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A photograph of a man and a woman in a rural, hilly landscape. The man, on the left, is wearing a yellow and blue long-sleeved shirt and yellow rubber boots. He is smiling and looking up at a young child being held by the woman. The woman, on the right, is wearing a blue long-sleeved shirt and a patterned skirt. She is also smiling and looking up at the child. The child is wearing a red and white striped shirt and red pants. In the background, there are green hills, trees, and a few other people walking in the distance. A large woven basket is visible on the ground in the bottom right corner.

Strengthening families to prevent family separation in Eastern and Southern Africa

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Introduction

Growing up in a safe and loving family is widely seen as vital for child development and wellbeing by policymakers, children, and caregivers.¹ The family is described in the Convention on the Rights of the Child as the best environment for children to achieve their rights.² Preventing separation from families is also prioritised in the African Union Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child³ and the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, welcomed by the United Nations in 2009.⁴

Despite these acknowledgements of the need to keep children in their families, there remains a lack of clarity on exactly how this can be achieved. In this paper, evidence primarily from Eastern and Southern Africa is pooled to outline the main components of strategies to prevent separation. It is argued that the effective prevention of separation rests on a strong care system that delivers holistic services and supports to families. The paper is aimed at policymakers and programme managers designing and delivering care reform policies,

strategies, and programmes. Although the paper focuses on preventing separation, many of the findings around family strengthening also apply to foster care, child headed households, and the reintegration of separated children.

Following on from this introduction, the paper begins with an explanation of the scope of the paper and definitions of the key concepts used. The paper then describes the case for focusing on preventing separation in further detail and explores the factors that commonly lead to family separation in Eastern and Southern Africa. The paper has three sections exploring how to prevent separation. The first outlines the principles and approaches required to prevent family separation. The second looks at the enabling environment or care system needed for the effective prevention of separation. The third explores the service and support required to prevent separation. The conclusion summarises the key findings and recommendations emerging from the paper.

The scope of this paper and key concepts used

The family can be defined as:

“... a socially constructed concept that may include children who live with one or both biological parents or are cared for in various other arrangements, such as living with grandparents or extended family members, with siblings in child- or youth-led households, or in foster care or alternative care arrangements.”⁵

A family includes those within the ‘caring circle’ of the child – those that can care for children to meet their emotional and psychological needs. This usually includes those related by blood or marriage, though it is recognised that perceptions of who is part of the family vary by context, culture and family circumstance⁶ In Eastern and Southern Africa, it is rare for a child to be raised by a parent or parents alone, and older siblings, grandparents and other relatives often play a key role⁷ Children separated from parents but being cared for by the extended family or friends of the family are in kinship care, which is defined as:

“Family-based care within the child’s extended family or with close friends of the family known to the child, whether formal or informal in nature.”⁸

These kinship care arrangements sit within the scope of this paper. Although children in foster care and in child headed households are also considered to be in a family, strategies to support these arrangements are not the focus of this paper. This paper uses the term ‘preventing family separation’ to cover policies and interventions that stop the child from becoming separated from their parents or from other family members caring for them.

The term family strengthening refers to:

“Programmes, strategic approaches and deliberate processes of empowering families with the necessary capacities, opportunities, networks, relationships and access to services and resources to promote and build resilience and the active engagement of parents, caregivers, children, youth and other family members in decisions that affect the family’s life.”⁹

Family strengthening aims to promote family-based care by preventing separation through building the resilience of families.

