

Orphanages are *NOT* the answer!



OVERTURE
INTERNATIONAL
EMPOWERING HAITI'S MOST VULNERABLE



Introduction.

In developing countries like Haiti, extreme poverty and weak social systems often breed violence and fail to equip parents with the skills and resources they need to effectively protect their children from brutality, sexual abuse and trafficking. These harsh realities often force children to seek refuge on the streets or to live in domestic slavery. Desperate parents may believe that sending their children to orphanages will provide a better life. **Sadly, more often than not, orphanages simply perpetuate the same abuse and exploitation children and parents are seeking to escape.** For these reasons and many more, **orphanages are NOT the answer.**

God did not intend for families to be broken but to remain intact and work together to glorify Him and build stronger communities. That's why we created the Overture Social Support Model. Our approach empowers communities and equips families to provide the resources and security needed to protect their children and strengthen their families. **Our goal is for children to remain in their homes, so they have the best possible opportunity for a safe, sustainable future.**

Orphanages are NOT the answer.

When it comes to caring for vulnerable children, many organizations and those who support them believe that orphanages are the best solution. While there may be orphanages managed by well-meaning people, evidence shows that these **institutions ultimately harm children, reducing their opportunity for long-term success.** The harms perpetuated on children raised in orphanages include:

- ▶ exposing vulnerable children to physical and sexual abuse due to neglect and poor safeguarding practices
- ▶ being deprived of the family environment that is crucial for healthy physical, emotional, social and spiritual development
- ▶ creating extreme dependency and inability to integrate into Haitian society
- ▶ being stripped of the opportunity to form healthy relationships due to the high turnover of volunteers and staff in orphanages

While Haitian children face challenges even when living with their families, their risk of being harmed is increased exponentially when they are turned over to an orphanage. That's why **orphanages are NOT the answer!**

“On 27-28 September, one of the largest orphanages in the country was attacked by a group of armed men. All 182 children in the orphanage witnessed the violence and remain vulnerable to subsequent attacks should the national police not be able to maintain order in Les Cayes.”

—OCHA Haiti Situation Report Oct. 1 2019

“ I have counseled many children who, even though they were in a safe building, did not feel safe during a crisis and were desperate to return to their family’s vulnerable home. This is precisely because, at such times, being in a safe shelter far from one’s family doesn’t provide the type of security they desire, therefore increasing the trauma. Children need affection and security that can only be provided by their parents and family.”

—Pierre Richard Peronneau, Social Worker





Disturbing facts about orphanages in Haiti.

Orphanages in Haiti

- ▶ In 2017, IBESR (the Haitian child welfare agency) identified 754 orphanages across the country. Many refused to grant IBESR access to their properties, while others moved children to other facilities without notifying anyone—including parents.
- ▶ Fewer than 35 orphanages out of the 754 (less than 5%) have been able to meet state requirements.
- ▶ In 2018, IBESR counted nearly 25,000 children still living in orphanages.
- ▶ In the 2018 count, 400 orphanages were required to close, with 307 of them flagged for perpetrating physical or sexual abuse.
- ▶ The Haitian orphanage system has been proven to be a breeding ground for corruption, abuse and trafficking of vulnerable children.
- ▶ Most children in orphanages actually have living parents or other family members who chose the orphanage due to poverty or lack of educational opportunities for their children.

Effects on Children and Communities

- ▶ Children in orphanages experience developmental deficiencies, suffer abandonment issues and experience trauma during their stay.
- ▶ Trauma and emotional scars from separation remain even after the child leaves the orphanage due to a lack of recognition, social and psychological services.
- ▶ The failure of orphanages to maintain family relationships paired with their lack of intention to strengthen and reunify families damages both the children as well as future generations.

88.6%

children have both parents living

10.2%

children have one parent living

1.2%

children are orphans

—Better Care Network

Economic Impact

- ▶ Millions of dollars designated for orphanages are ultimately diverted from child development, family strengthening and community development efforts.
- ▶ Separation of families and the orphanage system are perpetuated with funding from individual donors, churches, NGOs, missionaries, agencies and governments.
- ▶ Most orphanages and child day programs supported by foreign donors also count on imported food aid to feed children—meaning that millions of dollars donated to support these centers are also invested in foreign aid to meet their daily needs instead of purchasing from the local markets. Dollars that could be invested in strengthening families and communities and local development. Dollars that could aid during major crises.

