



World Without Orphans

ROLES FOR CHURCHES



DISCUSSION GUIDE

Developed by Judith S. Rycus, PhD, MSW



THE purpose of this document is to stimulate discussion among churches, their members, and their communities about their various potential roles in supporting the World Without Orphans (WWO) initiative.

The goal of World Without Orphans is to ensure that all children are given the opportunity to grow and thrive in safe, healthy, nurturing, permanent «forever» families. The primary target group of the WWO initiative includes children who have been abused, neglected, or sexually abused by their families, who have developmental disabilities, who have been abandoned, who have run away from home or are homeless, who have been exploited, or who are emancipating to independence from foster or orphanage care. The WWO movement believes that churches throughout the world and the communities they serve can provide many valuable services to these children and their families, thereby promoting safety, permanence, and well being for this very vulnerable population of children.

The Fundamental Principles of Child Welfare Practice_

THROUGHOUT more than 50 years of development, child protection systems in the United States, Canada, and Europe have learned many important lessons about the needs of maltreated children, and how our societies can best respond to address their needs. Learning from both research and direct practice experience, child welfare professionals have developed a common understanding about the strengths and limitations of certain child welfare interventions in achieving our goals. This knowledge has been compiled into a set of commonly held principles that form the foundation of child welfare practice in many nations. These principles were codified more than 20 years ago in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which has subsequently been signed by the vast majority of nations throughout the world.

The overriding principle is that we must always act in ways that serve each child's best interests. This broader principle of best interests helps us stay focused on our mission. From this foundation, we have derived several sub-principles to guide direct work with children and their families. They include the following:

- *Our first goal is always to protect children from harm – from abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, abandonment, and other forms of child exploitation. Our activities must always advance the goal of protecting children from harm and ensuring their safety and well being in both the short- and long-term.*
- *It is always in children's best interests to remain with their own families, if these families can be helped to become safe, stable, and nurturing environments for their children.*
- *It is never in children's best interests to be removed from their families, unless this is the only alternative that can ensure their safety. When children must be placed out of their homes, safety planning and targeted remedial services should begin immediately to strengthen and support their families in the hopes that children can be returned quickly to their own families.*
- *Permanence is essential for children to develop into healthy adults, and child welfare services must work to provide permanent families for all children. The term we use is permanency planning, which reminds us that all of our interventions should be directed toward ensuring that children can grow in permanent, stable, and secure families, whether these are their own families, relative families, adoptive families, or perma-*

nent legal guardians. Foster families cannot be considered permanent families unless the placement is intended to be permanent, and both the child and the foster family perceive themselves to be a family for life.

- *Children who need out-of-home placement to ensure their safety should always be placed in the least restrictive, most home-like environment, as close to their own home as possible. A properly chosen placement will meet children's physical, emotional, and social needs, will strengthen and preserve children's attachments and relationships with their families and important others, will promote healthy development, and will minimize the trauma inherent in separation and placement. In order of preference, we place children, first, with relatives or with adults who know and care about the child, or with foster families in the child's home community. Placement in group homes, hospitals, orphanages, and other congregate care institutions are placements of last choice. There are very few institutions that meet the best interests of the children who live in them. An exception might be a short-term placement in a hospital for a child with a serious illness or injury, or a therapeutic residential care setting for children with exceptional emotional or behavioral problems. Still, many foster families can be trained to provide similar therapeutic environments in family settings for medically fragile children, children with disabilities, or children with behavior problems. We believe that children should be placed in out-of-home care for the shortest time possible, and that every child should be placed in a permanent family as quickly as this can be arranged.*
- *Communities have a responsibility to protect and serve their members, including at-risk families and children. While government agencies have primary responsibility for formal child protection activities, none of the best-practice principles can be successfully achieved without the involvement of the community at large. Churches and their members can play an instrumental role in helping achieve goals of safety, permanence, and well-being for all children in their home community.*

During the evolution of child protection practice, we have learned that many seemingly sound and well-intentioned interventions can have unexpected and very damaging consequences for the children and families they were intended to help. The following are examples of commonly used interventions that can inflict serious harm on both children and their families:

- ***The «rescue» of abused and neglected children*** by abruptly removing them from their families and placing them in out-of-home care, such as in a foster home or institution, with no ongoing contact with their own families. This is extremely damaging to the children involved and often equally damaging to their parents, siblings, and extended family members for whom the loss can be overwhelming and debilitating.

