

FAITH 
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SHORT-TERM MISSIONS: Guidance to Support Orphans and Vulnerable Children



How wonderful to have the standards for short-term missions AND the best practices for excellence in ministry to orphans and vulnerable children! These are practical and effective, yet challenging as we consider how to provide the best care possible to kids around the world.

~ Brian Heerwagen, Standards of Excellence (SOE) in Short-Term Mission

This resource will make all the difference for my students and colleagues, and more importantly, for the lives of the children they hope to serve. It will make a difference for your church and ministry partners as well. Leaders and participants on mission trips want to do what is right; they want to help and not hurt. Love is what motivates them, but research is what can make the difference they long to make. This resource is rooted in both – it demonstrates God’s love that we hope to extend as we travel internationally and it demonstrates knowledge that guides us so that our efforts will not be in vain. Take this and use it; it will make all the difference on the trips you are planning.

~ Jon E. Singletary, PhD, Baylor University

Faith to Action’s Short-Term Missions: Guidance to Support Orphans and Vulnerable Children provides valuable knowledge of the importance of family to the foundational development of children, as well as best practices to reach this achievable goal. This information requires reflective consideration and action, by organizations serving orphanages around the world, to ensure every child’s safety and development. I highly recommend this important resource in order to prevent unhealthy practices!

~ Debbie Stephens, Equipped To Go

As a student of short-term missions, I’ve heard a lot about how detrimental short-term mission teams have been in their approach to ministry with orphans and vulnerable children. But I was only hearing complaints; no one suggested any solutions. No one had identified best practices in orphan and vulnerable children care. Then I learned about Faith to Action. They seemed to have some answers and were addressing the issues! I’m excited to see this publication clearly present how short-term missions to vulnerable children can be done with excellence. Every short-term missionary who will be involved in any kind of children’s ministry needs to read this guide and put its principles into practice.

~ Don Johnson, Send International

This paper challenged my assumptions and thinking on many levels. Knowing that 3 John 6 does not leave room for mediocrity, Faith to Action has provided an excellent resource for those who desire to provide OVC care in a manor worthy of the God we love and proclaim. Through this publication, our King is calling us to a higher level of service. These guidelines should be required reading for all OVC care ministries.

~ Wayne Sneed, Orphanos Foundation

Care for orphans is typically high on the list of causes Christian youth groups hope to serve—and rightly so! Unfortunately, we’ve too often defaulted to a short-sighted response: visit international orphanages, become attached to local children, then leave, taking with us photos, stories, and a piece of the dignity and wellbeing of the children we intended to help. Gratefully, this insightful guide from the Faith to Action Initiative offers both research and practical resources that help ministry leaders take a more thoughtful approach to orphan care by partnering with long-term workers and supporting initiatives that reunite families. Read it carefully before planning your next international trip!

~ Brad M. Griffin, Fuller Youth Institute

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INTRODUCTION

Currently, more than two million Christians from North America travel on international short-term mission (STM) trips each year¹ and they are passionate to make a positive difference in the world. Many of them are traveling to visit or volunteer in children’s residential care centers, often referred to as orphanages and children’s homes. These volunteers are motivated by a desire to respond to the unique needs of orphans and vulnerable children. The call of Christians to respond to the needs of these children is biblically based, and Scripture* clearly indicates the duty of the church to defend the cause of vulnerable children. While good intentions underlie the increasing trend of STM trips to residential care centers, significant concerns go along with sending short-term missionaries or volunteers to residential care centers.

The Faith to Action Initiative recognizes STM trips and global volunteering as an important means for participating in God’s work around the world. In recent years, the creation of valuable guidance and resources has improved the opportunity to do STM trips well and avoid historic pitfalls such as cross-cultural misunderstandings and lopsided power dynamics. However, in STM trips seeking to support orphans and vulnerable children who are lacking or at risk of losing adequate parental care, there remains a gap in guidance on how to avoid potential harm and ensure positive outcomes for vulnerable children, their families, and their communities.

This resource has been created for churches, mission agencies, faith-based organizations, donors, institutions of higher learning, and others who are interested in enhancing and supporting care for orphans and vulnerable children through sending or joining STM teams. It encourages STMs to shift their focus from engaging with children in residential care centers to engagement in activities that support family-based care.

The guidance is built on best practices in child protection, missiology, and cross-cultural engagement, and aims to complement the professional practices, national policies, and international standards necessary for the health and safety support of orphans and vulnerable children. By itself this resource is not a complete how-to guide, but it provides helpful background information and better practice standards for STMs. We recognize that pursuing best practices in supporting orphans and vulnerable children can be complex and challenging. This guidance is designed to encourage and support Christians, volunteering in various contexts, toward optimizing STMs to support the long-term wellbeing of children.

To help you get the most out of the guidance, the following symbols are used throughout to direct you to further reading, resources, illustrative case studies, and suggested action items:



Links reader to helpful resources and tools



Illustrates a story of best practice



Presents an opportunity for further reflection

*Unless noted, all Scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible translation.

Chapter 1: Short-Term Mission Trips in the Context of Caring for Orphans and Vulnerable Children

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. James 1:27

Between 1996 and 2001, the number of U.S.-based Christians who have participated in STM trips grew 630 percent.² Currently, more than two million North American Christians travel on international STM trips each year.³

STMs have enormous potential for good when implemented appropriately.

- Trips can cultivate advocates for communities and populations with specific needs, and participants may be moved to pray for and give toward global challenges.
- Visits can bolster the efforts of local churches, long-term missionaries, and faith-based organizations through long-term partnerships.
- STM teams can offer receiving communities access to specialized services, skills training, support for locally initiated projects, encouragement, cultural learning, and fellowship.⁴
- Visitors can benefit from spiritual growth and gain an increased commitment to serving vulnerable populations.