Lumos reports that if the basic costs for education and healthcare were covered, many of the 32,000 children living in Haitian institutions could live at home with their families at a cost far less than that of staying in an orphanage.

“Orphanages sever the bonds of affection between families and children. They take the responsibilities away from families and lead to bad behaviors in children, which in turn has consequences for communities. For this reason, the most important thing is to strengthen the capacity of families and communities to reduce the risks of children separating from their families: acting on the problems faced by families and in their communities.” —Kendy Forvil, Social Worker





Why do churches and other faith-based organizations continue to support orphanages?

It's not uncommon to hear about faith-based organizations supporting orphanages around the world. In fact, scripture encourages us to care for orphans and widows. The idea of giving back and making a difference in someone's life is noble and selfless. However, **what if these good intentions are actually causing harm to the very children in need of help?**

Orphanages tend to be started by individuals who are passionate about and concerned for vulnerable children with no families to care for them. But once an orphanage enters the picture, families who may be on the edge of poverty or who cannot provide an education for their children end up relinquishing their children to the orphanage rather than working to strengthen and improve their own ability to care for them. These parents are misinformed and believe they're helping their children when, in reality, they're actually making their children more vulnerable and further dismantling the family structure.

Research shows children grow and develop best in families, and **orphanages simply do not and cannot provide for the needs of children as well as a family can.** Orphanages deprive children of the love and stability of a family while also putting them at significant risk of abuse and neglect.

“It is important to understand that poverty is not a reason for the separation of children from their parents. The main cause is the lack of education. If we can fill this gap, closing orphanages in Haiti will be a simple process because parents will take their children. In my experience, after a family reunification and training, parents are unanimous in expressing that if they were aware of the consequences of separation and institutionalization on their children, they would never agree to give their children to orphanage owners—whatever the promises they make to them.”—Enel Andre, Social Worker



“All those years spent without ever knowing where my child was, I suffered a lot, I suffered in silence. Now I say thank you to God and to you. I’ll never forget what you’ve done for me.”

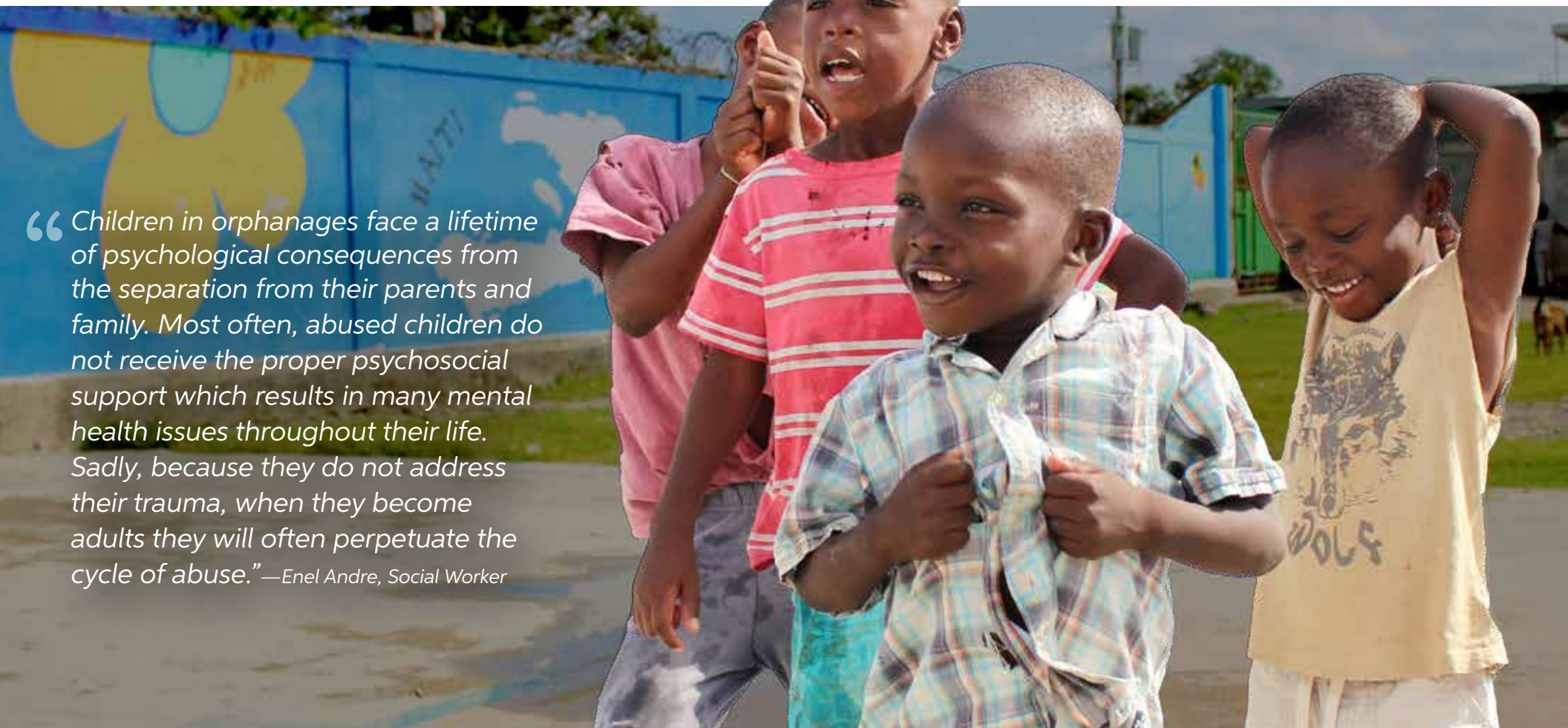
—Mother reunified with her child after being separated for 8 years

