



via volunteers

ethical volunteering in south africa

Our position on 'Orphanage Volunteering'

In recent years, some individuals and entities have proposed that all volunteering at orphanages or residential care facilities worldwide should be stopped as a matter of urgency.

The reasoning behind this is partly driven by research showing that long term stays in a children's home environment can be harmful to a child's emotional and psychological well-being, and their ability to integrate socially later in life.

Another concern is that children in some countries (with very poor or virtually non-existent social service systems) are exposed to child trafficking when they are at a children's home.

Finally, there have been many verified reports of fake orphanages (notably in Cambodia and India) where unscrupulous or financially desperate parents rent their children out to these places to earn an income. The 'orphanage' then uses the fake orphans to attract international volunteers and other donors.

Whilst we don't condone fake orphanages anywhere in the world, or any situation that would expose a child to trafficking, we do believe that the global one-size-fits-all approach taken by campaigns aiming to ban 'orphanage volunteering' worldwide are ill-considered and irresponsible.

These campaigns take no account of the standard of social service systems in different countries, are disconnected from the real world dangers that vulnerable children are exposed to, and provide no viable alternatives to their care other than vague utopian suggestions about 'working towards' finding a stable, loving family home for every child or enforcing a (horrific) situation where abused and neglected children are not allowed to be separated from their parents under any circumstances.

Although there is no such thing as a 'fake orphanage' in South Africa, it is worth taking a closer look at these campaign concerns from a South African perspective to see why we think their global approach is inappropriate.

Firstly, it's important to understand that we do not have orphanages in South Africa. There are no Government or Non-Government organisations that cater solely for orphans. As of 2015, we have an estimated 631,000 double-orphans (both parents deceased) in South Africa. Alongside them, we have 590,000 maternal orphans (mother deceased), and 1,881,000 paternal orphans (father deceased). The vast majority of double-orphans live with an adult family member (e.g. an aunt or grandmother), but there are many who have no other family members that are able or willing to take care of them.

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We have an estimated 58,000 children living in child-only, or child-headed households. These are homes where all residents are under 18, or where a child has had to assume responsibility for the household and younger siblings because of the poor health of their parent(s). Many of these children live in insecure shacks and face many challenges with regard to accessing social welfare grants, accessing services, staying safe, and pursuing education. One of Baphumelele's outreach programmes is assisting child headed homes in the community. Many of these children, however, end up being cared for in Children's Homes as they can't cope by themselves. In 2015, an estimated 21% of all children in South Africa were not living with either parent.

Alongside orphans, social services also intervene on a daily basis for an alarming number of children who are victims of neglect, abuse and abandonment at the hands of their parents.

These children are collectively cared for in children's homes, more recently termed as Child & Youth Care Centres. Each home is registered with the South African Department of Social Development (DSD) as a Place of Safety.

These homes normally begin life as small non-profit projects run by well-meaning members of the public who recognize a need in their community. As they grow and become a registered Place of Safety with the DSD, these homes become eligible for a government grant. This small grant aims to cover the basic costs for each child in terms of food, clothing and getting them to school. There is no funding available for counselling, extra activities and outings, and the myriad of other expenses associated with raising a child.

It's important to note that in South Africa, the government does not provide state-run facilities for children that have been abused, abandoned, neglected or orphaned – all facilities are local non-profit organisations as described above, and few of them could survive without help from local and international donors and volunteers.

When Social Services (The DSD in South Africa) intervenes to rescue a child from a harmful situation (normally in conjunction with the police), a court order will be issued to assign the child to a Registered Place of Safety (Children's Home or Child & Youth Care Centre) for a period of 3, 6, or 9 months or more, depending on the severity of the situation, and the likelihood of resolving the issues that put the child at risk.

Because of the backgrounds that these children come from, they are often malnourished, or are affected by HIV, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (with associated learning difficulties), or disadvantaged from missing out on schooling. In some cases, children arrive who have never been to school or have missed out large chunks of their education.

At each home, there are permanent management staff and carers, who fulfil the central parental role in the child's life, whether they are at the home for a few weeks, a few months, or even years in some cases. With limited funding, staffing levels are barely just enough to make sure all the washing, cleaning, cooking, feeding, bathing etc. are covered.

Few children's homes have the luxury of having carers that are able to allocate enough play time with the children or give them one-on-one time. Without extra help from volunteers, children are often left to their own devices for much of the day. 'Play time' is essential to a child's development and is something that many of the children have been deprived of before being placed in a children's home. It has been mentioned in many critic's arguments that the volunteers 'just' play with the children.

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This is such a sad attitude, as playing is so very important for children. One of the best parts of play is that it's fun! There are so many important skills that are developed through play: improved social relations, creativity and self-discipline; recognizing, managing and expressing a wide range of feelings/emotions; decision making, following instructions, perseverance, self-confidence, taking turns etc. The importance of play should never be downplayed as it plays such a large and necessary role in developing the child's personal, social and emotional growth.

Each home has one or more onsite social workers who liaise with each child's external social worker to progress their case. It might be that there is an abusive parent who is using drugs or abusing alcohol, or a single mother who isn't coping with looking after her children, or children that have been orphaned, or abandoned and left on the streets to fend for themselves as well as children being physically and/or sexually abused.

