struggling families, who become convinced that their children will have a better future in the centre than at home.

4. Orphanages should only ever be a temporary solution

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5. To help children, support their families and communities

- There are millions of vulnerable children in the world at risk of disease, exploitation, abuse, neglect, and death. To support these children, please consider learning about, working with, or donating to programs supporting children in families and at-risk communities.

Support families, not orphanages

For more information visit: bettervolunteeringbettercare.org

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