The mother kept the baby and raised him for two years, at which time the father kidnapped the child and placed him in the orphanage so the mother could not find him. The orphanage made no efforts to assess the family during the six years that the child lived in the orphanage. After an extensive reunification process facilitated by Overture International, the mother was found and reunited with her son. Today they remain together and are working with Overture and their community to strengthen their family and build a hopeful and loving future.

Are all orphanages bad?

It's crucial to recognize that not all orphanages operate with bad intentions. However, **decades of evidence show that orphanages ultimately harm children.** As more staff are added and more children are accepted, it's nearly impossible for even the most well-intentioned founder to maintain a safe environment. And then a revolving door of volunteers and staff means children form unhealthy attachments and struggle to build healthy relationships. **Even the “best” orphanages lack the family environment that children need to thrive.** Sadly, neglect is common in these institutions, and poor safeguarding practices create opportunities for abuse and exploitation. These children are robbed of their childhood and left with severe developmental and emotional issues.

The answer—there are NO good orphanages. Even those that manage to meet state requirements still fall short of meeting the emotional and social needs of a child. While we understand this may be a difficult truth to accept, it is truly the reality in Haiti and so many other developing countries. **That's why the U.S. orphanage system has been dismantled over the last few decades.**

A photograph of four young children in an outdoor setting. In the foreground, a boy in a plaid shirt is smiling and looking to the right. Behind him, another boy in a pink striped shirt is also smiling. To the right, a girl in a yellow tank top is smiling and looking down. In the background, a boy in a pink shirt is pointing towards the camera. They are standing in front of a blue wall with yellow and white patterns. The ground is paved.

“Children in orphanages face a lifetime of psychological consequences from the separation from their parents and family. Most often, abused children do not receive the proper psychosocial support which results in many mental health issues throughout their life. Sadly, because they do not address their trauma, when they become adults they will often perpetuate the cycle of abuse.”—Enel Andre, Social Worker

Is abuse really happening in orphanages?

Yes, there is rampant abuse in orphanages in Haiti and other developing countries. This is especially devastating when it happens to those who should be most protected and cherished. Sadly, this abuse remains largely ignored and unreported for a number of reasons. Understanding the forces contributing to the silence surrounding abuse in orphanages is the first step toward creating meaningful change:

- ▶ The lack of accountability in Haitian orphanages makes it difficult to prevent or stop abuse.
- ▶ The judicial system in Haiti is weak and corrupt, making it hard to enforce laws against abusers.
- ▶ Victims often feel voiceless and silenced without justice; those who seek resolution encounter difficulty given the time that has passed.