STM trips that provide these types of opportunities require substantial planning, thoughtful pre-trip preparation and training, and a strong partner in the field to provide input and leadership. Quality STM guidance and resources, such as Standards of Excellence in Short-Term Mission's *The 7 Standards*, *Helping Without Hurting in Short-Term Missions*, and ACC International's *Ethical Short-Term Missions and Volunteering* are available to promote general best practices in STM trips, and the principles they suggest are foundational to all cross-cultural service and volunteering. However, to protect and positively benefit orphans and vulnerable children, STMs require additional considerations, including an understanding of the broader context of caring for their needs.



Essential Resource: To move toward healthy STM practice, 400 mission leaders collaborated to develop the *Standards of Excellence in Short-Term Mission*. The 7 Standards include:

1. God-Centeredness
2. Empowering Partnerships
3. Mutual Design
4. Comprehensive Administration
5. Qualified Leadership
6. Appropriate Training
7. Thorough Follow Through

Orphans and Vulnerable Children Worldwide

Worldwide, there are an estimated 140 million children who are considered orphans, having lost a mother or a father. Of these, an estimated 15.1 million have lost both parents.⁵ However, the vast majority of these children are being cared for by their remaining parent or a family member.⁶ Up to 8 million children around the world are living in residential care centers (including orphanages, large-scale institutions, small group homes, and children's villages).⁷ A large proportion of these children have at least one living parent who, with some support, could care

for them.⁸ Children are living in residential care centers for many reasons. Research shows that poverty, not lack of caregivers, is a primary cause for placing children in residential care centers. Parents and other caregivers struggling to provide for their children may feel compelled to use a residential care center to meet their children's basic needs.⁹ Other causes include abuse and neglect, disability (either children or parents), natural disaster, or conflict.

The Importance of Family

Scripture, social science, and international guidance all agree the best environment in which to raise a child is a healthy, loving family.¹⁰ A family provides the love, nurture, stability, protection, and care that are integral to the healthy development of a child. The range of family-based care options includes strengthening families to care for their children, preventing children from being separated from their parents, and reunifying children with their families if they had been separated, as well as supporting alternative family care with a relative or in a foster or adoptive family for children who cannot safely return to their families.

Consistently, academic evidence from around the world has shown that children and youth cared for within secure and nurturing families are more likely to thrive than those in residential care centers. Nurturing family environments are consistently linked with positive outcomes for children's growth and development, and positive interaction between a child and parent or other primary caregiver significantly impacts the healthy development of the brain.¹¹

In certain circumstances, some children may need temporary residential care for transitional, rehabilitative, or special-needs care. However, even in high-quality residential care settings, children often face isolation, loss of a sense of belonging, identity struggles, and difficulty maintaining connections, even affecting their ability to form and maintain healthy relationships as adults. Residential care centers, however, cannot replace the loving care of a family and too often are unable to meet the social, emotional, cognitive, and developmental needs of children and youth.

International Policies and Practice

There is a growing movement among international and national policymakers, missions agencies, and nongovernmental organizations to recognize that every child deserves a family and to strive to ensure that children are cared for within families. Policies, practice, and support for children are shifting away from the overreliance on residential care centers toward increasing family-based models of care. More and more residential care centers are transitioning their models of care to supporting children within families, both reintegrating children back into their original families or supporting alternative family-based care through care, or adoption for children who cannot safely return home. Within this context, it is important to consider the growing practice of STMs and volunteering and explore ways these activities can best support orphans and vulnerable children.



What do you think of when you hear the term orphan? Considering that the vast majority¹² of children in residential care centers have a living parent or family member who would care for them if they had the physical and financial means to do so, how does it impact your understanding of the children living in residential care centers?

Chapter 2: Risks with Short-Term Missions in Residential Care Centers

Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. Romans 13:10

Primum non nocere is a Latin phrase meaning “first, do no harm.” The international development community has adopted this term from the healthcare sector as a principle that requires individuals to consider the potential harm any intervention may have. Implementing this principle in STMs requires exploring and discussing the potential risks of harm. Specific risks need to be addressed when considering STMs to help children who are living outside of family care, particularly children living in residential care centers.

Harm to Child Attachment

We did indeed cling to their presence like they were never going to leave; but, eventually, they had to leave. All we could do is curl and behave like nothing ever happened, but deep inside they had shattered our trust.
~ Stephen Ucembe, Founder, Kenya Society of Careleavers

Child attachment refers to the bond that forms over time between a child and their parent or primary caregiver.¹³ The bond is strengthened when the caregiver consistently meets the child’s needs, leading to a secure attachment. Conversely, when the bond is broken, the child can develop impaired attachment capabilities, which can affect their social and emotional health, including the ability to trust and to form lifelong, healthy relationships.¹⁴

Children living outside of family-based care settings are especially vulnerable to impaired attachment. The bond with their original caregiver has been broken; and at a minimum, they have experienced some form of trauma because of the initial separation. They may have also experienced neglect, abuse, or exploitation either in their family of origin or while outside of family care.

Short-term volunteers who interact with children in these settings may unknowingly contribute to a child’s attachment challenges. Many residential care centers utilize volunteers to augment caregiving functions or to fill a human resource gap. However, introducing multiple short-term caregivers who may temporarily meet a child’s needs for feeding, cleaning, interaction, and affection can further disrupt a child’s ability to form healthy attachments and undermine the relationship between child and caregiver.

Children may enjoy the attention of STM teams during their visits to the residential care center. However, this well-intentioned interaction is temporary and can be confusing to children because they may perceive a close connection. A volunteer’s experience of receiving affection from children often feels rewarding and may lead to the assumption that the volunteer is providing an important benefit for children as well. This can result in children forming premature bonds with volunteers, only to have those bonds broken when the volunteers leave. This cycle of insecure attachment repeats with each new STM team, aggravating an already fragile sense of connection, eventually contributing to a child’s distrust of others or an inability to invest in relationships. While children in residential care centers deserve love and attention, they must have these needs met by stable, permanent caregivers.¹⁵



STM participants often describe the experience of being embraced by children when they enter an orphanage. Take a moment to consider how your child or a child you know would normally respond to a stranger, especially one who looks different and talks differently. How different would their responses be and what might explain these differences?

