

# Letter-Writing Tips

Juna Amagara children are very grateful and consider themselves blessed to have sponsors who love them and write to them. The children are touched by the affection you express in your letters and the prayers you share with them. Sponsored children regularly pray for their sponsors. You invest in their lives, and they consider you family. Write as if you are.

## Before You Start

### Learn About Your Child

A child's culture provides insight into who they are. Learning about the geography, community structure, social beliefs, and the country history will give you a better understanding of your child's background.

## The Basics of Good Letter Writing

### Keep your messages positive.

Your tone should be warm and friendly. Take special care when discussing death or illness, and be sensitive to your child's living conditions. It may be discouraging to speak or send pictures of **material possessions**. Instead, make each letter an educational experience for the child, and **focus on happy news**, such as:

- Describe your family (e.g., where they live, what they look like, their interests, type of work they do, pets, etc.).
- Include a small paper gift — photos, postcards, bookmarks, greeting cards, etc.
- Explain your profession or a hobby.
- Describe a special holiday or family custom.
- Talk about what life is like in your town.
- Share your favorite Bible stories and verses.
- Elaborate on your church and the various ways you serve Christ.
- Remind your child that you pray for him or her regularly. Mention specific items your child has mentioned in his or her letters.
- Explain how your family includes your sponsored child in daily life (e.g., praying for him or her or displaying his or her photo in your home).
- Share your prayer requests and praise reports.
- Express what a privilege it is to be your child's sponsor.
- Affirm that God loves him or her and has a great plan for his or her life.
- Draw something for them - or have your children or a little neighborhood friend draw a picture
- Send a map of your country and mark where you live
- Discuss a person who influenced you.
- They like when you pray for them and ask them to pray for you in return.
- They love when you express your love for them and declare a blessing on their lives. And when you encourage them to study hard.
- Encourage your child to write back and/or draw pictures for you.
- Include a verse:
  - about God's provision for the future (Jeremiah 29:11)
  - about God's love for us (John 3:16)
  - the value of each child (Psalm 139:13-14)
  - or loving one another (1 John 4:7)
  - about the power of prayer (Matthew 21:22)
  - about the importance of learning (Proverbs 4:13)



*"I like that my sponsor is still writing to me and that he and everybody else is fine. I always hear terrible international news and I am so relieved to hear from my sponsor and to know that he is OK."*

## Give the child lots of encouragement.

Being able to write to you is a major triumph for many children, and finding time to write can be a challenge. To encourage your sponsored child:

- Comment on any progress you learn your child has made, such as in schoolwork, in a performance or even in the child's letter-writing.
- Be generous with genuine compliments. Praise the child's talents or skills that you've discovered ("you are a good writer," "you are a good helper") or the child's accomplishments ("your grades were very good," "you must be a very good soccer player," "your drawing is very colorful and happy"). Your words will boost your sponsored child's self-esteem and be a daily reminder that someone cares.
- Challenge your child to try something new or difficult and then write to you about it. Avoid "correcting" the child or criticizing.

## What topics should I avoid?

A caring heart very rarely offends, so be at ease when you write. The following are simply a few suggestions and precautions to bear in mind when writing to a child in a foreign country. It's best to avoid writing about material possessions and other topics that emphasize the difference between your culture and the child's situation, but take every opportunity to encourage your sponsored child to work hard and perform well in school.

In general, avoid:

- Discussing the material aspects of your life (e.g., the size of your home or the kind of car you drive).
- Sending photos that show your possessions.
- Sharing your home address, e-mail address or telephone numbers.
- Suggesting your child come for a visit or promising that you'll send a particular gift.
- Using colloquialisms and slang.
- Asking questions that are embarrassing or too sensitive to children, such as why the child failed a subject, body image, death or an absent father.
- Take special care in discussing death or sickness. Again, keep in mind the age of the child when writing.
- Many cultures don't share or understand our practice of owning pets. In places where food is scarce, animals are often viewed as competition for valuable supplies of food. This doesn't mean you can't mention your pet, but it is something to consider.
- Be careful with your wording. "My dear" and "Love" are too intimate for some cultures.