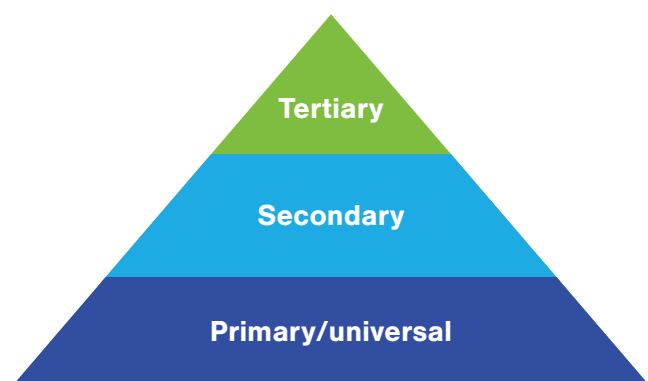
This paper explores family strengthening to prevent separation, which can include efforts to prevent family breakdown and child abuse and neglect which are both causes of separation. Family strengthening can also be used to support foster care, child headed households, and the reintegration of children back into families and many of the findings from this paper will be useful for these purposes. However, fully outlining necessary supports for foster care, child headed households and reintegration is beyond the scope of this paper.

Family strengthening interventions can be delivered at three levels:¹⁰

- **Primary/universal.** Targeted to an entire population or population sub-group, this level of family strengthening seeks to provide support before major problems occur within families. For example, providing access to child sensitive social protection, creating awareness of the need to protect children from violence, widely targeted efforts to enhance parenting skills, or campaigns to change social norms that lead to family separation.
- **Secondary.** This is targeted at communities or families where there is high risk of separation to prevent problems from escalating. It may include, for example, targeted awareness raising, home visits, respite care, family or individual counselling, offering parenting programmes alongside social protection, and some forms of case management support.
- **Tertiary.** This involves specialised interventions aimed at families experiencing acute crisis likely to lead to imminent separation or breakdown. For example, intensive social worker support using case management alongside the interventions described at the secondary level.

Whilst child protection actors often focus on secondary and tertiary prevention, some argue that primary prevention should be prioritised. Primary prevention stops children from being harmed, and children and families from needing more intensive and expensive support.¹¹

Figure 1 The three levels of family strengthening



Care systems refer to the legal and policy framework, structures and resources that determine and deliver alternative care, prevent family separation, and support families to care for children well. Care reform is strategies and processes designed to improve the care system.¹² Care reform is part of efforts to improve broader child protection systems, which can be defined as:

“Formal and informal structures, functions and capacities that have been assembled to prevent and respond to violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation of children.”¹³

Why strengthen families to prevent family separation?

International, regional and national legal frameworks highlight the importance of preventing separation from parents and other family caregivers and enabling children to grow up in nurturing and protective families (see Box 1 and Box 5 for examples).

When asked about priorities for their wellbeing, children commonly emphasise being within a safe and loving family.¹⁴ In many cases, families want to care for

children, and separation is an act of desperation when there are limited other choices open to them to ensure child wellbeing and development.¹⁵

There is a large body of evidence on the harm caused to children by separation.¹⁶ Preventing family separation is also widely seen to be more cost effective in the short and long term than providing alternative care or supporting the reintegration of separated children.¹⁷



BOX 1

The importance of preventing family separation and family strengthening in international and regional policies and guidance

The preamble to the Convention on the Rights of the Child¹⁸ states that:

“The child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding.”

Article 5 of the Convention describes the responsibility of parents to promote children’s rights and recognises that extended family or community members may also be caregivers.

Article 18 of **The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child**¹⁹ states that:

“The family shall be the natural unit and basis of society. It shall enjoy the protection and support of the State for its establishment and development.”

Article 19 states that:

“Every child shall be entitled to the enjoyment of parental care and protection and shall, whenever possible, have the right to reside with his or her parents. No child shall be separated from his parents against his will, except when a judicial authority determines in accordance with the appropriate law, that such separation is in the best interest of the child.”

Article 20 outlines the responsibilities of governments to enable families to care for children well, including through material assistance, access to services,

and support in the “performance of child-rearing.”

Article 3 of the **Guidelines for the alternative care of children**²⁰ states that:

“The family being the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth, well-being and protection of children, efforts should primarily be directed to enabling the child to remain in or return to the care of his/her parents, or when appropriate, other close family members. The State should ensure that families have access to forms of support in the caregiving role.”