Weakened Protection of Children

Scripture notes that all children must be safe and protected. However, children living outside of family care are without the same level of oversight and protection that is provided within a family. They often have no one to consistently advocate for their individual needs or to champion their best interests. As such, children living in residential care centers are at greater risk of violence and abuse and other forms of exploitation than children in families.¹⁶

The practice of STM trips to residential care centers further weakens protection of children living there, as it sets a precedent, normalizing access to vulnerable children. Opening the doors to well-meaning individuals can open the doors to everyone, including those who have harmful intent. Residential care center staff may feel pressure from their partners to open their center to visitors as they rely on these visits to build support for their work, which could compromise the wellbeing and safety of children in their care.

Residential care centers that host visitors may also put children into situations that could negatively impact their sense of privacy and self-worth. For example, they may feel pressure or be expected to act in a certain manner in front of visitors, such as describing personal traumatic experiences or performing traditional dances for guests. These types of experiences can feel invasive and contribute to feelings of objectification and otherness for children who often already lack a sense of belonging.



Identify a very difficult time in your life. Reflect on whom you told and when you told them about this experience. How did that feel? Now imagine the feelings a child might have when asked to share about the loss of a parent or family member, or another traumatic experience, in front of a group of visitors. How would they likely feel about doing this?

Sustaining Residential Care Over Family Care

When volunteers visit residential care centers, they provide assistance, bring donations, and draw attention that contributes to sustaining a residential care model. When support is given primarily to support residential care centers, it can perpetuate the overreliance on this model of care and leave fewer resources to develop family- and community-based services that can prevent family breakdown or the unnecessary separation of children from their families,¹⁷ or to support alternative forms of family care including kinship care, foster care, and adoption.

STMs can also elevate the reputation and prestige of residential care centers among families and others in the community, creating pull factors, or perceived benefits, for the separation of children from families. In regions where material poverty is prevalent, parents may place their children in residential care for the benefit of food, education, and other services for them—services that could be provided in the community for children living with families and often at significantly less cost.¹⁸ Where governments have prioritized transitioning children out of residential care and into families, funding and other types of support for residential care can hinder these reform efforts.¹⁹

Chapter 3 features best practices to encourage STMs that strive to uphold the importance of family and support the long-term wellbeing of orphans and vulnerable children.



- [Protecting Children in Short-Term Missions](#) (ACC International)
- [Orphanage Volunteering Why to Say No Infographic](#) (Better Volunteering, Better Care)
- [Video: Going On a Short-Term Mission Trip?](#) (ACC International)

While STM trips to residential care centers can pose significant risks to the wellbeing of the children living in the centers, if redirected, they can be used as a powerful tool to bolster support of care for orphans and vulnerable children. Specifically, they can:

- Increase funding and support for family- and community-based care;
- Create advocates for orphans and vulnerable children; and
- Increase the capacity of families and communities to care well for children.

Chapter 3: Seven Best Practices in Short-Term Missions That Benefit Orphans and Vulnerable Children

The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom, and whatever else you get, get insight. Proverbs 4:7

Scripture urges Christians to seek wisdom and knowledge, compelling us toward thoughtful consideration of the best ways to care for orphans and vulnerable children. The following seven best practices are based on current knowledge of best practices in global development, missiology, and the experiences and lessons learned from practitioners around the world to raise the standards for best practices in short-term missions supporting orphans and vulnerable children. They were developed to inspire and guide STMs to better support and protect children.

Seven Best Practices in Short-Term Missions That Benefit Orphans and Vulnerable Children



1. Pursue Healthy, Long-Term Partnerships

Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing. 1 Thessalonians 5:11

Whether church-to-church, organization-to-church, school-to-organization, or other arrangement, healthy, long-term partnerships with local entities are the context in which STM trips can best support quality care for children. Sustainable change can be carried out only by those who are in the community day to day. Locally based partners are best suited to determine the most appropriate and effective ways to serve vulnerable children and their families and how to utilize STMs to accomplish that.²⁰

Resources, such as those provided by *Standards of Excellence in Short-Term Mission*, provide guidance on developing and maintaining healthy partnerships. This guidance includes creating formal agreements and multiyear ministry plans that generate support aside from STMs, such as funding, prayer, and shared learning. Also, use of an intermediary organization to facilitate a partnership with a local church or other entity can be helpful for finding a quality partner, facilitating communication, and ensuring accountability.



Providing Family Support Through Church-to-Church Partnerships

Bright Hope serves as a connector between the U.S. church and local churches outside the United States seeking to serve those living in extreme poverty. Their approach to short-term mission trips is to guide churches through several stages of relationship building over time. The first trip engages churches in conversations and fellowship between a small U.S. team and leaders in the community where the partnership will take place. This includes home visits, observation of ministry activities, and discussion about the local church's vision. Bright Hope provides cross-cultural expertise and facilitates the exploration of how the partnership can move forward in a way that is mutually beneficial and culturally appropriate. In subsequent trips, Bright Hope helps facilitate an opportunity for mission teams to serve, making sure there is balance between the strengths and skills the team members have to offer and the expressed needs of the local leadership. The final and ongoing phase involves sending teams equipped to minister in very specific ways, such as pastoral and teacher training, income-generating activities, and medical teams, to build the capacity of the church and community leaders to support vulnerable families.

Adapted from the Faith to Action Initiative's *Journeys of Faith: A Resource Guide for Orphan Care Ministries Helping Children in Africa & Beyond*

Because STM teams rely on their partners to guide trip activities, determining the appropriate local partner for an STM trip or placing volunteers may be the most important step in planning a trip.