## Please do not:

- **Please do not include your address or email address anywhere in the body of the letter. We wish to protect you from unsolicited requests for money or other support**
- Please do not send money.

## Asking Questions

*"I love how my sponsor feels about me. I like that he loves me."*

Strike a balance between telling the child about yourself and asking questions of your child.

## Ask open-ended questions.

A child will find it much easier to start and maintain a dialogue if you provide the material first. Ask for descriptions, thoughts and ideas. Examples of good open-ended questions and statements include:

- What do you do on a normal day?
- What games or activities do you enjoy?
- What is your favorite way to spend an afternoon?
- Tell me about someone that has made your life better.
- Will you send me a drawing of your home or village?
- Who are the people that live with you?

*"I love when she writes 'God be with you and your family' and when she tells me she is praying for me. I thank her so much for this!"*

- What are your favorite holidays? How do you celebrate them?
- What are your favorite subjects in school and why?
- Tell me about your favorite places.

Other items to discuss:

- happy memories
- hopes and dreams
- qualities your child likes about himself or herself
- sports, cooking and chores

"I love when she writes 'God be with you and your family' and when she tells me she is praying for me. I thank her so much for this!"

## Make It Fun

As you correspond with your sponsored child, he or she will become more open to sharing with you. Knowing that someone is interested may spark longer letters. Build on past letters and maintain an open dialogue.

Here are some ideas:

- Write a story together.
- Send the child fun and educational materials, such as origami paper and instructions, or flash cards that translate words from their language to yours.
- Share funny stories.
- Start a game by mail.
- Share what you are reading and learning. Children observe how adults live and manage their lives and sponsored children can learn from you by what you share in your letters.
- Make "All About Me" cards with space to answer preprinted questions that you both answer.
- Photographs enable you both to comment on the same things, people and events.
- Try to obtain translations and revisions of classic stories in your child's language.



## Sending Gifts

**Want to include something "special" for your sponsored child? Think *flat*.**

Children cherish the little gifts and fun extras you add to your letters, but **bulky objects cause difficulties** and create problems with customs officials. Make sure that anything you include is **flat, lightweight and not easily broken**. Avoid items that can melt.

"Envelope add-ins" include:

- family photographs
- drawings
- stickers
- paper dolls
- postcards
- poems or stories
- coloring book pages
- birthday cards
- origami paper
- stationary
- preprinted pages for children to fill out

"I like how my sponsor sees me, his attitude and feelings towards me, his encouraging comments all the time. I like that he receives my letters, responds to my questions, and prays for my prayer requests. I really appreciate my sponsor and his family."

To minimize the possibility that mail will be lost or stolen, make it appear to have less worth to those who may be interested in its contents. Never include anything of value, **use plain manila or white envelopes**, and keep external writing **non-descript**.

# Some Important Things to Remember

## Can I ask if my child believes in Christ or is a Christian?

Yes. Juna Amagara is a Christ-centered, ministry. However, a child does not have to be Christian to benefit from the program.

In our Child Sponsorship Program, each child has the opportunity to hear the gospel in an age-appropriate and culturally relevant way. However neither the children nor their families are obligated to become Christians.

Your letters and questions offer another opportunity for your child to hear the gospel and demonstrate faith in action.

## How do I ask personal or sensitive questions, like those related to health, without offending the child or his or her family?

Discussing personal issues requires great sensitivity, particularly when communicating through letters and across cultures, and when the questions deal with health matters, which can often carry strong cultural stigmas.

Whether or not you should ask a particular question depends on your relationship with the child and the nature of the question. If you are uncertain, please consider delaying the question until you have built a stronger relationship with the child or have a better understanding of the culture.

Invite your child into a deeply personal relationship by modeling trust and honesty. Share with your child first. Allow him or her to see your courage and to take the first step.

Remember you are a mentor. Show your child you care by being patient, open, inviting and, most important, involved.

## Can I send photographs to my child?

Certainly! Photographs are not as common in the developing world as they are in the United States, they are particularly valued. A photograph of you, the caring person from another part of the world, adds another dimension to your relationship; it personalizes your correspondence and helps deepen the connection the child makes with you.

