

## GLOBAL GUIDANCE

Determined to give every child opportunities in life, **Amy Stokes** founded **Infinite Family** to pair orphans in South Africa with mentors from around the world. *By Heather Salerno*



After adopting her son from Africa, Amy Stokes wanted to help more kids.

### Child care

Amy Stokes knew the numbers: An estimated 43 million children in sub-Saharan Africa had lost parents, mostly to AIDS and other diseases, in 2003. That was the main reason she and her husband, Chris, decided to adopt their son, Calder, from South Africa after their daughter, Maya, was born. Yet Amy wasn't prepared for the region's staggering number of orphans when they arrived in Johannesburg that year. "We saw groups of kids on the streets, on the roads, just wandering around," she says. "It's a quiet tragedy."

### Adult supervision

Some of the children were lucky enough to live in orphanages that provide food, shelter and other basic needs, as Calder did. Even so, staffs are limited. "It was absolutely clear that these kids weren't going to have enough role models to help them learn to be self-sufficient, self-reliant adults," Amy says.

### Tech crunch

Before Amy, 47, left for her trip, she came across a webcam advertisement. It sparked the idea of using videoconferencing to connect South African youngsters with mentors from

across the globe. When she returned home to New York City, Amy shared her thoughts with a fellow mom whose husband had worked on an Internet-based education network, and he soon signed on as technology manager. Another mother developed a training program to teach mentors about South Africa's history and culture, while a neighbor spearheaded South African-themed fundraising events. In addition, foundations like the Rockefeller Brothers Fund supplied generous grants.

### Pair up

Since its launch in 2006, Infinite Family has paired more than 600 children with more than 400 volunteers in 15 countries and 37 U.S. states. Kids spend at least 30 minutes each week with mentors on an Internet platform called Ezomndeni ("everything related to

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family” in Zulu) Net from community-based mentoring labs in South Africa. The secure system allows them to do homework together, share photos and discuss school or career goals. Often mentors simply listen. “They're building a very strong, trusting relationship,” says Amy. “Many of our mentors and teens stay together for years.”

### Future perfect

Amy was devoting so much time to Infinite Family that Chris quit his job at a private equity firm in 2007 to

become a stay-at-home dad to Maya, now 14, Calder, 12, and Adia, 7. To cut back on expenses, the family moved to a more affordable suburban community. Amy earns a modest salary but puts much of it back into the nonprofit to help it grow. Although Infinite Family now serves 200 children, for Amy that's still the beginning. “What I want for all of Africa's children is what I want for my own children,” she says. “The ability and opportunity to create their future.”

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To make a donation or get involved, visit [infinitefamily.org](http://infinitefamily.org).