- Choose partners who have experience in supporting family care for children and who invest in community support services. This can include strengthening vulnerable families, reintegrating children from residential care into families, or promoting foster care or other forms of alternative family care. If a preexisting relationship exists with an organization that provides residential care and is planning on transitioning to supporting family-based care, STMs could enhance the growth of their family-based care activities such as supporting programs for local mothers with vocational training so they can provide for the basic needs of their children.
- Choose partners who behave and operate ethically and adhere to the highest standards for serving children. Perform due diligence before investing in an organization serving vulnerable children, as well as when reevaluating existing partnerships. This step will help you determine if your partners are having a positive impact on the community and operate programs that serve the best interests of children and families. To make a well-informed decision about whether to partner with an organization or not, verify ²¹:
 - ✓ Legal registration and license to conduct their activities;
 - ✓ Child protection policies and procedures, including background checks for all visitors and reporting procedures in place;
 - ✓ Positive reputation in the local community and in good standing with national authorities; and
 - ✓ Organizational capacity to carry out planned activities to a high standard with financial integrity and transparency.

When potential partners are not fully meeting some of the suggested criteria, but desire to improve and have the capacity to meet them, those who organize the STMs can help to support them to fill some of these gaps, such as helping access additional training for the staff or sending an accountant to help set up good cash management systems.²²



- *Due Diligence Guidelines* (ACC International)
- *7 Standards of Excellence: A Code of Best Practice for Short-Term Mission Practitioners*, page 6 (Standards of Excellence in Short-Term Mission)
- *Building Strategic Relationships: A Practical Guide to Partnering with Non-Western Missions* (Daniel Rickett)

2. Support Families and Communities

God sets the lonely in families... Psalm 68:6 (NIV)

The most impactful way to meet the needs of orphaned and vulnerable children is through empowering their families, their communities, and the systems that will protect and care for them long after visitors return home. ACC International's *Protecting Children in Short-Term Missions: A Guidance Manual and Toolkit for Churches and Christian Organisations* notes, when seeking to assist children through STMs, it is important to look at children in context; and the context of children is their families, communities, and culture. STM teams should strengthen children's support networks rather than replace them.

The specific activities that will support families and communities depend on the unique challenges families in a specific community face, as well as the strengths of the community that surrounds them. When planning STM trips, ask your trusted local partners to determine the various ways your team can best support their family care programs. This will ensure that your short-term mission engagement contributes to programs that will allow STM team members to engage in activities that:

Empower vulnerable families to care for their children. This includes:

- Providing short-term assistance to meet basic needs of families including medical, nutritional, educational, and housing needs.
- Building capacity of parents for caring for children, including parenting skills and behavior management and conflict resolution skills, as well as access to supportive services, respite care, or childcare.
- Supporting income generation and livelihood development, such as teaching small business skills and budgeting and saving skills, or securing market access.
- Helping families prepare for their child's return, such as renovating homes, gaining access to a water source, or setting up a garden.
- Addressing barriers to education for children, such as investing in local schools and local teachers so that children do not have to leave their communities to be educated.
- Advocating for local and national governments to improve systems and policies to protect children and support families.

Support alternative family care models, such as kinship care, foster care, and adoption, for children who are unable to live with their families. In addition to supporting the programs noted above, teams could:

- Assist local leaders in their work to recruit, train, and support families providing care within the community, including participating in a community event to raise awareness of the need for foster families or finding ways to encourage or celebrate foster families.
- Create opportunities for encouraging communication, collaboration, and partnerships within the community between the local government, schools, churches, and nongovernmental organizations to strengthen local support of vulnerable children and families.
- Partner in establishing quality childcare opportunities.
- Collect facts and stories to share with others when they come home and advocate for increased support of alternative family care models.



Essential Resource: *A Continuum of Care for Orphans and Vulnerable Children* provides an overview of a range of family care options for children who have been separated from parental care.

Encourage residential care centers to reintegrate children into families and transition their models of care to support family-based care. STM participants with an existing relationship with a residential care center and who have the appropriate professional skills can:

- Support residential care center staff to build their capacity to implement the safe reintegration of children into families.
- Provide training, material support, and connections to local leaders who can guide the transition and help to strengthen families and communities.
- Help develop and fund programs, such as parent training, access to education, and livelihood or microfinance programs, that benefit the entire community and prevent children's separation from their families.

These suggestions may seem challenging for an STM team. However, in the context of a long-term, trusted partnership with an organization that knows the needs of families and strengths of the community, STMs can be utilized in appropriate ways to support the long-term objectives and programs those partners have for supporting families to care for children.

Note: Occasionally, some children may need residential care for a temporary safe or therapeutic place as they transition to family care. These contexts require consistent, long-term caregivers and are not appropriate for STM trips. Volunteers with professional qualifications can work alongside local staff in these settings for the purpose of building their care capacity. The children living in the residential care centers may be invited to participate in community activities, but they should not be targeted for direct engagement with STM teams.



- *Let's Stop Focusing On Children* (Peter Greer)
- *Transitioning to Family Care for Children: A Guidance Manual* (Faith to Action Initiative)



Strengthening Families in Cambodia

Australian Christian Churches International Relief (ACCIR) began working in Prey Tatung village, in Cambodia, including training a local church and community leaders in community-led development principles. An STM team from an Australian church contacted ACCIR wanting to send an STM team to support the Prey Tatung community. ACCIR asked the community leaders if there was anything they wanted the team to do while they were visiting. The village leader told staff about six vulnerable families who had yet to set up their farms because they could not complete the manual labor themselves. They were struggling to feed their children and were at high risk of sending the children to residential care centers. The village leader was organizing community work teams to help these families set up their farms, and he invited the STM team members to participate in these work teams and help dig the families' fish ponds. Team members were paired up with members from the community, and the community members led, guided, and directed the work done by each team member. At the end of the three days all six families had ready-to-fill fish ponds, and for the team it was a great learning experience as they got a true sense of what development means to a local community.