Unfortunately, reporting abuse in Haitian orphanages rarely results in corrective or legal action, leaving children in unsafe situations with no means of protection. The problem is compounded by the fact that those who speak out against abuse are putting themselves and the victims at risk of harm or backlash from orphanage staff or administrators.

Why does the abuse remain hidden?

When children age out of orphanages, it is often the case that many years have passed since the abuse occurred, leaving a 'my word against yours' scenario. The orphanage leadership always wins. In many instances, these **innocent children struggle with the trauma and repercussions of abuse silently for years**, eventually impacting future generations in their families and communities.

The abuse that takes place in Haitian orphanages today cannot continue to remain hidden in the shadows. Silence perpetuates the abuse, increases the trauma and limits a child's ability to live a healthy and productive life. Children are among the most vulnerable members of society and are worthy of experiencing the love, support and protection that most often comes from living in a family unit. This is why Overture is focused on strengthening families and communities through our Social Support Model.



Why is it so difficult to close orphanages?

Closing orphanages is a complex and challenging undertaking. But that doesn't mean it's impossible. Based on Overture's own work and years of experience, we can personally attest to the fact that it is possible. **Shutting down the orphanage system is absolutely critical to ending the grave harm that such institutions consistently cause to children.**

Many orphanages are run for the purpose of profit. The interests of the children become an afterthought at best, and never the priority. These profiteers often send staff or volunteers to search for vulnerable families with the goal of persuading them to relinquish their children to the orphanage, not for the children's sake but to increase their funding revenue. **This is an alarming, and sadly common, form of child trafficking that violates children's rights and should be condemned and stopped.**

The road to closing orphanages is not an easy one. Many orphanages use emotional blackmail and scare tactics to prevent children from returning to their families. They may also lobby against efforts to close them, using arguments such as "where will these children go?" or "who will take care of them?"

While closing orphanages may seem daunting, it doesn't give us permission to ignore the problem. There are many ways the church, including you, can help facilitate the process. First, you can provide funding and resources to support organizations that focus on family reunification and foster family development. You can also make a difference by spreading the word to educate those around you about the harm caused by orphanages and the need to empower loving families who truly have their children's well-being as their top priority.





“ I still remember this little boy who would not stop crying. He was screaming so much that at one point he had no voice left. Had he been beaten? Was he hungry? Was he bitten by a dog? Didn't he have a place to sleep? None of these things! I was curious to know what was going on with him. When I asked him why he was crying, he answered in no uncertain terms: “I want to live with my mother and father!” These words were like a tornado in my heart. Yet, the staff was foolishly trying to make him understand that he was in the middle of school and that he had better finish the school year, that they were going to buy him a bicycle, and that we were going to put more toys at his disposal. He would stare at us again with his youthful eyes and repeat the same words with more rage: “I want to live with my mother and father!”

—Pierre Richard Peronneau, Social Worker



“ I didn’t agree at all with my son being placed in an orphanage. I thought it was absurd, especially as he was my only son at the time. It was his father’s decision, influenced by the orphanage owner. He wanted him to join the orphanage at all costs. That’s how it happened. I have to tell you that today, I have a lot of regrets. If my son behaves the way he does now, it’s because he spent part of his childhood at the orphanage.”

—Mother of child reunified by Overture International



There is a better way.

Reunification—Children Belong in a Family

Rather than perpetuating the orphanage model, **the solution is to help build strong, loving families who are able to provide and care for their children.** Where this isn't possible, new families should be identified and created through fostering.

Orphanages are not only counter to creating sustainable families and communities but are also counter to the Christian worldview. As people of faith, we're called to care for society's vulnerable and marginalized. Psalm 68 reinforces this truth by stating God's concern for the most vulnerable. This powerful picture of God's design and desire conveys that family is the place where God wants us to flourish. **Every child deserves to grow up in a safe and supportive family.** For children in an orphanage, this means taking the first step of reuniting them with their own families or, when not possible, foster families.