Whatever the reason, Social Services work towards reuniting the children with their family (having resolved any issues with the parents), looking for other members of the family that are willing to look after the child (a grandmother, auntie etc.), finding foster homes, or adoptive families. Each court order is reviewed, and extended as required, depending on progress made.

The main priority for any children's home is to get these children back into a family environment as soon, and as safely, as possible.

It is important to recognize that no children's home will claim to be a better alternative to the healthy emotional growth that a stable family environment can provide. Of course, if every child had access to a stable family environment, children's homes would not exist, and the huge resources of time and money that are allocated to child social services, the police and the legal system could be used elsewhere.

In the real world, a well-run children's home is a far better alternative to having children continue to live in terrible conditions, or enduring various kinds of abuse or neglect at the hands of their parents. This isn't a need that is going to end any time soon. South Africa has an alarming number of orphans and children in need of welfare assistance, the unwilling legacy of Apartheid, and a society with a huge difference in living standards between the very wealthy, and the very poor.

We question the opinions expressed by some, who suggest that vulnerable children are being subjected to 'waves of abandonment' as carers come and go, or when volunteers leave, and that this is the worst thing that could happen to them. This view may have some merit at loosely run projects that allow volunteers to come and go for short periods, or behave like part-time mothers, but makes no sense with well-structured projects with permanent staff.

Having worked closely with vulnerable children and their social workers since 2004, it is all too evident that the most devastating psychological damage to these children occurred when they were being sexually abused, abandoned, neglected, beaten or burned by their parents or other family members, *not* when they were put in the place of safety.

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Many of these parents have been alcoholics, drug addicts, physical/sexual abusers, involved in drug dealing and other gang related activities, or have bestowed HIV and Fetal Alcohol Syndrome upon their children. We cannot ignore the impact that these combinations of abuse have had on each child, and it would be foolish to suggest that we could wave a magic wand and reverse all of the damage that had been caused before Social Services intervened to remove the children from these situations.

The reality is that without well-run Places of Safety, these children would continue an existence of abuse and neglect, and many of them would perish. There are no alternatives for these vulnerable children - without a Place of Safety, those that are able to escape from their abusive family situation would end up on the streets and be exposed to many other risks including child trafficking, drugs and prostitution.

Every home we support is a Registered Place of Safety with the DSD, and have management boards, steering committees and policies in place that comply with the Children's Act in South Africa. These policies ensure anonymity for the children, protect them from abusive parents, and create a safe space free of risks associated with child trafficking. Each volunteer needs to produce a Police Clearance Certificate before arriving.

Where space is available, children's homes in South Africa have transitioned to a cluster home environment where children live in smaller family-style units with dedicated carers, fulfilling the role of a parental figure. Baphumelele Children's Home in Khayelitsha (near Cape Town) is an excellent example of this.

Every home is dedicated to reuniting children with their families and work closely with registered fostering and adoption agencies where this is not possible.

For our children's home projects, we insist on a minimum 4-week commitment from volunteers. Most of our volunteers stay for longer, but in our experience, this minimum period works very well for the homes and the children. Our volunteer programmes are well structured, and we do not have volunteers fulfilling any kind of parental role during their stay.

Because the children already have a central parental figure in the form of the carers, we avoid emotional attachment issues that could occur if volunteers were placed to fill that role. Our volunteers are not here to be a temporary mom or dad, and we include a thorough brief on these issues for all volunteers joining our community projects.

Most of the volunteer activities can be carried out with little or no training (helping with dishes, laundry, washing bottles, preparing meals, feeding, painting, arts & crafts, play etc.), so we are able to provide every volunteer with plenty to do.

When we have volunteers with additional skills, they are assigned to an appropriate staff member during their stay for supervision and guidance. Many of our volunteers have been qualified social workers, nurses, nursing students, doctors and teachers.

At one of the children's homes we work with, Heather (Via Volunteers Co-Founder and qualified teacher) runs an educational enrichment programme. She decided to put her 20+ years of teaching experience to good use soon after we started working with this particular home. She prepares a daily reading programme for some of the children and supervises the volunteers to make sure they understand what is required to do this effectively. She also prepares daily one-on-one lessons for some children not attending school, daily exercises for children with low muscle tone, low core strength, poor fine motor skills etc. to anyone who might need it.

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These lessons are carried out by the volunteers if they are willing and/or able. If a volunteer is not capable of the task, they will not be asked to assist in this way but many enthusiastic, intelligent people are quite capable of following the planning set by Heather, thereby assisting children who would otherwise not have had any of this input provided by their schools, as the state usually has an approximate 6 month waiting list for therapy which then only often happens about once or twice a month.