The **Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action Minimum Standards**²¹ state that a core goal of child protection interventions in emergencies should be to ensure that:

“Family separation is prevented, and unaccompanied and separated children receive care and protection in timely, safe, appropriate and accessible ways in accordance with their rights and best interests.”²²

In 2022, **Commonwealth states developed the Kigali Declaration on children’s care**.²³ This includes a commitment to tackle the underlying causes of inadequate care and develop holistic approaches to promote family strengthening.

UNICEF’s global child protection strategy²⁴ stipulates that successful child protection begins with prevention. The prevention of family separation is one of UNICEF’s thematic priorities.²⁵

Factors that lead to family separation

Evidence from Eastern and Southern Africa, and globally, suggests causes of separation are usually complex and it is rare for just one factor, such as poverty, to be responsible for family separation.²⁶ Separation can also be prevented by ‘protective factors.’ These are the strengths within individuals, families or communities that can mitigate risks and help families

deal with difficult situations.²⁷ Both risk and protective factors exist at the level of the society, community, family, and child.²⁸ Factors differ greatly by context and programmes to prevent separation should draw on local research that seeks to understand drivers of separation in each setting. Table 1 provides examples of common risk and protective factors in the region.

Table 1 Risk and protective factors that affect family separation²⁹

	Risk factor	Protective factor
Society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poor socio-economic policies and social protection strategies (which affect levels of poverty). Inadequate investment in protection and care services. Inappropriate investment in protection and care services – for example, services that do not prioritise prevention or support to families or fail to stop recruitment into residential care by care providers. Inappropriate or inadequate investments in education, physical and mental health services, and services for children and adults with disabilities – all drivers of separation. Inadequate strategies to address the causes of harmful practices and the exploitation of children, affecting the numbers of children pushed out of families and into marriage, child labour/trafficking or a life on the streets. Climate change and the consequent prevalence and severity of conflict and disasters. This is already leading to rising levels of planned and unplanned separations, and affects multiple drivers of separation, including poverty and access to services. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social protection, education, mental and physical health programmes targeted at vulnerable groups (see for example Box 12). Care reform strategies that prioritise prevention and family-based care (see for Box 5 for examples). Effective child protection systems that address violence against children. Climate change and disaster preparedness and response plans (particularly if they focus directly on preventing family separation).
Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social acceptability of the use of residential care, which can be actively encouraged by care providers. Social norms supportive of harmful practices or the exploitation of children. Stigma and discrimination against certain groups, including children with disabilities or young, single, or unmarried parents. Social networks weakened by discrimination, urbanisation, or conflict (leading to isolation). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong social norms around the importance of the family and mutual responsibility for child rearing. Strong social support networks. Services and support for families provided by community-based organisations and religious leaders, groups, or organisations. Community members or leaders and religious groups or leaders that challenge harmful social norms.
Family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Violence against children, child abuse or neglect. Gender-based/intimate partner violence. Household poverty – which can directly lead to separation if families are too poor to feed children and indirectly affect separation by exacerbating other causes, such as access to education. It should be noted that global guidance states that poverty should not be used as a justification for children being separated from their families by courts or social workers. Nonetheless, children are sent away to residential care or work because families feel they cannot meet their basic needs. Death, ill-health, disability, migration, or disappearance of parents or other caregivers. Divorce or separation of parents, and remarriage and discrimination by step-parents. Unwanted pregnancy or pregnancy outside of marriage. Young parents struggling to care for children. Drug or alcohol abuse by parents or caregivers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Caregiver resilience and capacity to manage stress and deal with adversity. Strong caregiving skills, including non-violent disciplining. Lack of behavioural challenges amongst children due to positive family and child interactions that help children regulate their emotions. Strong support from the extended families.
Child	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gender, age, and other characteristics of the child. Depending on the characteristics, this can both increase and reduce levels of separation. Level of agency – which can increase separation if the child chooses to leave the family and reduce separation if the child chooses to remain in the family. Disability of the child, generally a risk factor leading to separation. 	

