

What it feels like to grow up in a children's home

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Stephen, squatting second left, with some members of Kenya Network of Care-leavers. The group had visited a children's home early this month.

In Summary

- I was never told I was loved throughout my long stay here. The housemothers showed little or no response to our distress. Due to this, we learnt not to cry because experience had taught us that no one would care

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I am 26 years old. For 13 years, the only home I knew was an orphanage, where my younger sister and I were banished to when our mother died. I say banished

because my experience in my former home has convinced me that no child belongs in such an institution.

Every time I reflect on my past, I remember the fact that I was never told that I was loved throughout my long stay there. I longed to be hugged, but the closest I got to a hug was what I saw on television. A caring smile was hard to come by from the housemothers who took care of us.

They were insensitive to our emotional needs, our relationship mechanical and impersonal. They were employees who washed us, fed us, and kept the dormitories clean.

We were left alone on mats, on chairs, and dormitories for long periods, without stimulation; no attachment, bonding, play, or enjoyable daily routine. The housemothers came and went. There was no chance to get attached to them.

Most of the time, they showed little or no response to our distress. Due to this, we learnt not to cry because experience had shown us that no one would care. Sometimes we would even get spanked for crying. The experience was worse for the younger children, who needed constant warmth and reassurance as well as stimulation. Those little ones were always miserable.

I looked forward to visitors. I would run and cling to them, because I felt that they were loving, caring, and concerned because they would carry us, hug us, and call us “sweet little children”. But they would leave, and we would all retreat to our misery.

I longed for someone I could talk to, and not a day went by without me thinking about my mother, and wondering what our lives would have been like had she not died. Her death was a cruel one, which my siblings and I had the misfortune of witnessing. Her assailant slashed her neck with a panga, and we could only watch helplessly as she bled to death. She had been carrying our younger sister on her back. She too died in the attack.

I was about five years old. I still recall that terrible day with such clarity, it might have happened yesterday. After my mother’s death, my sister, elder brother, and

I were taken to live in a hospital in Kisii, where I come from. We lived there for about three months, and then we were committed by the court to the home.

My elder brother ran away from the home after a year or so, and went back to Kisii. My parents must have separated before my birth because I saw my father for the first time when I turned 12. He had come to visit us at the home. Soon after this, I was informed that he had passed away.

I attended primary school within the compound of the home, and after sitting my final year examinations, I was sent to Joytown High School in Thika. I was a bright student, and scored B- in my KCSE examinations.

But this did not fill me with much happiness, because I had just turned 18. I was now an adult and no longer entitled to any support from the home. I was given Sh10,000 and sent away to make a life for myself. It was a disorienting experience.

I had lived a sheltered life and had no skills to talk of. I felt lost. Luckily, I had made some friends within the community, and they housed me. But after a month, the money was gone, and I had no means of survival.

I went back to the home and asked for a job. They employed me as a groundsman and paid me Sh5,000, which I used to pay rent and buy food. After a year, the home got me a sponsor, who offered to pay for my university education. This is something that I will always be grateful for because it has empowered me in ways I never thought possible.

I joined the University of Nairobi in 2003 to study social work and graduated in 2006. I was blessed to be at university, but I felt as if I didn't belong there. I constantly experienced a sense of profound loneliness and a deep sense of uncertainty. I felt lost. You would have to understand that my exposure to the outside world was limited.

I was used to interacting with people whose backgrounds were similar to mine — neglected children, children from broken homes, orphans, children who didn't belong anywhere. But the young people I found at university had families and

real homes, which they talked about and visited often. What did I have? Where would I go for Easter, or Christmas?

My ties with my extended family were estranged in my childhood. None of them wanted us when our mother died, therefore as much as I have tried to accept them, I don't consider them family.

Just like the other children at the home, I lost my culture, tradition, and mother tongue almost immediately I stepped into the home.

To deal with the uncertainty, I immersed myself in my studies. After graduation, I got a job with an NGO as a social worker. A few weeks ago, my younger sister graduated from nursing school. It is a dream come true for her because she has always wanted to be a nurse. I guess this is one more blessing to be grateful for.

I may come across as confident, but I am still struggling to relate with people. Most have a set view of how one should carry oneself in society. They don't have time to work on your personality and expect you to fit in, just like the next person. Trying to fit in is no easy task.

Taking charge

In June last year, a colleague and I formed the Kenya Network of Care-Leavers, an organisation whose aim is to bring together individuals who grew up in orphanages across the country. The group has a membership of 45.

The oldest member is 32, the youngest is 18. Some of them were kicked out of care or left without being adequately prepared, or not prepared at all, to live independent lives.

One of them equated this to a football game, where one is given a red card and expected to get off the pitch immediately. You're not prepared for the life ahead. The objective of the group is to create a haven where we can share our experiences, dreams, and hopes. To be a platform where our voices can be heard, and a stage on which we can advocate better care for children in institutions. We also look for ways in which each one of us can achieve our educational goals as well as financial independence.

Parents figure

Children in homes need to have parent figures who can act as role models. Unfortunately, this isn't the case. Thousands of children are being brought up in isolated conditions where they rarely interact with loving adults.

In a certain children's home I visited recently, I was taken aback when small children around the age of two and three clustered around me and started calling me "mummy". By the time, I was leaving, I was heartbroken. This depicted the poor level of socialisation and interaction that these children have. They will grow up confused about their identity and roles.

Institutions are like zoos. People come to visit, play with us, then leave us in our closed compounds. In a nutshell, we're in cages. There is also the pity. I saw many visitors crying, and this made me feel bad about myself, and made me realise that I was really different from other children.

They say it takes a village to raise a child, but show me how many institutions are community owned. Or how many are run or funded by Kenyans. Over 70 per cent are run by individuals, groups, and organisations from the developed world.

I am pursuing a Masters Degree in Child Development at Daystar University, a course that has opened my eyes and helped me understand myself better. At times though, it still feels as if I'm groping in the dark.

If you want to get in touch with the Kenya Network of Care-Leavers, e-mail knet.careleavers@gmail.com

<https://www.nation.co.ke/lifestyle/living/What-it-feels-like-to-grow-up-in-a-childrens-home-/1218-1058884-154pyhj/index.html>