

Does international child sponsorship work?

New research says yes

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Child sponsorship is a leading form of direct aid from households in wealthy countries to children in developing countries, with approximately 3.39 billion dollars spent to sponsor 9.14 million children internationally. A new study to be published in the *Journal of Political Economy* shows international child sponsorship to result in markedly higher rates of schooling completion and substantially improved adult employment outcomes.

Researchers used first-hand survey data from a study of Compassion International, a leading child sponsorship organization, to examine the adult life outcomes of a group of 10,144 individuals in Bolivia, Guatemala, India, Kenya, the Philippines, and Uganda that included children who began sponsorship through the program a generation ago. The study estimates causal effects on adult life outcomes in areas such as educational completion, type of employment, and community leadership.

Specifically, the study finds that international sponsorship increased the probability of a child completing secondary school by 27%, completing a university education by 50%, and obtaining a white-collar job as an adult by about 35%.

Despite the billions of dollars that flow to child sponsorship each year and the millions of American families who sponsor overseas children, this is the first published study to investigate whether such programs actually benefit the children they intend to help. Evidence from the study points to the positive effects of child sponsorship on the adult life

outcomes of these children.

Compassion's program places a strong emphasis not only on providing for the basic needs, such as school tuition and healthcare, but also on nurturing children's life aspirations and self-esteem over what is typically a decade of participation in sponsorship programs. "Too often we have focused our development efforts on provision for human beings rather than the development of human beings," said Bruce Wydick, one of the study's authors. "Although child sponsorship does indeed provide help with school fees, access to health care, and other tangible benefits, Compassion's particular approach focuses on the more holistic development of the child, such as development of self-esteem, aspirations, spiritual and ethical values. In follow-up studies involving currently sponsored children, we measure very large impacts in these areas, which we believe play a significant role in what we observe in the difference in adult life outcomes."

While further research is needed to establish a causal link between aspirations and [adult life](#) outcomes, this study has intriguing implications for the way we view economic development. Said Wydick, "I believe our research contributes to a new and growing body of investigation that seeks to examine the importance of 'internal constraints' to economic development—the importance of aspirations, self-esteem, goals, and reference points related to behaviors that are propitious to helping the poor escape poverty."

More information: Bruce Wydick, Paul Glewwe, and Laine Rutledge, "Does International Child Sponsorship Work? A Six-Country Study of Impacts on Adult Life Outcomes." *Journal of Political Economy* 121:2 (published April 2013).

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