10 Questions to Ask When Supporting an Orphanage

Every year, individuals and organizations around the world invest significant time and resources into caring for orphaned and vulnerable children. As we learn more about what children need to thrive, we have an opportunity to make sure our support reflects that understanding.

Research shows that children develop best in safe, nurturing families. Yet an estimated 80% of children living in orphanages and other forms of residential care have at least one living parent, and many are placed in residential care due to poverty and other challenges their families face.

Whether you're considering giving to, volunteering with, visiting, or partnering with an orphanage—or already do—these questions can help you better understand an organization's approach to caring for children and families and make informed decisions about your support.

01

Why are children entering the orphanage in the first place?

Ask what circumstances are causing children to be separated from their families. Are children entering because they have no safe caregiver or because their families are facing challenges like poverty, lack of access to education, disability, illness, or other hardships that could potentially be addressed while keeping the family safely together?

02

Is family reunification an explicit goal?

Does the organization actively trace families, assess whether reunification is possible, prepare children and caregivers for reunification, and provide support after children return home?

03

How is the organization strengthening families and preventing separation?

Does it work with families and communities to address the challenges that put children at risk of separation in the first place?

04

How does the organization determine whether residential care is actually necessary?

Before admitting a child, are safe family and community-based options explored? Residential care may sometimes be necessary, but it should not be the default response to vulnerability or poverty. When needed, it should generally be temporary.

05

How are children supported to stay connected to their families?

When safe and appropriate, are children able to maintain meaningful relationships with parents, siblings, relatives, and their communities? Does the organization actively encourage and facilitate those connections?

06

Is the orphanage legally registered and authorized to care for children?

Don't assume that operating openly means operating legally. Ask whether the facility is licensed or approved by appropriate government authorities and meets the country's requirements for residential child care. For instance, in Uganda, there are 1,000+ children's homes, but only about 100 are legally approved by the government. Registration as an NGO or nonprofit does not automatically authorize an organization to operate a children's home.

07

Does each child have the appropriate legal documentation for placement?

Ask how children are formally placed into care. Are the appropriate government authorities involved? Are placements legally authorized, documented, and regularly reviewed rather than children simply remaining in the orphanage indefinitely?

08

Does every child have an individual care plan?

Is there a documented plan that considers the child's needs, family relationships, reasons for separation, and long-term future? Whenever possible, that plan should include a pathway toward reunification or another safe, permanent family-based option.

09

What safeguards are in place to protect children?

Ask about child safeguarding policies, staff and volunteer screening, training, reporting procedures, visitor practices, and oversight—including how the organization manages contact between children and donors, volunteers, visitors, and short-term mission teams.

10

What is my support actually helping sustain?

Consider what your giving, volunteering, visits, or partnership make possible. Is your support helping children move toward safe, permanent families? Could some of those resources instead—or also—help strengthen families, prevent unnecessary separation, support reunification, or develop family-based alternatives?

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Good questions can lead to better care.

Have questions about family-based care or want to explore how to better care for vulnerable children and families? Let's talk.

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