We recommend you send a picture of yourself in the first letter and lots of pictures after that. You can send landscape photos, artistic pictures, pictures of your pets, the town you live in, your family and friends, etc.

Please avoid sending pictures that may accentuate the economic differences between you and your child (e.g., homes, cars, etc.). Be especially aware of what is in the photo's background.

If you happen to send a photo that our country staff considers inappropriate, we will return it to you.

Please remember to include your sponsor number and your sponsored child's name and number on each item you send.

## What should I expect from the letters I receive?

Please do not expect a pen-pal relationship. Your child is living and learning under circumstances much different from those in the United States.

Sometimes letters are written as part of a class exercise and may seem a little impersonal or formal. Additionally, cultural differences may cause your child's letters to seem excessively pious or grateful.

Your sponsorship is an opportunity to mentor your child. As your relationship slowly develops, your consistent presence fosters trust and tells your child "I care about you and want to be a part of your life." Your relationship should improve over time, as your child matures and learns to write more personal letters.



**"I like it when my sponsor tells me how her children are doing in school; it encourages me to work hard not to let her down."**



## Are my letters really that important?

Yes. Your letters are life-changing. They matter as much as your financial generosity.

A child who understands his or her true value to God has taken the first step in overcoming poverty. The easiest way for you to help your child take that step is to be involved in his or her life by writing letters.

As a sponsor you are in a position to model Christ's love. Your letters establish you as a significant person in your child's life. You are acting as a mentor.

Sponsored children treasure every letter they receive, and many children read their letters repeatedly, eagerly sharing them with visitors. Even into adulthood graduates emphasize the importance and influence their sponsors' letters had in their lives. Regardless of cultural and age differences, everyone grows stronger with consistent messages of love and support.

Furthermore, letters are an important part of your child's development. Exchanging letters improves your child's basic literacy skills and his or her self-awareness and ability to put thoughts and feelings into words.

Also keep in mind that topics you consider uninteresting, or that you feel you've discussed before, are viewed differently by a child in the developing world.

Every single day poverty tells children, "You don't matter." But that is a lie, and your letters demonstrate that. They say, "You do matter, Suzana." "I care about you, Renato." "Jesus loves you, Lerionga."

## Why do my child's letters seem impersonal?

Communicating between cultures is difficult. This is especially true with written communication. It becomes even more apparent when the written communication is between an adult and a child in different cultures.

Many children in developing countries can't imagine that anyone would be interested in the details of their lives (e.g., how tall they are or how much they weigh). They may not think the sponsor really wants to know, or it may be considered vain to discuss personal things.

A child may be reluctant to open up because sharing is emotionally risky or the child may fear a cultural stigma or repercussions. However, children are encouraged to discuss their faith and to share what is happening in their lives and the lives of their families.

Developing trust in a relationship is difficult enough without having to cross cultural, geographic and age boundaries. Your consistent letters and your messages of love and support are invaluable and immeasurable. Your words of encouragement give inspiration and hope to a soul living with despair and rejection. As a mentor, your letters plant seeds that will bear fruit in your child's life and in the lives of your child's family and friends.

"Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop — a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown." — Matthew 13:8, NIV

## Why doesn't my child answer my questions?

Many children in the developing world don't immediately grasp the concept of "conversations" by mail and must be trained to develop the skill. Your love, understanding and encouragement should help you see progress over time as the child's writing skills mature.

Often, when a child receives a letter from his sponsor, he takes it home to show his family and then saves it in a "special place." Several weeks later, the center staff schedule a time for children to write letters to their sponsors and the children may not have the last letters with them and may not be able to remember the questions that were asked.

Frequently, a center worker or teacher will sit down with a younger child and write on the child's behalf. Questions can sometimes be overlooked or forgotten because of this.

*"I like it when my sponsor wishes me the best in my studies and when she prays for me."*

**The most important thing is that you care enough to keep in touch with your sponsored child. Remember that we all grow in our relationships through repeated interactions. By exchanging correspondence with your sponsored child, you build a person-to-person bond that can mean a lot to each of you.**