Adapted from ACC International's *Protecting Children in Short-Term Missions: A Guidance Manual and Toolkit for Churches and Christian Organisations*



If an STM team shifted its focus from funding or volunteering in a residential care center to supporting vulnerable families in the community, what challenges might they face? How might team sponsors respond? What questions might the team members have? How could the team try to overcome these challenges and questions?

3. Establish Clear Goals and Healthy Expectations

Desire without knowledge is not good, and one who moves too hurriedly misses the way. Proverbs 19:2

To ensure that the best interests of vulnerable children, families, and communities are protected, and to avoid disappointment, conflict, and confusion for both visitors and receiving organizations, STM trips require clearly communicated and goals that are agreed upon with local partners and healthy expectations for STM team members.

There are common expectations for those eager to help orphans and vulnerable children, including the hope to have an emotional connection to the children they visit or a desire to rescue or be the answer to the needs of a child. These motivations are rooted in an important instinct to protect children but can be a barrier to better practice in STMs.

Shifting expectations of volunteers from providing direct assistance to orphans and vulnerable children to supporting families and communities allows volunteers to understand their role in a long-term solution of children being able to live with loving families.

Establishing a process to ensure that the best interests of children are prioritized over expectations of STM team members is critical and must be at the forefront of all planning and implementation of STM objectives. This can be done at the beginning of the planning phase or can be incorporated into established STM programs.

Clarify the goals of the trip and how activities contribute to them with local partners.

- Establish an end goal of sustaining the long-term wellbeing of orphans and vulnerable children.
- Create practical objectives that support the current work of your partners. For example, an STM objective may be to increase the community's awareness of the need for children with disabilities to be fully integrated into the community. To do this, the team could help at a community event celebrating children with disabilities.
- Help participants understand that the value of the trip can lie both in what they accomplish and in what they learn, so they can be better equipped to advocate for the needs of children when they return home.
- Consider team objectives such as spiritual growth, cross-cultural learning, and increased commitment to serving vulnerable populations, and thoughtfully plan activities to meet these objectives while not compromising the wellbeing of children.

Address expectations and motivations for STM team members and leaders of the sending church or agency.

- During pre-trip preparations, explore motivations and expectations of team members and assess participant intentions as they relate to the goals and objectives of the trip.
- For churches, sending agencies, and receiving organizations, consider reframing or renaming the STM trip as an advocacy, vision, partnership, or learning service trip, or other terms that indicate a significant educational component.
- Seek to balance motivations to have a positive impact on children, families, and the community with the desire to have a positive impact on the team members.
- Shift expectations from being able to provide immediate assistance to fostering sustainable transformation; and shift expectations from hoping to have direct interaction with vulnerable children to playing roles that support their families and the churches and organizations that serve them.
- Explain why team members should engage only in skills-based ministry that they are trained to perform. If it wouldn't be appropriate to engage in a certain activity in their home country, it is unlikely to be appropriate overseas.



Show Caution: There are rising expectations from donors to see or experience firsthand the work they are supporting financially. Staff of residential care centers who recognize the risks for STMs engaging with the vulnerable children may feel pressure to allow STM teams to interact with the children in their care knowing it could compromise the children's wellbeing and safety. With thoughtful planning, STM teams can consult their partners to learn ways to creatively and meaningfully support care for orphans and vulnerable children that does not involve direct contact with children. This can involve listening to the suggestions of staff, caregivers, and parents, as well as adult care leavers.



Consider an STM trip you are going to take or have taken in the past, and ask yourself, would I still go on this trip if I couldn't take photographs? If I couldn't interact with children directly? If I couldn't tangibly see I was making a difference? How might you adjust your motivations and expectations considering the best interests of vulnerable children and families?

4. Learn about Orphans and Vulnerable Children

Give instruction to the wise, and they will become wiser still; teach the righteous and they will gain in learning. Proverbs 9:9

Ensuring quality STMs that will benefit orphans and vulnerable children requires training focused on the children's unique circumstances. Adequate and appropriate training prior to, during, and after a trip is instrumental to making STMs a transformational experience for both STM trip members and the communities they visit. Focused learning can help set appropriate expectations of team members and empower participants to be informed advocates, donors, and prayer partners after their trip. Include in-country voices, such as local child welfare professionals, for their perspective on the challenges vulnerable children and families face, as well as how best to support children.

Educate participants on the situations, needs, and models of care for orphans and vulnerable children, including:

- Accurate definitions, statistics, and key facts;
- Importance and benefits of children living in permanent, safe, loving families and the limitations of residential care centers;
- Impact of poverty on the plight of children and families;
- Various models of care in the continuum of care for children²³; and
- Specific context information, including the policies and cultural assumptions and practices.

Train participants in the basic principles of child wellbeing, including:

- Seeing the children within the context of their families and communities;
- Seeking the best interests of each child and the importance of family; and
- Understanding the unique developmental needs of children who have experienced deprivation, vulnerability, and early childhood trauma, including those related to attachment, loss, and the role of the caregiver.

While these topics may feel daunting for a team leader, they can be tailored to the goals and objectives of each individual trip.



- *Children, Orphanages, and Families: A Summary of Research to Help Guide Faith-Based Action* (Faith to Action Initiative)
- *Finding Families - The State of Residential Care for Children and Implications for Human Development: A Research Review* (Catholic Relief Services)

5. Uphold Healthy Attachment

Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. Romans 13:10

Throughout my stay, children of all ages were seeking emotional and physical attention from outsiders such as myself—holding our hands and sometimes clinging to us. I was concerned because children who have formed healthy attachments are usually more cautious of strangers. I also worried about how easily children that have grown up with a succession of temporary caregivers might be exploited.

~ Dr. Geoff Foster, Pediatrician at Ministry of Health and Child Welfare, Zimbabwe

As noted in [Chapter 2](#), children living outside of family-based care settings are especially vulnerable to attachment challenges. STMs seeking to serve this population must recognize this sensitivity, avoiding adding to their attachment challenges or undermining the relationship between child and caregiver. It is therefore vital to consider the specific context and vulnerability of each child when assessing if or how to engage with them during STMs.