Principles in strategies to prevent family separation

All strategies to prevent family separation must **take a strengths-based, empowering approach**, that identifies and builds on strengths within children, families and communities.³⁰ This means emphasising the protective factors that can reduce the likelihood of separation, rather focusing exclusively on risk.³¹ Children and families should be enabled to develop the knowledge and capacities to prevent family separation.³² In applying this core principle, the following principles are also important.

- **Use a child-centred approach that focuses on the best interests of the child.** Make all decisions with the best interests of the child as the primary consideration.³³ This includes recognising that although families are usually the right place for children to grow up in, temporary separation may sometimes be in children's best interests if they are at risk of harm. In line with global guidance, children should always be kept with siblings, providing it is in their best interests.³⁴
- **Do no harm.** Efforts to strengthen families should not expose families or children to further risks, vulnerabilities, or harm. Always ensure that decisions, further care arrangements or policies are in the best interests of the child.³⁵
- **Enable child and caregiver participation.** Involve children and caregivers in decisions that affect them. Consult them in programme design and evaluation and policy development to help ensure relevance and quality.³⁶ Children and caregivers can also play a key role in campaigning for more supports to families.³⁷ Disempowered vulnerable and marginalised groups need support to participate.³⁸ For example, discrimination against children and adults with disabilities may mean that efforts are needed to ensure that their voices are heard.³⁹
- **Understand and build on wider family and community supports.** In Eastern and Southern Africa, most responses to inadequate care and violence against children take place within families and communities, with no engagement of the state or civil society.⁴⁰ It is vital to understand and build on these less formal aspects of the care system to enhance the role of extended families and communities in preventing family separation.⁴¹ For example, as discussed below, existing networks can be strengthened by supporting self-help groups (see Box 3).
- **Ensure that all family strengthening programmes have a strong focus on disability.** Disability of adults and children is a major driver of separation in the region.⁴² Effective family strengthening programmes must seek to understand why disability leads to separation in each context, and to support families affected by disability. It is important to recognise that there are a wide range of different forms of disabilities, experiences, and vulnerabilities.⁴³
- **Promote gender equality.** This means, for example, addressing the gender-based and intimate partner violence that can lead to family separation, encouraging men to play a role in caregiving (see Box 2) and ensuring women and girls can participate meaningfully in programme design and implementation.⁴⁴



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BOX 2**Gender transformative parenting**

UNICEF promote gender transformative parenting as part of strategies to prevent family separation and protect children from violence, abuse, neglect, and harmful practices.⁴⁵ Gender transformative parenting aims to promote positive gender norms to transform power structures in future generations.⁴⁶ Strategies to achieve this goal include:

family-friendly and gender sensitive policies; work to end harmful practices in the home; encouraging father's engagement in parenting; and the training of parents and frontline workers.⁴⁷

In Rwanda, the Bandebereho couples intervention engages men in 15 participatory group

discussions, and their partners in eight of these sessions. The discussions cover issues such as gender and power, fatherhood and caregiving, couple communication and intimate partner violence. The programme aims to challenge gender inequalities which are reinforced through everyday interactions in the home. An evaluation of the programme shows that male participants were around half as likely to use violence against female partners compared to non-participants, and to spend longer on household chores. The programme is run by the Rwandan Men's Resource Centre and is part of the MenCare+ programme coordinated by Rutgers and Promundo.⁴⁸

- **Develop context, family, and child specific solutions.**

As the drivers of separation vary by context so too must the response; there are no one size fits all interventions.⁴⁹ Base programmes, policies, and guidance on locally gathered evidence. As well as each context being different, each family and child is also unique. When responses include intensive, individualised work at the level of the child or family, these must be tailored to their specific needs.⁵⁰ For example, the support needs of a biological parent are often different from those of a kinship carer. Within kinship care, support needs vary greatly depending

on factors such as the nature of the relationship between child and carer and the age and level of experience of the carer.⁵¹

- **Focus on sustainability.** Ensure that benefits to children and families last beyond the project or programme by building self-reliance.⁵² Strengthen the entire child protection and care system (see section below on enabling environment) to ensure sustainable and wide-reaching change. This must include an emphasis on working with government to strengthen care systems.⁵³