At the time this was written, we had a boy aged 9¾ who arrived at the home more than 2 years ago having never been to school – he could not read or write, or recognize numbers. He was angry, violent, frustrated, and generally a very unhappy little boy. Two years+ down the line, he is calm, gaining confidence all the time, helpful, and willing to learn. Even though he has been assessed as ‘non-verbal’ and apparently has a low IQ, he can now read, write and do Maths at a basic grade 2 level. The reasons why he has not been admitted to a school yet are complicated and sadly our government and education departments are very slow to place children at schools due to over-crowding and a lack of special needs schools that suit the home language of the child. Heather could only spend so much time teaching him in her own time as she has a business to run, so the difference made by having volunteers teach him every day with work prepped and assessed daily by a qualified teacher is astounding. We are in complete agreement that volunteers should not just be told to teach children without the proper support from a trained teacher but without the assistance of our international volunteers, he would not have reached this level by now.

Heather also prepares a weekly enrichment lesson for the Grade 1-4 children (the creche and pre-schoolers are included but leave after the singing and story time), which includes Maths & English literacy, singing, dancing and other activities to promote gaining knowledge, fine/gross motor skills as well as personal/social and emotional development. Our volunteers assist with these lessons and are essential for enabling us to provide one-on-one assistance for the many children who need it.

We have been working closely with these particular children for nearly five years now and have seen amazing improvements in those that were once insecure, anxious and suffering from low self-esteem. This has been noticed at school level too, where improvements in Maths and English have been attributed to our programme.

At each home we work with, our volunteers are an asset that are welcomed by the home and children alike. With volunteer funds we are also able to contribute towards food, clothing, school supplies, maintenance and many other things that help improve the lives of the children.

Another positive consequence of volunteer involvement has been the outings that we have been able to do with some of the children. All children’s homes in South Africa are Registered Places of Safety, and they are recognized as such by the court. For this reason, the children cannot play out on the street, stay over with a friend from school, or make plans to interact with other children outside of the home. They have to spend their time either within the confines of the home, school, hospital, clinic, or travelling between these locations.

With assistance from volunteers (hands and funds), we have been able to organize many supervised outings for the children over the years. Through this, the children have learned a wide variety of social skills, been introduced to the wonders of the natural world, and improved their confidence and abilities in many areas. Most of these children didn’t know what it was like to go shopping, push a trolley (shopping cart), go to the movies, go to a restaurant, choose from a menu, or even how to play with toys.

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Because of these outing opportunities, the children have visited aquariums, museums, indoor activity centres, paddling pools, fun parks, ten-pin bowling alleys, beaches filled with penguins and islands covered with seals. They have experienced boat trips, joined us for coastal drives looking for baboons and whales, played football on the beach, ridden horses, been ziplining through the mountains, ridden on a train and many other adventures too numerous to mention.

There is no doubt that these experiences alongside structured volunteer involvement have helped to recover self-esteem and confidence and enabled these children to collect some positive childhood memories to add to their own stories.

With very few exceptions, every volunteer has carried out fundraising before, during, or after their stay – we don't ask them to do this, so it's always a welcome surprise for the home they are working with. These donations have enabled some children's homes to survive through very tough times and enabled them to develop a stable base for improving the lives of the children in their care.

When Ed (Via Volunteers Co-Founder) first visited Baphumelele Children's Home in 2004, it was operating on a shoe string, with babies and children in cramped quarters, basic repetitive food, and only a handful of unpaid helpers working with Mama Rosie to keep on top of things. With very limited funds, they were doing the best that they could.

Now, Baphumelele employs about 60 local people full-time, has an Educare & Creche facility for 230 children, a respite centre for babies and toddlers with HIV/AIDs, a specialized baby house, cluster homes for children aged approximately 3-18, and a community outreach that assists child-headed homes. In 2017, Mama Rosie was awarded the status of 'CNN Hero' for her work, and as she will tell you herself, Baphumelele would not be here without the assistance and funding provided by local and international volunteers.

If you are concerned that volunteering with children might be contributing to a culture of dependency, we would urge you to consider the impact of removing volunteer assistance from a well-managed home. No one else is going to step in to fill the void. These homes are already financially challenged and making the best use of every resource available to better the lives of the children in their care. The number of children affected is overwhelming, and without long term changes to the social fabric of South Africa, we are unlikely to reach a time when we no longer need Places of Safety for vulnerable children.

The campaigns that aim to ban 'orphanage volunteering' worldwide take no account of the devastating effect this would have on reputable children's homes in South Africa and other parts of the world, or the children that would be forced to endure unimaginable hardships and abuse without the protection that places of safety provide.

These campaigns would have more credibility if they were country specific in their targeting of fake orphanages and recognized that vulnerable children in reputable children's homes need all the help they can get. Where there are situations in which volunteer organisations offer loose programmes with no structure or regard for the children involved, we would welcome any pressure that is applied to them.

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If you are considering volunteering with a children's home or orphanage anywhere in the world, please do some research before you commit to something that might see your time wasted, and your money supporting a scam. If you have even the slightest of concerns, please ask questions, insist on speaking to previous volunteers (preferably in your own country) and do not make any payments until you are absolutely sure.

If you are not asked for a police clearance, receive any pushback, vague replies or experience delaying tactics (e.g. 'we will put you in touch with an ex-volunteer when you pay'), walk away and find an organisation with a solid reputation for providing beneficial programmes at reputable children's homes that really need help.