In the context of children living in family care, work with your partner and children's parents or caregivers to determine if and how STM visitors may interact with the children in their care. In these situations:

- Avoid direct interaction with very vulnerable households.
- Ensure that children's primary needs, such as feeding, putting to sleep and bathing, are met by caregivers only.
- Limit physical and emotional affection based on advice of local partners on what is culturally appropriate.
- Be especially cautious of interacting with younger children or children with special needs who may not understand the relationship context.
- Organize group activities rather than one-on-one connections.
- Gently direct children to their primary caregivers if they need comfort.
- Give all donations and gifts that will benefit children and families through, and with the guidance of, parents, caregivers, the local church, or community partners.

STM teams and volunteers should not spend time in residential care centers. Children in residential care centers need the assistance of trained, qualified, and committed staff who are equipped to deal with their unique needs and to prepare them for reintegration into a family while helping to build healthy, trusting relationships. Volunteers are limited in their ability to address these needs and can cause further trauma to children when the volunteers leave.²⁴ However, professionally trained volunteers (e.g., social workers, medical professionals, teachers, or counselors) can work alongside local staff for the purpose of building their care capacity, such as in case management, but should limit their direct contact with children.

Participating in general community activities facilitated by STM teams, at the local church for example, may be an appropriate project that would include interaction with children in the community, whether they live with families or in a residential care centers. However, these events must be fully integrated, and not be targeted toward orphans and vulnerable children. In coordination, local partners and community leaders activities might include:

- Vacation Bible school
- English programs
- Sports camps
- Field trips

- Creative workshops
- Educational support programs

STM teams may also consider spending time listening to the experiences of adults who grew up in a residential care center to learn how they can best advocate or fundraise for children in similar circumstances. With each of these activities, every effort must be taken to ensure they do not allow for situations that might jeopardize the attachment and protection of children.

Note: In situations such as natural disasters, conflict zones, or health crises, it is not appropriate to have STMs volunteer in residential care centers. In these situations, children are temporarily separated from their parents, which is traumatizing, and it is best to have minimal interaction with strangers. STMs could be more helpful by partnering with an organization focused on family tracing and reunification.



How would you want an international volunteer team to interact with your children and family? Is that different from expectations STM teams may have? If so, why?



- *What Is Healthy Attachment?* (Attachment Trauma Network)
- *Bonding and Attachment in Maltreated Children* (ChildTrauma Academy)

6. Protect Children from Harm

Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. Isaiah 1:17

STM teams must pursue the holistic protection of children. Follow these steps to ensure that an STM trip is safe for children.

- ✓ Ensure that your church or organization and any partners have an established—and consistently implemented—child protection policy and code of conduct for staff and volunteers.
- ✓ Conduct thorough background and reference checks on all STM team members. Any concerning findings should prevent participation in the trip.
- ✓ Avoid situations that might objectify or stigmatize children, such as asking children to perform or to share about traumatic events.
- ✓ Ensure that parents or primary caregivers supervise any interaction with children and volunteers.
- ✓ Do not allow exclusive relationships to develop between visitors and children, for example, one-on-one alone time or special gifts to specific children.



Essential Resource: For a broader understanding of how to support child protection in STMs, as well as comprehensive tools and activities for implementation, explore ACC International’s *Protecting Children in Short-Term Missions: A Guidance Manual and Toolkit for Churches and Christian Organisations*.

- ✓ Clearly outline how a child protection incident or concern should be reported, and the processes for how the team will respond.
- ✓ Teams should not get involved in legal matters or formal child protection interventions such as rescuing or removing children from situations of abuse.²⁵



Consider how adults interact with children in your home country. Research child protection policies of your local school settings, Sunday school program, day care centers, or children's residential treatment centers. Make a list of the policies and determine how you can uphold them on your next STM trip.



- Webinar: *Optimizing Your Child Protection Policy: 5 Key Components for Keeping Children Safe* (Christian Alliance for Orphans)
- *Sample Child Protection Policy* (World Vision International)
- *Report Child Abuse Country Contacts* (ChildSafe Movement)
- *Keeping Children Safe: A Toolkit for Child Protection* (Keeping Children Safe Coalition)

7. Share Stories and Images with Care

If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.
1 Corinthians 12:26

Even when trips are carefully planned and implemented, to avoid harm to children, families, and communities, it is vital to consider the way information, stories, and images are shared during and after STM trips. Sharing information, stories and images can rally support for an important cause or challenge misconceptions. However, it can also lead to perpetuation of stereotypes, misrepresentation and objectification of a child, even abuse or exploitation. What team members see and hear is privileged information and demands the utmost sensitivity to protect the privacy of anyone the team meets.

- Seek permission from parents or primary caregivers before taking and sharing photographs of children.
- Once you have received permission, share online only what you would share in front of the children and their parent or caregiver.
- Consider how stories and images can convey dignity and respect before sharing them. Avoid sensationalism and stereotypes, and consider how your words and images reflect upon the children, families, and communities you are sharing about.
- Avoid photos and videos that place your image as the focus.
- Do not exchange contact information directly with children. Their primary caregivers should mediate all contact.
- Be cautious when sharing information on social media or otherwise that could expose or endanger children and families. De-identify all stories and images, removing geotagging, distinguishable landmarks, and names, and changing any personal details where necessary.



How have you seen STMs represented on social media or in the media? How are vulnerable children represented? What negative impacts may the posts and images have? How might they portray a positive message to those who view?



- *Child-Safe Digital Engagement* (World Vision International)
- *Wise and Honoring Representations of Vulnerable Children in Media Guidelines and Webinar* (Christian Alliance for Orphans)
- *Ethical Storytelling* Online Resources

Taken together, these seven best practices provide general guidance for those who plan and go on trips toward multiplying the long-term positive impact on orphans and vulnerable children and families. **Chapter 4** highlights positive STM models that can uphold each of these seven best practices.

