

# What you should know before volunteering in a children's home?

## → Are you going to work in a children's home?

Do you love travelling? Do you want to head somewhere sunny and different? To learn about another culture while gaining experiences and doing something meaningful, for instance through working as a volunteer in a developing country? Perhaps working for children's wellbeing is something you are passionate about and you are thinking about working in a children's home?

You should know: children who cannot grow up with their parents all have gone through a traumatic experience. They are separated from their parents and sometimes from their whole family. In particular, when they end up in a children's home they miss contact with their family, their culture, religion and background. Most children have relatives or other adults in their community with whom they can live with. Supporting these families and communities is a critical investment in the children's wellbeing.

Volunteers and supporters of children's issues globally should remember that the future of the children you'll work with is in the country where they are living. It is important that they learn how to function in society and that they have local people to rely on and trust in moments when they feel lonely and insecure. They need long term loving relationships with caregivers for their social and emotional development, which is not possible with people that stay with them for only a few weeks or months. Despite this, as a short term visitor you can still make a difference in the life of children. This leaflet explains how you can do this best.

### Be prepared!

In addition to this leaflet, read more information about growing up in children's homes. It is important to know that it is much better for children to grow up in a family and not in an institution. You can find more information about this from the Better Care Network. [www.bettercarenetwork.org](http://www.bettercarenetwork.org)

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Most intern volunteers just come to attain their educational certificates while others go beyond that and want to help.

*Young person, Kenya*

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*Attachment to others and a sense of belonging are critical to children. All children seek the support of a constant adult figure that can protect and support them. Without adults, children cannot thrive. In a safe and supportive environment children can develop, discover the world knowing that they can rely on the person that provides them with a sense of belonging and that they will be there for them whenever they need them. Every child needs long-term caregivers: parents or other adults with who they have developed these bonds. These attachment figures are a mode for all relations they will form in their life. The younger the child, the more important it is for them to have a longer term caregiver that they can bond with. In a children's home where often caregivers work in shifts and have limited time, children lack the opportunities to create these attachments. This has harmful effects in children's development and wellbeing when they are small but also when they grow older and even into their adult life. Children without attachment figures show difficulties in trusting other people as well as themselves. They have difficulties with separations and in building relationships with friends and partners, in jobs and with their own children. Also, other developmental areas are affected. Research shows that they do not perform as well in school, lack self-confidence and do not develop to their full potential.*

■ Inform yourself about the country and culture where you are going. The Dutch Royal Institute for Tropical Studies has information covering many countries. Travel guides and websites on specific countries can provide critical information.

■ Try to adjust to the local customs (clothing, habits, traditions and appropriate manners of communication). If you cannot do this for a specific reason, explain this with respect.

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We expect volunteers to carry out their tasks realising that they are role models for the children which is a heavy responsibility.

*Staff children's home,  
South Africa*

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■ It is extremely important to invest in a good relationship with the leaders of the project, before and during your stay.

■ Choose an activity that fits the duration of your stay. A longer period of at least three months is required if you plan to interact with children intensively. This is not recommended for a short period.

■ Be aware of your strengths, but also of your limitations. Did you complete an education related to working with children? In that case you can support the caregivers. Was your education in languages? If so, you could teach English. Are you good in sports? Undertake sport activities. If you're not afraid of construction work, assist in building. You can also think of doing some administrative work, paint a wall or do drawing with children.

■ Try to have a clear understanding of your tasks and the do's and don't's before you travel to the project and communicate this with the receiving organisation. Some children's homes see a volunteer as a replacement of paid caregivers. This is not in the best interest of the children and their need to attachment figures. Your role and tasks should always complement the permanent staff members.

■ Care for yourself: you will hear tough stories and see difficult things, from the children and at the place where you are. Think upfront how you will deal with this and how you approach children and listen to them. Speak about this with your supervisor or coach in the project.

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I did what I came for: teach dance. This went ok and was also sometimes less nice. I had to adjust to the fact that every class had different children. In the end I have adjusted the classes and we had a lot of fun.

*Dutch volunteer*

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■ When you leave: organise a farewell party, for yourself but in particular for the children. Don't make promises to the children about returning or maintaining contact.

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They should know and understand the kind of children they are coming to interact with because children come from different backgrounds; some are from the streets, some are orphaned, others are abused etc.

*Young person, Kenya*

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■ Respect the privacy of children and the staff; do not place traceable information or pictures on Facebook or websites and blogs.

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We exchanged ideas and shared of our different cultures.

*Young person, Kenya*

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■ Do not make promises you cannot keep to children or people you meet in the community.

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Volunteers must bring presents, gifts; they come from a rich country. I want to study in her country; she promised me that she would try to realize that.

*Child, South Africa*

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- Treat all children equally: do not have favourites! You may like some children better than others or you feel touched by their stories. Do not show this and give them equal attention.

- Be flexible in what you do, also during your stay in the project.

- Be aware that you will always make mistakes, that is part of life.

- And above all: enjoy your stay and ensure it is a good experience for the children, caregivers and communities and yourself!

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I worked with young people. I liked one better than others. I tried not to show this as I think it is important that you treat them all equal.

*Dutch volunteer*

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## What is and does the Better Care Network Netherlands?

The Better Care Network Netherlands is a network and knowledge exchange platform for organisations and persons who support children without adequate parental care, in the Netherlands and in projects abroad. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that for a child to develop to its full potential, it should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding. Many countries often rely on children's homes for children without parental care, rather than supporting families to prevent the separation or alternative family based care. The Better Care Network Netherlands aims to improve this situation through cooperation between organisations and exchange of good practises and knowledge. This supports the development of family-based care and the opportunity for all children to grow up in a family.

## More information?

Website:

[www.bettercarenetwork.nl](http://www.bettercarenetwork.nl)  
[www.bettercarenetwork.org](http://www.bettercarenetwork.org)

E-mail:

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**Better  
Care  
Network  
Netherlands**

**Colophon:**

This leaflet was developed by the Working Group  
*Quality of Care* of Better Care Network.