

# Abandoned Niños in Argentina

## What life awaits them beyond the orphanage?

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It was oddly quiet at 9 am for an orphanage that was noted to house between 300 and 600 children. The Catholic Mass was at 10 and open to visitors; in fact, this was the time the orphanage suggests you visit.

A curious person would wonder how any operation could care for so many children especially with a ratio of 30 children to one house mother, some volunteers and “transitory uncles.” And to a social worker, the curiosity and wariness goes beyond their basic welfare to that of attachment issues, how they relate to each other and the volunteer staff, what kind of stimulation and education they receive here, and what life awaits them beyond these walls.

If one searches the Internet for volunteer opportunities in Argentina, the number of times this particular orphanage comes up is phenomenal, and you can pay anywhere from \$300 to \$2000 to have an experience that is described as life-altering. Questions immediately arise: how well do they screen volunteers, is the money obviously spent on the care and welfare of the children, how do so many children end up there in the first place?

Walking around the premises, it was remarkable how nobody came to investigate our presence. Taking a few snapshots and peering through windows, there was a group of 10 children participating in a Sunday school lesson. Where were the rest? Why was it so easy to walk around and not be questioned?

In the barren courtyard, most of the grass was replaced with packed dirt, there was a “futbol” (soccer) post made out of tree limbs and a basketball hoop attached to a light pole. Within a few minutes the first boy came out with dirty sweatpants on, no underwear and wearing a t-shirt. Bright-eyed, he spoke in Spanish to find out what we were doing. “Looking at the basketball hoop, do you have a ball?” This was enough for the 8 year



old to begin throwing a plastic used yogurt container through the hoop. When asked if he had a ball again he grabbed a stick and began tossing it through the hoop. His facial features were noticeably different, his eyes off-center, and his difficulty with coordination led to the suspicion of a developmental disability. It was soon clear that he had difficulties counting how many baskets he had scored, using his fingers to add two plus one.

A little girl stood at the gate, next to a drying mattress, watching the game behind strands of her hair. She looked resigned to being left out. And then a second boy about 6 years old, without shoes, came out of one of the houses. The first

boy instructed him how to throw the stick through the hoop. He immediately joined in and had the scoring shout down just right... “goooooooooooooooooaaal!” with his arms in the air and a gleaming smile across his face.

The dynamics radically changed when a third boy came out and aggressively began demanding attention by grabbing the camera and taking the stick. The first boy immediately retreated to his home. There was an obvious established hierarchy. By break-dancing and stick-throwing the eldest boy, perhaps 9 years, insisted on being the center of attention. It was easy to get caught up in his survival behaviours as he repeatedly hugged and climbed on me, trying to use the camera. Together we took some photos. He began with one of our backpack, his hands and several of his home, trying to capture the other onlookers in the windows and doors, children unable or unwilling to join in. He took photographs of his peers, all missing their heads. He wanted to see each photo after it was taken, clearly this not being his first time around a digital camera. He was completely unaware or uninterested that his nose was running and mucus was smearing on his face and hands, and he was very physical in his interactions.



Rough and tumble, or indiscriminate attachment? Cultural differences made it difficult to briefly assess through observation and to truly understand the social norms of the interactions with strangers.

Ideally this was going to be the most rewarding social work volunteer opportunity one could imagine while living abroad in Argentina for 4 months. The plan to connect locally and avoid the heavy tourist-laden costs was optimal. The orphanage website invites anyone interested in seeing the organization and the Parish to come during Sunday's Mass and the international work-abroad programs report that no experience is necessary to volunteer with the needy and impoverished children.



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Although we were having a pleasant and very engaging interaction with these children for three quarters of an hour, it was shocking and somewhat upsetting that not one adult came to see where they were, or who we were. It was a mixed feeling of being fortunate to have such easy access to play with the children, but at the same time, alarming. Was this a result of cultural differences? It is easy to build rapport with needy children, allowing them to participate in taking photos, playing basketball and equally, as easy to manipulate and take advantage of them one could suppose. Back in the city of Cordoba, one helping professional who had previously worked with street children explained that it wasn't uncommon for the children and teens to be very affectionate with volunteers, offering hugs and climbing on them. The thing was, however, these children didn't know us; in fact, we just walked onto their playground and were greeted as though we were family.

It was clear that there was no money being spent on balls for the children to play with. They were, in fact, quite skilled at getting the stick through the 3 meter high hoop. In front of the orphanage there were faded multi-colored swing sets and a climbing bridge. However there were no swings on the swing set.

A couple of other children came out to the courtyard, including two young girls, one in pigtails, offering hugs and wanting to hold hands. Why were they here? Some children, such as those with developmental disabilities, were unable to stay with their families due to lack of financial and social resources to care for them. These children, vulnerable and requiring intensive support and resources, are often at the greatest risk of exploitation. Without a social system or advocates, the future of these children is very limited. Other children were sent to the orphanage because of identified behavioural problems or they were abandoned. It is unclear however, what circumstances are leading to some children being abandoned.

No caretaker or administrator was available to answer any questions onsite, but the above information was available from their website, international charity agencies, and local people. When the children on the playground were asked what time Mass was and if they were going, none of them were aware of such a thing. The children we were engaging with clearly were not the ones brought out for the show 'n tell of fund raisers.

This orphanage has been operating for 36 years by a priest who found his calling in 1969 when a heavy rainstorm destroyed the homes of the local poor people and left two boys unattended and cared for. There are 9 houses on the main site and another 35 throughout the local town and villages.

In the guiding statements of the orphanage, the "volunteer Mamas" are seen as key to providing love and care for each "son." It remarks that because a child needs a mother all the time, the challenge of charity is to find new mamas for new sons. The volunteer mamas live with the children "night and day" and "her service is absolutely voluntary and in it is expressed humility, generous spirit, transparency, and above all, love." Before one could begin to question where these volunteer mamas come from that are able to offer their devotion and free service they note, "some mamas offer and give themselves, finding their service vocation. Others are young, alone single mothers, housewives or wives or widows without children. To be a Volunteer Mother of the House of the Child is to be always breeding life, growing in the love to the abandoned children."

This shouldn't be too surprising, the expectation of women to provide unpaid services or the belief that women are natural child-nurturers willing to care for children 24/7. Is it possible to have a large organization working with a very vulnerable population with free labour and not appear exploitive on all fronts? Or do cultural and religious differences interfere in judgmental ways to prevent understanding of a priest that created a community project for children in need?

Local Argentinians and helping professionals relate stories of corruption, poor treatment and the lack of care of the children; as well as, the seemingly inevitable stories of sexual abuse. There appeared to be no awareness of trying to place children with smaller families or to have them adopted. In reviewing the newsletters and reports of the orphanage, there is no mention of where the first few hundred children are, given that they would be approximately 35 years old now. But there are colorful photos of children hugging the Priest on his 77<sup>th</sup> birthday and other celebrated events.

Eye to eye, the niños were like any other children, beautiful, cute, playful, and loving. It's not surprising that one 9 year old boy has figured out how to demand what all of them deserve. 

*Tania Zulkoskey is on sabbatical from her Social Work practice in BC.*