Chapter 4: Short-Term Mission Models to Support Vulnerable Children and Families

The church has a critical role to play in ensuring that children everywhere are afforded an opportunity to grow up in a loving family. This role is fulfilled as the church mobilizes believers to give, support and volunteer with organizations that uphold children's right to a family, and open their homes to children in need of care in their own communities. ~ ACC International

STM trips have the potential to be a powerful means for mobilizing global interest and energy to increase and improve support for orphans and vulnerable children. The following STM models—both learning oriented and action based²⁶—have proven effective for contributing to the improved wellbeing of children, families, and communities.

Advocacy

Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy. Proverbs 31:8–9

STM volunteers can make a positive contribution to care for orphans and vulnerable children through advocating and fundraising for organizations that have the credentials, skills, and relationships to support family care. The advocacy model focuses on creating advocates, using the cultural immersion as a catalytic experience, motivating and empowering participants to action, and sharing their experience in an effective way with others. Ideally, this model includes a long-term commitment to supporting a specific organization and issue. Activities can include:

- Organizing field visits to learn about community initiatives and meet with local families;
- Attending presentations delivered by organizations or local community groups working to address issues related to orphans and vulnerable children in the community; or
- Visiting organizations working with orphans and vulnerable children to see what is already being done, by whom, what works, and why.

Upon returning home from an STM trip, participants can share about a particular community or project, giving voice to those who want their story to be heard. Sharing their experience can help to catalyze change, advocate for prayer or financial support, or promote action via blogs, speaking engagements, social media, or sharing in person with those in their circle of influence.

Vision and Partnership

By shifting the focus from what we are doing for the poor, to what God wants to teach us - we are in a better position to be transformed. ... And the rest of our lives will be irrevocably shaped by what we have witnessed. ~ Craig Greenfield, Alongsiders International

Long-term partnerships are the most effective way for someone to contribute to sustainable transformation for vulnerable children and families. For those seeking a new partnership or those actively supporting a program



Family First: A Global Partnership

Bethany Community Church (BCC) found a shared conviction in *Roblealto Child Care Association's* mission for support of family-based care and the holistic transformation of communities. The two formed a partnership in 2012 for the development of a new childcare center in the community of Los Guido outside San Jose, Costa Rica, and together, steps are being taken to restore children and their families to right relationship with each other, God, and their community. A vital component of maintaining this special relationship has been annual strategic visit trips from church members to Roblealto. Objectives for these trips include supporting and encouraging the staff of Roblealto, educating trip members on issues of poverty and development, and equipping trip members to be ambassadors for the partnership. They gather stories and information during their visit, and for the six months after they return, they work together to creatively engage the BCC congregation in the work of Roblealto through educational events, videos, and storytelling. To provide structure for the ongoing transformation of team members beyond the initial trip experience, BCC encourages team members to engage in their communities as well through BCC's local foster care ministry and other community ministries. The congregation of BCC is being transformed by sharing its gifts with the work of Roblealto.

Adapted from *Family First: A Global Partnership Between Roblealto and Bethany Community Church* blog

financially, the vision and partnership models help develop a mutually beneficial relationship while providing an opportunity to observe the partner organization in action.²⁷ During vision and partnership trips, the majority of time in-country is spent listening to local leaders and partners, seeing successful projects, learning from stories, and building relationships to learn more about how to create a partnership.

Vision and partnership trips include a variety of activities unique to the shared objectives of the partnership, as well as events celebrating milestones in the partnership, praying and worshiping together, and sharing stories of how a ministry can best support orphans and vulnerable children and families. Other activities can include:

- Meeting with a partner organization's leadership to discuss program strengths and areas for growth;
- Supporting the organization's leadership as they think of ways to best care for orphans and vulnerable children; or
- Convening local families or young adults to learn about their experiences with the partner organization.

Church-to-Church Partnership

The church-to-church partnership model is similar to vision and partnership trips, but involves a long-term relationship between churches in two separate geographical regions. Connections may be made through a denomination or a nonprofit organization, or through an existing relationship. A theological foundation, unity in Christ, and shared mission make church-to-church partnerships fertile ground for creating a mutually beneficial relationship. Local churches are proven, effective contributors to the support of vulnerable children

and families—often playing critical roles in identifying needs and providing holistic care. Activities for church-to-church partnership trips can include:

- Traveling to visit a partner church to worship and pray together;
- Volunteering with the church’s ministry and outreach efforts;
- Teaching new games, activities, and songs the church can integrate into their children’s program; or
- Hosting conferences on topics such as parenting, marriage, and the importance of family-based care.



- *Journeys of Faith: A Resource Guide for Orphan Care Ministries Helping Children in Africa & Beyond* (Faith to Action Initiative)
- *Twinning in the Best Interest of Children: Promoting Family Life, Not Orphanages* (Catholic Relief Services)

Learning Service

Our goal is to be a learner, be a catalyst, come alongside indigenous leadership, be transformed.
~ Wil Crooks, Children’s HopeChest

The learning service model recognizes the importance of learning before helping. In this model, STM trip participants focus on listening and educating themselves about the culture, challenges, local solutions, and role of visitors. This model is helpful not only for utilizing the limited time STM teams spend in the field, but also for empowering them to be effective advocates for the rest of their lives, including advocates for family-based care. Activities can include:

- Spending time shadowing an in-country leader, such as a pastor or local social worker, to understand the nature of their work to support families;
- Interviewing parents, family members, and other caregivers to learn about their experiences; or
- Connecting with government officials or authorities to hear firsthand accounts of the policies and legislative frameworks as well as strategic areas for intervention.

This model also includes locally supervised internships that allow participants more time to learn about vulnerable populations, the cultural context, and successful models of caring for vulnerable children and families in a certain region. Activities involved in internships will vary based on the needs of the organization as well as the intern’s skillset. Examples include shadowing local child welfare professionals, nurses or other medical professionals, or teachers.