- **Allowing children to spend long periods of time in out-of-home placement** in foster homes or institutions without conducting permanency planning to arrange a permanent family. In the child welfare literature this is widely referred to as *foster care drift*. The image it generates is of a child in a very small boat, bobbing alone and adrift on a large ocean, with no paddle, no map, no direction, and no one to sail him home. This is how impermanence is widely experienced by children placed in out-of-home care.



- **Subjecting children to a series of temporary placements**, such as moving from one institution to another, living in different relative or foster homes, or having a constantly changing succession of caregivers. A lack of permanence brought about by a series of changing placements and caregivers is extremely traumatic for children and can have serious effects on attachment, mental health, and overall growth and development.

- **Failure to recognize that many families can be helped** to overcome their problems and provide safe and nurturing care to their own children, if they can receive consistent support and assistance from people and organizations their communities. With the proper in-home supportive services to families, removal and placement of children is often not necessary. Services to achieve this goal of family stability are sometimes called gate-keeping services, since the goal is to prevent the children from entering placement at all.

- **Moving too quickly to terminate the legal rights of birth parents**, without first trying to help parents safely care for their own children, abruptly deprives children of their birthright, of permanent family connections, or a sense of belonging, and potentially contributes to a life of social isolation.

- **Placing children in institutions such as children's homes, group homes, hospitals and orphanages**. While a group home or orphanage has the capacity to meet children's basic needs for food, clothing, shelter, and education, and this may seem



preferable to their being homeless or at risk of harm in the larger community, institutional care also has seriously detrimental consequences for children. Placement in long-term institutional care disrupts or severs children's emotional attachments to important family members and increases the trauma to which these children are subjected. Institutional care of children below the age of three significantly impairs brain development, creating lasting psychological and cognitive disabilities. Many research studies over the past 60 years have documented the negative effects of institutionalization, child maltreatment, and other traumatic experiences on children's long-term development and well being. Some of the most important are the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study, a large public health study conducted in the United States, and the Bucharest Early Intervention study, conducted by a group of physicians in Romanian orphanages. The ACE study highlighted the life-long negative outcomes for adults who experienced significant trauma during childhood, and the Bucharest Early Intervention study documented significant negative developmental outcomes for very young children placed in orphanages. While the Bucharest study found that the damage from institutional care could, at times, be reversed if children were quickly re-placed in stable and nurturing family settings, the most sobering finding was that much of the damage is irreversible and continues to affect the lives of these children in very significant ways.

- *Emancipating or releasing children from institutions or foster families simply because they have reached a certain biological age, whether they are ready to live independently or not. It is expected that these children will adjust on their own in the community, even though they may lack safe housing, a way to earn a living, family connections, or ongoing family support. In fact, research has repeatedly demonstrated that children emancipating from foster homes and institutions are extremely vulnerable, at high risk of being homeless, unemployed or underemployed, highly susceptible to trafficking, prostitution and crime, and at higher risk of illness, injury, or early death.*

If child advocates, be they professionals, communities, or churches, are naïve or un-informed about the dangers of many well-intentioned interventions, attempts to be helpful may actually do more harm than good by subjecting children and their families to unnecessary additional trauma. For this reason, WWO seeks to provide churches and their communities with a menu of potential strategies that can effectively support at-risk children and families. WWO will compile information on recommended practice models and strategies and link child advocates with resources to receive the necessary training and preparation to strengthen their capacity to do this work effectively. We do not suggest that churches and communities supplant professional governmental and non-governmental child protection organizations, but churches and their communities can work in partnership with professional child welfare organizations to achieve a common vision and goals.

