

Orphan

Details

An orphan is a child whose mother or father or both has died. Historically, in the context of institutional 'care', the term 'orphan' did not necessarily mean a child whose parents had died. It was most often used to describe a child whose parent/s were (or were judged to be) unable, for many different reasons, to care for them.

Edwin Exon, superintendent of the [Melbourne Orphan Asylum](#), attempted to define the term in a conference paper in 1891:

A child may be orphaned or bereaved wholly or partly by the death of one or of both parents, or by the disease, neglect, or criminal character of the parents.

This quote makes clear that it was certainly not the case that all children in orphanages and other institutions were 'orphans' in the technical sense.

Joanna Penglase's book about growing up in 'care' in New South Wales is titled *Orphans of the living*, and she points out that

all children who are removed from parents – by whatever means and for whatever reasons – suffer the same feelings of grief and loss; they suffer as all children do who lose their parents.

The term 'single orphan' was often used to describe children whose fathers had died, and the term double orphan meant children who had lost both parents. Welfare workers in Victoria in the mid-twentieth century used the term 'orphans of the living' to differentiate between 'real orphans' and the circumstances of other children in care. Welfare workers in Victoria in the mid-twentieth century used the term 'orphans of the living' to differentiate between 'real orphans' and the circumstances of other children in care.

This particular, misleading use of the term 'orphan' in the child welfare system is one factor contributing to many Care Leavers' sense of bewilderment about their childhood experiences.

The Forgotten Australians Report stated how many children had been lied to, and incorrectly told they were orphans, only to discover the existence of one or two living parents later in life. Other children wrongly assumed they were orphans, as many children in 'care' were given very little information about their families.

'Ken', a former resident of [St Nicholas' Boys' Home](#), spoke of how he had been misled to believe he was an 'orphan':

The Mission had forgot to tell me I had a family, four sisters, a father, mother, who had separated. My guess is that other boys – and girls – in the orphanage might have felt the same – that they were orphans also (Monk & Donoghue, 1994).

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Related Glossary Terms

- [Orphanage \(1830s - 1950s\)](#)

Resources

- James Jenkinson Consulting, [Guide to Out-of-Home Care Services 1940-2000 - Volume Two: Data Base](#), November 2001

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