- *Learningservice.info* Resources for volunteer travel
- *Campus Compact* A hub for global learning and community-campus partnerships

Skills-Based Volunteering and Exchange

Please, if the volunteers are going to come, empower our staff, empower the organization, with your time and your skills, so that when you go you've left a legacy, rather than a vacuum.

~ Paul Hooper, The Homestead Projects for Street Children

Team members can transfer skills to local workers for a sustainable impact. These activities could include:

- A counselor providing family members with training and tools that will continue to strengthen their long-term care for their children;
- A child care professional offering skills-based training in child development and abuse prevention;
- A social worker training local staff in child and family assessments;
- A teacher exchanging teaching methods with local teachers;
- A computer engineer developing a case management system;
- A communications expert creating promotional materials for the organization;
- A business professional supporting the development of a local cash crop, such as coffee, and helping with market access; or
- A policy and advocacy professional encouraging local community and church leaders to effectively influence systemic change.

Volunteering from Home

It is not always necessary to travel a great distance to make a cross-cultural impact. Volunteering from home allows volunteers to use their skills to engage in activities from their home location. Supporting orphans and vulnerable children outside of STM trips includes funding family-based care programs or learning about the issues facing orphans and vulnerable children and becoming an advocate for best practices. Online volunteering may allow individuals who have limited time or finances to contribute their skills and expertise. With modern technology, the potential for virtual service is almost limitless and can include opportunities to meet new partners and build relationships. Examples include:

- Providing graphic and web design;
- Assisting with donor development and accounting;
- Hosting a 5K or other athletic event to raise awareness or collect donations;
- Starting a crowdfunding campaign to encourage giving; or
- Organizing an Orphan Sunday event at church.



- [Take Action](#) (Faith to Action Initiative)
- [Orphan Sunday Resources](#) (Christian Alliance for Orphans)

Closing Statement

Since the beginning of the Church, Christians have responded to God’s call to care for orphans and widows. The Faith to Action Initiative honors the service of missionaries, pastors, and community leaders who are dedicated to doing their best to improve care of orphans and vulnerable children.

Recognizing that there is often a gap between ideals and reality, the principles and standards provided in this guidance serve as goals readers can work toward, determining their role and next steps in the unique context in which they serve as they develop an action plan to support the long-term wellbeing of children and families.

Short-Term Missions: Guidance to Support Orphans and Vulnerable Children (2018) is produced by the Faith to Action Initiative, with generous support from the Oak Foundation and First Fruit, Inc. In producing this resource, the Faith to Action Initiative sought recommendations and input from more than 50 stakeholders—including members of our Faith to Action Initiative Leadership Council, practitioners from around the world engaged in sending and receiving STMs, pastors, mission leaders, faith-based organizations, and academic leaders.

This resource was written by Sarah Gesiriech and Elli Oswald of the Faith to Action Initiative, and Nicole Wilke of the Christian Alliance for Orphans, and with guidance from the Standards of Excellence (SOE) in Short-Term Mission.

The resources highlighted throughout the guidance are included for informational purposes only and should not be considered as overall endorsements by the Faith to Action Initiative.

To learn more about the Faith to Action Initiative or for resources to support family-based care, please visit our website: www.faithtoaction.org.

GLOSSARY

- **Attachment:** the formation by a child of emotional connections with the significant people in the child's life. This process begins in early infancy as the child bonds with one or more primary caregivers.
- **Caregiver:** a person who is responsible for the care of a child, including a parent, relative, foster parent, or paid caretaker, such as those who work in day centers or group homes.
- **Child Protection:** the safeguarding of children from violence, exploitation, abuse, and neglect.
- **Community-Based Care:** both the direct caring role assumed by the leadership or members of a community and the supportive role community-based organizations play in assisting direct caregivers.
- **Family-Based Care:** family care options include care in the child's birth or adoptive family, kinship and relative care, legal guardianship, and foster care.
- **Orphan:** a child who has lost one or both parents through death. The loss of one parent classifies a child as a single orphan and the loss of both parents as a double orphan.
- **Orphans and Vulnerable Children:** children who are at risk of losing or who lack adequate parental care or protection. Orphans and vulnerable children include children whose care and protection are being, or are at risk of being, violated, such as children who are living in poverty, abused, neglected, or lacking access to basic services, ill, or living with disabilities, as well as children whose parents are ill, and those who are at risk of being separated.
- **Receiving Organization:** individuals or groups who receive and facilitate short-term mission teams while those teams are in the host country. This could be local churches, missionaries, nonprofit organizations, volunteer companies, schools, or tour companies.
- **Residential Care/Residential Care Centers:** care in settings where children are looked after in any public or private facility, staffed by paid care providers or volunteers, and based on collective living arrangements. This includes short- and long-term residential institutions such as children's homes, group homes, and orphanages.
- **Short-Term Missions (STMs):** the mobilization of a Christian missionary for volunteer service in other countries or communities for a short time, often from one week to several months.

Source: Definitions adapted from the *Better Care Network Toolkit: Glossary of Key Terms*, Faith to Action Initiative Resources, and ACC International's *Protecting Children in Short-Term Missions*.

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This Guidance has been endorsed by:



Contributors: Sarah Gesiriech, Elli Oswald, and Nicole Wilke

Short-Term Missions: Guidance to Support Orphans and Vulnerable Children (2018) is produced by the Faith to Action Initiative, with generous support from the Oak Foundation and First Fruit, Inc., and with guidance from the Standards of Excellence (SOE) in Short-Term Mission. The Faith to Action Initiative serves as a resource for Christian groups, churches, and individuals seeking to respond to the needs of orphans and vulnerable children. Through our publications, website, and workshops, we offer practical tools, resources, and up-to-date information on key strategies and research to help guide action. We are part of a growing global movement—faith led and evidence based—that seeks to affirm and support the importance of family care for children.

Photo credit: Joop Rubens for Firelight Foundation