



## HOW VOLUNTEERS AND VISITORS CAN BEST SUPPORT VULNERABLE CHILDREN

The plight of vulnerable children in the developing world is challenging and moving and stirs many good-hearted people to seek opportunities to volunteer within programs that assist children such as orphanages and shelters. Without careful consideration and awareness of the broader issues, our good intentions could contribute to the exploitation and vulnerability of the children we seek to help. Therefore before you decide to visit or volunteer in an orphanage we suggest you consider the following questions:

### 1. HOW CAN VISITING AN ORPHANAGE HARM THE CHILDREN?

It is critical that young children form a strong attachment with a primary caregiver for their cognitive, social and emotional development. Children in orphanages have been separated from their parents and often experience attachment disorders, which cause them to develop unnaturally close bonds with people they have just met. When volunteers take the role of caregivers in an orphanage the children quickly form these bonds. Each time a volunteer leaves, this bond is broken and the child once again experiences rejection. This is extremely detrimental to children and therefore only long-term staff should assume caregiver roles for children in orphanages.

### 2. HOW CAN VOLUNTEERING AT ORPHANAGES FUEL AN EXPLOITIVE SYSTEM?

Many orphanages rely on donations from visitors and volunteers. They often keep the children undernourished and in poor conditions to illicit donations from tourists who feel sorry for the children. There are cases of orphanages recruiting and trafficking children to fill their orphanages for fundraising purposes. This is a system that exploits children and is unfortunately perpetuated by volunteers who are genuinely trying to help.

### 3. WHO IS VOLUNTEERING?

When orphanages open their doors to well meaning volunteers, they also make a way for predators to gain access to the children. Predators are known for seeking opportunities to volunteer and work within orphanages to access children. Whilst good screening can reduce the risk, it is not always possible to identify a child abuser and therefore volunteering does expose children to risk.

### 4. DO I HAVE THE SKILLS AND TRAINING TO ASSIST TRAUMATISED CHILDREN?

Children in residential care have undergone multiple traumas, including being separated from their families. They need the assistance of trained, qualified and committed staff who are equipped to deal with their special needs. Most volunteers do not come with these skills or the local language to use these skills. They can therefore inadvertently compound the children's trauma out of a lack of awareness of how to appropriately deal with their behaviour.

### 5. WHAT WOULD BE APPROPRIATE IN MY OWN HOME OR COUNTRY?

In most of our own countries our government's child protection systems would not allow us to visit any kind of shelter or residential care home and most of us wouldn't consider asking. It would be considered a violation of the child's right to privacy and a risk to the children. In developing countries, children have the same rights but often child protection laws are weak or unregulated exposing children to risk. In the absence of strong local laws we should apply the same standards we would expect for our own children to children everywhere.



## ETHICAL ALTERNATIVES- SUPPORT FAMILIES, STRENGTHEN COMMUNITIES.

- 1. Volunteer in a program that seeks to preserve families and prevent family separation.** Volunteers could work with whole families or parents to strengthen their capacity to look after their own children.
- 2. Volunteer within family reunification programs.** Help a family prepare for their child's return by helping them renovate their house, get access to a water source or set up a small business or a veggie patch.
- 3. Volunteer in programs run in the community that everyone can access.** Examples might be English programs, sports programs, creative workshops or educational support programs.
- 4. Use your skills to build the capacity of staff working with children.** This might be in areas of promotions, websites, English, management, accounting or games and activities.
- 5. Focus on learning so that you are better equipped to advocate for a project or the needs of children when you return to your own country.**

When done with thought and consideration, volunteering can positively contribute towards good outcomes for vulnerable children and their families as well as be a life changing experience for volunteers.

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**However you choose to volunteer we encourage you to**



**THINK** about the impact



**ASK** the right questions



**ACT** in a way that protects children and promotes families.