TWO TYPES OF INTERVENTION: REMEDIATION AND PREVENTION

THERE are two broad types of intervention being recommended for WWO advocates. They are remediation and prevention. Remediation involves work with children and families in which child maltreatment or child abandonment has already occurred. The children may be living in their own families, may be placed in out-of-home care, or may be homeless. The goal of these services is to correct the conditions that created an unsafe environment in their own homes to permit safely maintaining or reuniting these children with their own families. If the family cannot be strengthened to provide a safe environment for their children, even with intensive services, we must work to identify, assess, approve, and fully prepare an alternative «forever» family for the children. Much of the formal child welfare system is designed to provide remedial services to maltreated children and their families.

However, it is equally important to prevent children from entering the child protection system at all. Preventive and supportive services targeted to at-risk children and their families in their own homes and communities can stabilize and empower these families to safely and permanently care for their own children. Many of these services are based in the community and can be provided by a variety of community organizations and

advocates. Making these services widely available to at-risk families and encouraging families to make use of them are an integral part of the gate-keeping process.

An analogy for a comprehensive child protection system is that of a rapidly flowing river. Remedial services occur downstream and are designed to catch children who are caught in the rapids and pull them out of harm's way. Preventive services take place up-river and are designed to prevent children from falling into the river in the first place.

Churches, the members of their congregations, and the communities in which they are located can potentially offer a wide variety of resources that can be used both up-stream and down-stream to help at-risk children and families. Our goal is to mobilize these resources and equip child and family advocates to use them most effectively.



Roles for Churches in World Without Orphans_

THE following describes potential ways church communities in the WWO movement can become involved in this important work. We have included strategies that directly help vulnerable children and youth, that provide help and support to at-risk families in the community, that support families who have adopted or are fostering at-risk children, and that promote larger-scale community and organizational change.

RESOURCE FAMILIES_

FAMILIES and individual adults can serve as resource families for children who have been abused or neglected, abandoned, are homeless, or have developmental disabilities. Some services may be provided by volunteer families from the church's home community with the approval of the children's parents. Some services will require collaboration with and approval or licensure by the governmental child protection agencies that have the authority to serve these children. The category of resource families includes several types of family-based care for children who cannot remain safely in their own families. The types of resource families described below are ranked from least to most intrusive and least to most permanent.

- ***Respite families*** provide short-term care to children who live with their own families, with relatives, or in foster or adoptive families. Respite caregivers provide physical and psychological relief to reduce family stress and to enable families to keep their children at home. This is especially important for families whose children have medical problems, developmental disabilities or serious behavior problems that require parents to provide many hours of intensive direct care each day. Respite care gives parents a much-needed break and enables them to do other activities, run errands, or spend time with other family members.
- ***Child care providers*** are families who provide child care services, sometimes called day care, while parents are at work. Being able to find affordable or volunteer child care in the parents' home community may enable parents to seek work or remain employed without having to place their children in an orphanage to ensure their care. Some child care providers may also be trained as protective day care providers who work specifically with children at high risk of abuse or neglect. The use of protective day care can ensure that children are in a safe environment during the day, which can reduce family stress. Protective day care is a valuable tool to prevent full-time out-of-home care for children, while services are provided to help their families address the conditions that increase risk to their children at home.

- **Mentor families** provide a one-on-one relationship and specialized attention to children who lack permanent family connections. Examples are providing tutoring to help children succeed in school; mentoring youth who are emancipating from institutional or foster care; and serving as a «big brother» or «big sister» to provide dependable adult companionship, guidance, and counsel for children and youth. Mentor families can work with children in their own families, in foster families, or in institutional care. Often, mentoring families can become permanent support systems for children.
- **Relative/kinship families** include members of a child's extended family or close family friends who can provide short or long-term placement for children, thereby helping children remain in their own families and communities. Relative or kinship families may provide an alternative, more home-like placement resource for children than living in orphanage or institutional care.
- **Foster families** are single adults or families in the community who provide temporary, 24-hour care for children who cannot remain safely in their own families. Foster families generally parent individual children or sibling groups, but they rarely parent more than 5 foster children at a time. Foster families can provide a safe and nurturing environment that promotes children's healthy growth and development and addresses developmental problems resulting from prior trauma. Many foster families eventually become permanent families for children in their care. A high percentage of adoptions of older children are by their foster parents, thereby ensuring legal and psychological permanence for children while avoiding another placement disruption and re-placement in a different family.
- **Permanent Alternative Families** are «forever» families for children through adoption, legal guardianship or custody, or other forms of legal permanence. The placed child is expected to remain a permanent part of their «forever» family for life. Placement in a permanent family provides children with safety, stability, security, identity, and long-term family connections. Some forever placements might have various degrees of openness, enabling children to communicate with and preserve their attachments with siblings, parents, and other relatives, even though these family members may not have the capacity to care full time for the child.