Creating an enabling environment to prevent family separation

A strong care system is the precondition for effective family strengthening services and support. This system should be focused on reducing risks and building protective factors within individuals, families, and communities, recognising their inherent strengths. The care system has multiple components which are listed below. In addition, the care system also provides services to families and children, which are described in the next section. The care system is part of the wider child protection system, and a strong care system is contingent on a strong child protection system.⁵⁴

Similarly, improvements to the care system, and to family strengthening specifically, can enhance the entire child protection system.⁵⁵

Data collection and monitoring

To design or improve efforts to prevent separation, evidence is needed on the causes and extent of separation, and the existence and effectiveness of services and support to strengthen families.⁵⁶ This requires research on the reasons for separation, mapping of services, and the monitoring and evaluation of interventions. A

combination of qualitative and quantitative data is usually required to understand the scale and complexity of family separation and the effectiveness of responses.⁵⁷

Participatory approaches that enable vulnerable children and families to come together and share knowledge and problem solve can contribute to family strengthening (see Box 3 for an example from Zimbabwe).⁵⁸

Administrative data, such as that generated by case management processes or the routine administration of care services, can enhance the understanding of family separation.⁵⁹ For example, tracking the number of children placed into residential care can be used to assess whether rates are increasing or declining. If

this data is disaggregated by age, gender, disability, and location it can shed light on factors that may be influencing these trends.

For monitoring programmes, it is important to regularly assess core indicators on outcomes of family strengthening interventions. This should include monitoring changes in protective factors to determine if these have been enhanced. For example, assessing the extent to which caregivers feel more confident in their parenting skills, feel that they have family and social support to deal with stressful situations, or have improved livelihood skills. Where they exist, national indicators established by governments should be used.

BOX 3

Consulting families in programme design and the use of peer-to-peer support groups in Zimbabwe⁶⁰

In Zimbabwe, the Farm Orphan Support Trust (FOST) carry out community dialogues to identify support needs for vulnerable families. Communities are asked to describe barriers to children reaching their full potential. They are then encouraged to develop community level response plans to address these threats to wellbeing. FOST may offer some assistance in implementing these plans but have found that they are more sustainable if led by the community.

FOST have also established peer support groups for vulnerable grandparent caregivers. These groups provide livelihoods support and give emotional and caregiving support to members. Grandmothers

come together to discuss the challenges they are facing and resolve them together. Common issues discussed include how to positively discipline children, sex and sexuality amongst teenagers, and violence against children (including gender-based violence and online exploitation). Although the groups are very much led by the grandmothers, FOST social workers provide insights, training, case management support, and referrals to other services where needed. For example, informing grandmothers that teenage girls tend to have sex at much earlier ages than in the past, and providing information on sexual and reproductive health services.

BOX 4

Monitoring family strengthening in the Skillful parenting programme in Tanzania⁶¹

In Tanzania, a randomised cluster-controlled trial has been used to evaluate a programme designed to reduce violence against children, a driver of family separation. This involved randomly allocating 248 families from eight villages to:

- participate in parenting programmes,
- receive livelihoods support,
- participate in parenting programmes and receive livelihoods support, or
- receive no support at all.

A combination of methods was used to assess outcomes, including reports from parents and children and observations by professionals. The findings showed that parenting programmes reduced violence against children, with or without the livelihoods component. However, livelihoods support alone was associated with increased physical abuse.

Policies, strategies, and guidance

The national legislative and policy framework should include a strong commitment to children's right to live in families. Policies and legislation should also outline the key components of efforts to prevent family separation, including for children with disabilities.⁶² Guidance on prevention is needed for social work case management.⁶³ As the causes of separation often relate to other sectors, preventing separation should also be highlighted in policies, strategies, and guidance outside of the child protection and care sector. Of relevance are

policies, strategies and guidance related to disability, health, education, social protection, and disaster/climate change preparedness and response.⁶⁴ Efforts to prevent separation should never stop at the development of policies, strategies, and guidance; implementation is vital.⁶⁵ Effective implementation requires the other components of the care system to be operational, including a strong workforce, coordination mechanisms and services for children and families. Box 5 provides examples of how preventing family separation is covered in Kenya's policies, strategies, and guidance.

