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# SPONSORING A CHILD AIN'T WHAT IT USED TO BE

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Child sponsorship is popular among Christians, with some young families even sponsoring a child for every one born in their own family. So it's important to know that for the most part, child sponsorship isn't done the way you might think it is.

It's estimated around nine million children are sponsored worldwide and it's not hard to see why child sponsorship is a popular form of giving. As a sponsor you have the opportunity to make a tangible difference in a child's life and develop a letter-based relationship with them. It's the opportunity for connection which really appeals to our relational side.

However, many agencies have moved away from sponsoring individual children to channelling the money raised into community development, so that the photos and stories of children are mostly a marketing tool to engage the public. For those organisations which still direct funds from sponsors to individual children, there are many questions raised in the development sector about the ethics of singling out particular children for support and leaving out others. There are broader questions surrounding the administrative costs of running child sponsorship programmes as opposed to community development, and questions of integrity when the product appears to be something it isn't. Many donors are relatively ignorant about the programmes they support (at least, I know I was prior to writing this article), which makes asking the questions even more important.

Questions surrounding child sponsorship have resurfaced following a [recent study](#) into the effectiveness of child sponsorship published in the *Journal of Political Economy*. Authored by a Professor in Economics and International Studies at the University of San Francisco, the research looked at the long-term outcomes for children who had been sponsored through Compassion, a worldwide Christian NGO.

Compassion was chosen to be the focus of the study because of their particular emphasis on child development (as opposed to community development). Under their model, money goes directly from a sponsor to an individual child via the local church. It provided the perfect conditions for a researcher needing a "control group"—in this case, the unsponsored siblings of sponsored children. (Although I'm told there are other streams of 'critical intervention' funding which go to community development for things like sanitation and clean water.) Compassion works through local churches in the areas where children are sponsored, and it's the churches who work with families and children to improve their health and education.

The study showed children who participated in Compassion's child sponsorship programme stayed in school longer, were more likely to have salaried or white-collar employment and were more likely to be leaders in their communities and churches than their unsponsored peers. As you can imagine, the study is now the backbone of Compassion's message: "Compassion child sponsorship. IT WORKS."

While many (myself included) have shared the study on social media with much glee—development that works!—it raises questions around the different models of sponsorship, particularly individual child sponsorship.

Compassion's CEO, Tim Hanna says they focus on the child, with the hope that the child will go on to influence their community.

"Compassion's model [is based on] the understanding that if you change enough children, you will change a community," he says. "I guess the other way to look at it is you change a community and you hope people will change. We approach it from, if people themselves get hope and life and change and they will change their communities. So I wouldn't want to compare and say one is better than the other, but they're all valid."

Tim points to two graduates from its child sponsorship programmes who have taken up roles in the political life of their countries (Haiti and Uganda) to show how their work can have impact and influence beyond the child.

"What we do really well is child development; we don't claim to do other things really well. There's no magic bullet when it comes to alleviating poverty, and there's no shortcuts. You've just got to keep doing the bit that you do well, and we do holistic child development really well. I guess the research tells that story."

A growing number of agencies like World Vision, Baptist World Aid and Plan are using community-based funding models, where money given through child sponsorship is distributed to projects which benefit whole communities. Under World Vision's child sponsorship programme, communities are selected to take part in Area Development Programmes (ADPs) which last for around 15 years and target things like improvement in sanitation, health and education. Once these communities are selected, World Vision consults with community leaders to determine priorities for the ADP, and after a couple of years, which children should be approached for sponsorship. The families of these children are then informed about the child sponsorship programme and given the opportunity to come on board.

Once a sponsor back in Australia has chosen a child, the money they give is distributed to fund projects within the community which benefit every child. In a way, the children who are in contact with sponsors become ambassadors for their community. These children are monitored closely by World Vision, and receive and send letters, but beyond that, are treated no differently to their siblings and peers.

Sarah Knop is Senior Product Manager for World Vision's Child Sponsorship programme. She says World Vision transitioned to a community-based approach in the mid-80s and has tried to reduce any exclusivity or jealousy in communities where children are sponsored.

"We obviously don't want to create an environment for communities where some children are singled out as being treated better than others or given extra special benefits. We want the whole community to benefit, and that's really what we're about at World Vision—we're about seeing the community thrive."

Sarah concedes child sponsorship has continued to be used as a development tool because it's an effective way of engaging people with the work of World Vision. But she says they wouldn't do it if it didn't benefit the children and communities receiving the support.

"We've always had the community involved in the work that we're doing, it's just we've improved that process over time.

"We know that when we're working with these communities we're seeing real change and real development happening."

Not all charities employ child sponsorship to fund their work. Oxfam Australia refuses to, stating on its website that "Our programs focus on communities rather than individuals. We consider this a more effective and efficient approach for long-term developmental outcomes."

Meanwhile, UNICEF offers becoming a 'Global Parent' so your money goes towards community projects which will improve the lives of children around the world.

Former Director of TEAR Australia, and lecturer at Tabor College in Victoria, Steve Bradbury says while he was in the top job, TEAR didn't consider child sponsorship as a fundraising tool, because of the cost of doing it and the complexity of explaining how it works to donors.

"It's very labour intensive, just in terms of tracking the children, selecting the children, photographing them, getting the letters and doing what's necessary to create some kind of connectivity to the sponsor as well as monitoring them on the ground," he says. "And we can't tell from the literature what that's actually truly costing the organisations who work with the child sponsorship model."

Steve also wonders how charities set the monthly contribution amount for donors.

"How does it cost to sponsor a child in the Philippines, or in India or in Timor or anywhere else, when the cost-of-living in those places is different? And how come if I'm an Australian doing that child sponsorship here it costs me more than if I was an Indian sponsoring a child through the same international agency? And the reason is that someone somewhere has sat down and said well, what is the kind of figure that we're more likely to be able to raise from the average Jo Blow out there."

While it hasn't gone down the child sponsorship road, TEAR has run its own marketing campaigns which use a tangible idea to raise funds for community development. It's TEAR's popular gift catalogue through which you can "buy a goat" (or other useful gift) for your friend, where you are essentially giving money towards community projects run by TEAR. This fundraising method came into being during Steve's time as Director and it's been copied by many other NGOs worldwide since.

And similar to child sponsorship it is something which consumers have often failed to understand. He says in situations where more goats (or other items) are paid for than are required, the money goes towards other aspects of the community development project. Despite being explained in the catalogue and the NGOs marketing material, this funding redistribution mechanism continues to prove confusing to the consumer.

"There is no question that some of the people who purchase a goat item or heifer or whatever it is, despite every effort we've made to explain how it works, they're convinced that that's where their money is going," he says. "We've even had people who said, 'That's great because we have far too many goats in Australia!'"

But he says the prices set for the various items in the TEAR gift catalogue were taken from real project budgets and averaged out.

"They were real figures, but the child sponsorship figure is not a real figure," he says.

Steve argues the focus in child sponsorship and development more broadly should be on transparency and best practice, with the consumer needing to ensure they are aware of where their money is going. But he says, at the end of the day, if it makes people engaged with poverty and development, then child sponsorship is worthwhile.

"I think what I would want to say is that there is a need for all of us to take on the issue of transparency very seriously and be as vigilant and diligent about it as we can," he says. "But nothing has been as successful as child sponsorship as a way of hooking people into development programmes ... and the last thing I would ever want to do is discourage someone from doing it. I think it's better that they do it than not do anything at all."