Churches can contribute by educating and encouraging their members to become resource families for children in their home community. Moreover, since resource families typically need ongoing support and assistance, churches and their members can provide an invaluable source of support. Churches might help families meet their basic survival needs by contributing food, clothing, home management assistance, or transportation; by helping families retool their homes to accommodate additional children; by providing respite or child care for adopted or foster children; by organizing and leading support groups for adoptive and foster families; and by mentoring or tutoring children in care.

Churches can also provide a location for formal training programs for resource families in their community.

WORKING WITH AT-RISK FAMILIES IN THE COMMUNITY

THERE are many ways churches and their members can work with at-risk families in their communities, thereby enhancing the gate-keeping process to prevent children from coming into out-of-home care. Options include:

- **OUTREACH.** *Churches may make special efforts to bring at-risk families and children into the regular activities of the church community. Reaching out to families in need of social and emotional support can help prevent family crises that might require placement of the children into out-of-home care. Involving at-risk families in regular church activities can also provide them with a permanent support network and meet their needs for friendship, affiliation and belonging*
- **FAMILY-TO-FAMILY SERVICES (SOMETIMES CALLED «BUDDY FAMILIES»).** *Church member families can be partnered with at-risk families whose children are still at home or whose children are being reunited from out-of-home placement. At-risk families typically experience many kinds of personal, interpersonal, and environmental stresses, which together increase the risk to their children. Buddy families can help families meet their basic needs while also providing support, encouragement, education, and guidance to at-risk parents. Buddy families may also work as respite or child care families. If children must come into out-of-home care for longer periods, living with their buddy family is less traumatic than being placed in an institution or with a new, unknown foster caregiver. Buddy families can also help teen or young adult parents develop the skills to care for their children and promote continuing education and development of these young parents.*

However, there may be obstacles for buddy families. Not all at-risk families will be accepting of help. It may also take time for these families to develop trust in the buddy family, or confidence that the buddy family really cares and will follow through with their promises. In some at-risk families, the underlying problems may be too complex and the homes too dangerous to be appropriate for a buddy family. Therefore, a screening process is necessary to identify at-risk families in the community who would be amenable to and appropriate for this kind of assistance.

Resource families of all types will need training and preparation to serve in this role. Resource families will also need ongoing support and assistance, and churches can be a significant resource to help resource families address the challenges of caregiving.

WORKING AT THE COMMUNITY LEVEL

CHURCHES can also operate or support specialized community-based programs that support at-risk families and their children. These programs could include the following:

- **A community-based assistance program for at-risk families**, whereby each family's needs are evaluated, and the church community contributes time, money, and material donations to support these families. Activities may include collecting and distributing donations of food, clothing and shoes, household items and cleaning supplies, and special supplies for infant care. Churches can also provide, homemaker or home management education and support, assistance in repairing or renovating living spaces to make them safe for children, cleaning and developing outdoor space so children have a safe place to play, and linking families with needed medical care services. A model for these services can be found in community settlement house programs, which formed the foundation of early social work practice.
- **A church or community-based preschool or day care program** for children from at-risk families in the church's community. The preschool could provide respite care for at-risk families and child care services for employed families while concurrently meeting children's developmental needs. The preschool or day care program could charge a sliding fee scale, or could subsidize the care of children whose families cannot afford the service. Churches could also integrate at-risk children into regular preschool or day care programs, enabling these children to learn and benefit from experiences with other children.
- **A drug or alcohol rehabilitation program**, such as Alcoholics Anonymous or other 12-step program, to help substance-abusing parents achieve and sustain sobriety. The elimination or control of substance abuse can stabilize families, improve care of children, and help prevent family disruption. Associated programming could include community-wide educational programs about the dangers of drinking while pregnant (fetal alcohol syndrome) and conducting outreach to provide developmental, educational, and support services to pregnant women.
- **A family violence prevention and treatment program**. This might involve hosting training classes about family violence, or sponsoring a shelter for battered women and their children, which can prevent separating the children from their family. Engaging in family violence programming will require collaboration with mental health and community law enforcement professionals. However, the number of children who lack parental care because of family violence is very high, and supporting and protecting victims of family violence can significantly prevent out-of-home placement of the children.