BOX 5

Preventing family separation in Kenya's care reform policies, strategy and guidance

Article 11 of The Children Act of 2022⁶⁶ states that every child has the right to parental care and protection and children should only be separated from parents if this is in their best interests.

The Guidelines for the alternative family care of children in Kenya (2014)⁶⁷ explain why preventing family separation should be prioritised and outline the policies and programmes that are needed to strengthen families. These include case management and gatekeeping, maternal care services, especially for vulnerable new mothers, educational support, day care services, health care, parenting courses and training, legal supports, assistance for children with disabilities, community outreach and home visiting, encouraging child participation and positive decision making, and social protection.

The vision of the ten-year National Care Reform Strategy for Children in Kenya (2022–2032)⁶⁸ is that:

*"All children and young people in Kenya live safely, happily and sustainably in family and community-based care where their best interests are served."*⁶⁹

An objective of the strategy is:

*"To increase high-quality and accessible services to strengthen families and prevent them from separating so that the best interests of children and young people are served."*⁷⁰

The strategy outlines in detail how these goals will be achieved through improvements to gatekeeping and social services, and legal and policy frameworks and services related to:

- social protection,
- child trafficking,
- refugee and asylum-seeking children,
- physical and mental health,
- education, and
- awareness raising around abuse and neglect.

The strategy makes explicit the need to prioritise children with disabilities in family strengthening, including through the following.

- Campaigns to tackle false information about and stigma against children with disabilities.
- The registration of children with disabilities to ensure targeted services can be appropriately planned and directed.
- Services for children with disabilities and their caregivers, including respite care, inclusive day care services, peer support groups, enhanced cash transfers, and specialised community-based rehabilitation and health services.
- Capacity building of social workers in relation to disability.



Coordination and collaboration

Preventing family separation requires coordination across multiple sectors. Within each of these sectors, contributions are needed from a range of government agencies, NGOs, community-based organisations, and faith-based organisations. Community and religious leaders also often play a key role. Coordinating the activities of all these actors is vital to ensure interventions reach vulnerable children and families across the country, and to avoid the duplication of activities.⁷¹ Ways to promote effective coordination and collaboration include the following⁷²

- Establishing multi-sectoral coordination bodies at the national level, to coordinate strategies and promote collaboration, and at sub-national level for joint planning of interventions and problem solving.
- Mapping of relevant services across sectors to improve joint planning and improve referrals between different actors.
- Outlining clear roles and responsibilities in policies, strategies, and guidance, and establishing accountability mechanisms to ensure that different actors fulfil stated roles and responsibilities. This includes having one clear lead agency or ministry who can ensure momentum and compliance.
- Joint planning of interventions, and joint capacity building on family strengthening. This should happen both at the national level, to ensure that all actors have a similar understanding of the key components of family strengthening, and locally, to promote shared delivery.

Box 6 provides examples of effective national coordination strategies to scale up parenting interventions in Botswana and Namibia.

BOX 6**Developing country-wide parenting/caregiver supports in Namibia and Botswana⁷³**

With UNICEF support, the government of Namibia is in the process of developing a parenting strategy. This is based on evidence including a survey on violence against children and a country-wide mapping of parenting support interventions. This work is being coordinated by an inter-agency group which includes representatives from the Ministries of Health and Social Services, Gender Equity, Poverty Reduction and Social Welfare, and Education. The strategy will cover various areas including:

- ante- and post-natal support to teenage mothers,
- mental health services and support for parents and caregivers,
- support to avoid malnutrition, especially in early years,
- home visiting programmes,
- awareness raising campaigns including on positive discipline, and
- the development of a national parenting manual.

