

Volunteering in a children's home: how to do this best?

→ Are you going to work in a children's home?

Do you love travelling? Do you want to head somewhere sunny and different? To learn about another culture while gaining experiences and doing something meaningful, for instance through working as a volunteer in a developing country? Perhaps you have a heart for children and would love to contribute to their well-being so you think about working in a children's home?

You should know: Children who cannot grow up with their parents all have gone through a traumatic experience. They are separated from their parents and sometimes from their whole family. In particular, when they end up in a children's home they miss contact with their family, their culture, religion and background.

Volunteers and supporters of children's issues globally should remember that the future of the children you'll work with is in the country where they are living. It is important that they learn how to function in society and that they have local people to rely on and trust in moments when they feel lonely and insecure. They need long lasting bonds with people that stay with them for more than the three weeks or months you have to offer. They need adults to attach to. Despite this, as a volunteer and outsider you can still make a difference in the life of children. This leaflet explains how you can do this best.

Be prepared!

In addition to this leaflet, read more information about growing up in children's homes. It is important to know that it is much better for children to grow up in a family and not in an institution. You can find more information about this from the Better Care Network. www.bettercarenetwork.org

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Most intern volunteers just come to attain their educational certificates while others go beyond that and want to help.

Young person, Kenya

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Attachment is important. All children seek the support of someone stronger, an adult that can protect and support them. Without adults, children cannot survive. In an environment of safety and support children can develop, discover the world knowing that they can rely on the person that gives them the sense of feeling and that they will be there for them whenever they need them. Every child needs fixed caregivers: parents or other adults with who they have developed attachment. These attachment figures stand model for all relations with people the child meets in life. The younger the child, the more important it is to have fixed attachment figures. In a children's home with caregivers in shifts and with insufficient time, children lack attachment opportunities. This has an effect on children when they are small but also when they grow older and even into adulthood. Children without attachment figures show difficulties in trusting other people as well as themselves. They have difficulties with separations and in building relationships with friends and partners, in jobs and with their own children. Also, other developmental areas are affected. Research shows that they do worse in school, lack self-confidence and do not develop to their full potential.

■ Inform yourself about the country and culture where you are going. The Dutch Royal Institute for Tropical Studies has an information series covering many countries. Travel guides and websites about countries can provide much information.

■ Try to adjust to the local customs (clothing, habits, traditions and appropriate manners of communication). If you cannot do this for a specific reason, explain this with respect.

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We expect volunteers to carry out their tasks realising that they are role models for the children which is a heavy responsibility.

*Staff children's home,
South Africa*

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■ It is extremely important to invest in a good relationship with the leaders of the project, before and during your stay.

■ Choose an activity that fits the duration of your stay. A longer period of at least three months complies much better with intense contact with children than a short period of several weeks

■ Be aware of your strengths, but also of your limitations. Did you complete an education related to working with children? In that case you can support the caregivers. Was your education in languages? If so, you could teach English. Are you good in sports? Undertake sport activities. If you're not afraid of construction work, assist in building. You can also think of doing some administrative work, paint a wall or do drawing with children.

■ Try to have a clear understanding of your tasks and the do's and don't's before you travel to the project and communicate this with the receiving organisation. Some children's homes see a volunteer as a replacement of paid caregivers. This is not in the best interest of the children and their need to attachment figures. Your role and tasks should always compliment the permanent staff members.

■ Care for yourself: you will hear tough stories and see difficult things, from the children and at the place where you are. Think upfront how you will deal with this and how you approach children and listen to them. Speak about this with your supervisor or coach in the project.

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I did what I came for: teach dance. This went ok and was also sometimes less nice. I had to adjust to the fact that every class had different children. In the end I have adjusted the classes and we had a lot of fun.

Dutch volunteer

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■ When you leave: organise a farewell party, for yourself but in particular for the children. Don't make promises to the children about returning or maintaining contact.

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They should know and understand the kind of children they are coming to interact with because children come from different backgrounds; some are from the streets, some are orphaned, others are abused etc.

Young person, Kenya

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■ Respect the privacy of children and the staff; do not place traceable information or pictures on Facebook or websites and blogs.

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We exchanged ideas and shared of our different cultures.

Young person, Kenya

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■ Do not make promises you cannot keep to children or people you meet in the community.

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Volunteers must bring presents, gifts; they come from a rich country. I want to study in her country; she promised me that she would try to realize that.

Child, South Africa

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- Treat all children equally: do not have favourites! You may like some children better than others or you feel touched by their stories. Do not show this and give them equal attention.

- Be flexible in what you do, also during your stay in the project.

- Be aware that you will always make mistakes, that is part of life.

- And most and for all: make your stay a great and good experience for both the children and yourself!

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I worked with young people. I liked one better than others. I tried not to show this as I think it is important that you treat them all equal.

Dutch volunteer

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What is and does the Better Care Network?

The Better Care Network is a network and knowledge exchange platform for organisations and persons who support children without adequate parental care, in the Netherlands and in projects abroad. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that a child for a full and harmonious development should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding. Many countries have limited or no possibilities to raise children without parental care in a family environment and they depend on children's homes or institutions. The Better Care Network aims to improve this situation through cooperation between organisations and exchange of good practises and knowledge. This supports the development of family-based care and the opportunity for all children to grow up in a family.

More information?

Website:

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**Better
Care
Network
Netherlands**

Colofon:

This leaflet was developed by the Working Group
Quality of Care of Better Care Network.