Family and Community Strengthening

Once reunified with their family, the next step is to equip the parents to build a safe, supportive environment in which the child can grow and thrive. To strengthen families and their communities, we implement our Overture Social Support Model, which is our proven foundation for building Haiti Stronger through empowering Haitians of all ages at individual, family and community levels toward independence and self-reliance.

The Overture Social Support Model is a holistic approach that aims to strengthen communities by keeping families together. We work with local leaders to identify the needs of the community and equip parents with skills and resources to raise their children in a healthy and secure environment. **By providing support and training to parents, this approach leads to more sustainable and long-lasting solutions.** With a focus on equipping community members with the education, skills and resources they need to overcome daily obstacles, the model's Five Pillars—Empowerment, Education, Nutrition, Healthcare and Housing—serve as the building blocks to a stronger Haiti. A country free from generational dependence and moving toward self-reliance and autonomy.

“When we educate community leaders and they become aware that the orphanage model of care creates many disadvantages and harm, they testify that if orphanages did not exist, more social services would be created in the communities, and they would suffer less from the lack of total deprivation of basic social services.”

—Wijems Sainval, Social Worker





Here's what you can do.

One of the most significant impacts of the Overture Social Support Model is that it **strengthens and keeps families together, eliminating the need to hand over a child to an orphanage**. In many communities, children are often separated from their parents due to poverty, conflict and natural disasters. Overture works to keep families together by providing them with the tools they need to stay united, such as job training, financial education and access to social services. By strengthening families, Overture strengthens the community as a whole, making orphanages obsolete.

In conclusion, Haitian orphanages continue to have a significant negative impact on the lives of children in the country. The physical, social and psychological damage caused by prolonged separation from their families and communities has far-reaching consequences that continue to affect generations. **That's why we need you to take action now.** Here's what you can do to help end the orphanage system, keep Haitian families together and equip children, parents and communities to be self-reliant and independent:

- ▶ if you are currently supporting an orphanage, encourage the organization to reunify children with their families.
- ▶ be an advocate and encourage orphanages to engage with organizations like Overture International that focus on family reunification and strengthening.
- ▶ invest your prayers, finances and support with organizations like Overture International that focus on family reunification, preservation and strengthening.
- ▶ commit to transforming the orphanage system by making a pledge today at orphanagesarenottheanswer.org.

“Overture's success with the transformation of the ESPWA orphanage in southern Haiti and the reunification of all 252 children in one year proves we can reduce and hopefully end the orphanage cycle in Haiti.”—Enel Andre, Social Worker

Please continue to read the case study to see how this

transformation is possible!

Case Study: 252 reasons why orphanages are NOT the answer!

Beginning in 2020, Overture International transitioned the ESPWA orphanage from a traditional orphanage to a thriving child development and family strengthening center, reunifying 252 children with their families. As of June 2023, **all 252 children remain unified with their families**, and 170 of them have just recently completed their three-year individualized support plans, ultimately equipping and empowering them and their families with the resources needed to realize independence and self-reliance! They are now role models in their communities for family preservation and for the remaining 82 reunified families who are still in the midst of their family-strengthening journey.

These families have:

- ▶ participated in building their own block-built homes.
- ▶ been provided access to educational scholarships.
- ▶ participated in parenting skills training.
- ▶ taken advantage of vocational and entrepreneurial skills development.
- ▶ accessed healthcare through Overture's permanent medical clinic and mobile clinics.
- ▶ participated in trauma counseling and other supportive services.
- ▶ benefited from community food programs that include farming and food packaging initiatives.

All of this progress is made possible through the generous support of Overture donors and the hard work of our Haiti-based teams and the families and communities we serve. **It is truly a collaborative effort that ultimately moves the children, parents and communities closer to self-reliance and independence.**

Continue Learning More About Why Orphanages are NOT the Answer!

While the preceding insights are based on Overture International's deep experience with issues related to orphanages and reunification, there are many other respected voices speaking into this conversation. We encourage you to continue to learn more about this important subject by visiting our orphanage resource page at **orphanagesarenottheanswer.org** or by scanning the QR code.



“Sing to God, sing in praise of his name, extol him who rides on the clouds; rejoice before him—his name is the Lord. A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families, he leads out the prisoners with singing; but the rebellious live in a sun-scorched land.”

—Psalm 68: 4-6



~~ORPHANAGES~~



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