The manual builds on work carried out by Lifeline/Childline Namibia. It has been piloted with a range of parents in rural and urban settings, including young parents and those with disabilities. The manual is currently being revised and finalised.

Additionally, discussions are under way with universities to incorporate aspects of the manual linked to disability early identification and intervention into the training of health care professionals. Training around the manual will also be provided to social service workers, education professionals, and those working on social protection programmes.

With UNICEF support, the Government of Botswana has carried out research on parenting programmes across the country. Finding that many of these programmes have been developed outside of the country and do not meet local needs, a new parenting programme specifically for Botswana is currently being developed. The development of this programme is coordinated by a technical working group with representatives from relevant government and civil society agencies. Politicians, religious and traditional leaders, and community members across the country have been consulted to ensure buy-in and relevance. Efforts are being made to consider different groups within the country and ensure that the programme is relevant to all. Addressing social norms around violence within families is sensitive. Rather than critiquing parents/caregivers, this programme will seek to build trust and encourage success.

A strong social services workforce

Across Eastern and Southern Africa, the social services workforce consists of a mixture of professional social workers and para-professionals and community volunteers (referred to collectively in this paper as 'social service workers').⁷⁴ Para-professionals and community volunteers play a vital role in monitoring families vulnerable to separation, providing support, and making referrals to professional social workers and other service providers where children and families need specialised services (see Box 7).⁷⁵ As well outlining the importance of preventing separation, the regulatory framework should also explain the different roles and responsibilities of social service workers.⁷⁶

For social service workers to effectively contribute to family strengthening they must be properly trained, supported, and incentivised.⁷⁷ Social service workers need support and training so that they understand and are committed to:⁷⁸

- the importance of children growing up within families,
- the common causes of separation in their context, including during emergencies,
- the value of and how to use strengths-based approaches, and
- effective strategies to prevent separation, including for especially vulnerable groups such as children with disabilities.

There need to be enough social service workers at the community level with sufficient time to work closely with those families and children that require intensive support.⁷⁹

As well as the social service workforce, staff in other sectors need a mandate and capacity building in preventing family separation. This may involve adapting an existing role to integrate family strengthening approaches or ensuring that staff are sensitive to the risks of separation and can make referrals. For example, agricultural extension workers can integrate

positive parenting messages and actively support families at risk of separation in their routine work.⁸⁰ During emergencies, border guards can identify children momentarily separated from parents and reunite them.⁸¹ Staff administering social protection programmes are in regular contact with vulnerable families and can make referrals to social workers where necessary.⁸² Those working in the justice, education and health sectors, and those working on disability issues, also have key roles to play, and children's protection and care should be mainstreamed in their work.

BOX 7

The use of community volunteers to support vulnerable families in Rwanda⁸³

In Rwanda, there are two volunteer Inshuti z'Umuryango (Friends of the Family – IZU) in each village, one male and one female. These volunteers are chosen by the villagers. They form a community child protection workforce responsible for assisting in the protection of children from neglect, violence, abuse, and exploitation. This includes contributing to the prevention of family separation in several ways.

- Conducting community-based awareness raising to prevent violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation.
- Making home visits to and supporting families at risk of separation. For example, where a child is not attending school, the volunteers explore the reasons for non-attendance and liaise with schools or other service providers for support.
- Identifying children who are abused, neglected, or exploited, providing basic psychosocial support and making referrals to professional social workers and other service providers where necessary.
- Identifying and supporting children with disabilities, helping to ensure that they are included in family and community life. IZU have been specifically trained on disability

to enhance their capacity to work with these families.

- Contributing to the prevention of school drop-out and early pregnancy, by identifying and visiting at risk children and advocating with education officials for greater support.
- Referring economically vulnerable families to social protection programmes.
- Supporting case management processes by giving information to support assessments, following up on children and families under case management, and providing a link between district social workers and families where necessary.

Evaluations of the IZU programme have found that the IZU are well-known and trusted members of their communities. IZU are also respected by services providers and increasingly brought into coordination and planning meetings, hopefully enhancing the relevance of service provision.