- **A food bank** can help support families during hard economic times and prevent neglect of children solely because of poverty. Church members might make donations of food or cash to the food bank or volunteer to manage the acquisition and distribution of food. Churches might also lead community campaigns to engage restaurants, food markets, and other community organizations to contribute cash or food to the food bank. Operating a formal food bank allows the purchase of food in larger quantities, which reduces the cost and expands the impact of cash contributions.
- **Adopt an Orphanage.** If there is an orphanage in or near the church's home community, the church might create a formal partnership to provide one-on-one nurturing, recreation, attention, tutoring, and other services to the children in orphanage care, focusing on promoting healthy development and helping children develop sustainable attachments with people outside the orphanage. Activities could include providing individual attention and nurturing; organizing play activities; reading to children; providing opportunities for arts and crafts; taking children into the community for family and church activities; helping children with school work; or tending to children who are ill or who have special care needs. What is most important is ensuring the sustainability of both the church's involvement with the orphanage and the connections of volunteer families with individual children. Connections made through such programs could potentially result in foster care or permanent placement of children in care, or mentorship when a child emancipates from orphanage care. Church families could also help re-establish contact between children in orphanages and members of their biological and extended families. Some families might not visit their children in care because of the location of the orphanage and the lack of transportation or funds to get there. Church members, especially «buddy families» could partner with parents whose children are in orphanage care as part of a plan to reunite the children with their parents.
- **Develop a volunteer corps** of individuals who can provide short-term support to at-risk families as needed. Services might include transportation, helping to arrange medical appointments, intervening with landlords or property managers, locating and renovating adequate housing, doing home maintenance or repair, arranging for car repair, or helping families access other community support services.

ADVOCACY_

CHURCHES might consider joining with other churches and community groups to advocate for improved systems of care for at-risk children and families. Advocacy activities could include educating the community-at-large about children's issues and child abuse prevention; working with the media to raise awareness and build support for important projects and programs; talking with government officials and community leaders to promote organizational change; or advocating for permanent funding for both govern-

mental and non-governmental organizations that serve families and children. Churches might also advocate to enact legislation to create and sustain essential services. Examples of these might include:

- *In-home service programs for parents of children with disabilities to enable them to care for their children at home*
- *Placing all children younger than age 3 who need out-of-home care in family-based placements and closing the baby homes in the community (institutional care of infants in orphanages or hospitals)*
- *Advocate for the transition of orphanages into family resource centers that would provide emergency housing and care for at-risk children and their families, and that would offer family reunification, permanency planning, counseling, and other services to stabilize the families they serve*
- *Developing an array of community-based supportive services for at-risk families to prevent crisis and family break down*
- *Developing formal educational and mentoring programs that help emancipating youth achieve independence*
- *Increasing housing resources and providing stable living arrangements for homeless and at-risk families, such as partnering with a local Habitat for Humanity chapter to target housing for at-risk and homeless families with children*
- *Creating a financial safety net for families at risk of disruption*
- *Increasing employment opportunities so families do not need to abandon their children to find employment*

Conclusion_

HEALTHY children and families depend on healthy communities. The World Without Orphans movement seeks to mobilize, educate, and empower churches and their member communities to step up and serve, to help eliminate child maltreatment and abandonment, and to strengthen and support vulnerable families. World Without Orphans contends that with the strong involvement of their communities and an investment in their futures, all children can grow up in permanent, safe, and stable families.

We encourage you to join the movement, explore the possibilities and opportunities in your own communities, and help us achieve this goal.



Please, send us your comments and feedback to:

INFO@WORLDWITHOUTORPHANS.ORG