"I would say that [IZU] are people who are near the community, they are advisers of people, when you have a problem, you go to find them, and they help you to resolve it without going far. They stay with you until your situation improves." (Parent)⁸⁴



Adequate financing

Child protection and care is massively underfunded in the Eastern and Southern Africa region.⁸⁵ Where funding is allocated to protection and care, preventing separation is not always prioritised. For example, UNICEF's recent assessment of Malawi's child protection expenditure found that most resources go to response to violence (a major cause of separation), with very little allocated to prevention.⁸⁶ A key step to preventing separation is ensuring that more is invested in key sectors such as child protection and social protection, and that the strengthening of families and prevention of separation is prioritised within these sectors. For sustainability, funding should ultimately be provided as part of national government budgets.

Governments and donors need to be made aware of the central importance of keeping children within families and encouraged to shift resources away from residential care and towards families, both at the level of national systems, and in the direct funding of residential care facilities. There remains a tendency in the region for foreign donors, particularly faith-based organisations, to fund residential care facilities rather than support families.⁸⁷ These often well-meaning individuals need to be educated to ensure their funds are more wisely spent, to appreciate the harm caused by institutional care and the need to instead use funds to empower families to care for children.

To determine how much is being spent on preventing separation and on family strengthening, it is vital to clearly define which services fit under this broad category of provision. Budget analysis in South Africa has shown the importance of clear and consistent

definitions of prevention services to allow comparisons over time and between provinces.⁸⁸ As noted above, the prevention of family separation often includes inputs from a range of sectors, including child protection, social protection, education, and health. All these services need to be considered in budget analysis. The funding of services for children and adults with disabilities should also be increased as evidence suggests that this is inadequate in the region.⁸⁹

UNICEF's [Guidelines for developing a child protection budget brief](#) provide a useful starting point for understanding how to influence public sector financing.

Supportive social norms

Social norms can be both a risk and protective factor in relation to family separation. Norms can directly encourage separation by making it socially acceptable to place a child in residential care or send them away for marriage or work.⁹⁰ Norms can also indirectly lead to separation. For example, discrimination against children with disabilities can result in placement in residential care. Social norms can mean that extended family members feel obliged to care for a child, even if they don't want to or lack the resources to look after them properly. This can lead to eventual breakdown in these arrangements.⁹¹ Inequitable gender norms can exacerbate many of the factors that lead to family separation. For example, household poverty for female headed households, gender-based violence, norms around child marriage or child labour, and restrictions on male involvement in family life and in child caring responsibilities.⁹² Box 2 provides examples of strategies to challenge inequitable gender norms.

Despite these risks, norms that promote family unity are far stronger in Eastern and Southern Africa than those that encourage separation. Across the region there are strong beliefs in the importance of children remaining in families, and being cared for by the extended family, where parents can no longer look after them.⁹³ Effective family strengthening involves highlighting, celebrating, and building on these norms. Strong beliefs about the primacy of family-based care should not be used as an excuse for under-investments in family strengthening. For example, it has been argued that governments feel they don't need to support kinship care as beliefs are so

strong that extended families will take children even with no or minimal support.⁹⁴

Social norm change can be changed in a variety of ways ranging from large national campaigns to small groups discussions. UNICEF's resource [Everybody wants to belong](#) provides helpful practical guidance on social norm change. Whatever tools are used to change norms, it is important to remember that this takes time and requires sustained investment. Box 8 provides examples of social norm change around children with disabilities in Uganda.

BOX 8

Social norm change for children with disabilities in Uganda⁹⁵

In Uganda, the NGO Ekisa have created the finding value tool for social workers, counsellors, pastors, and mentors to use with parents or caregivers who have a child with a disability. The tool helps parents and caregivers find value in their child by exploring commonly held biases, assumptions, and false beliefs around disability. Those using the tool take the parent or caregiver through a five-stage journey.

1. Ignorance: Beliefs around disability are examined and false assumptions are challenged.
2. Sympathy: Efforts are made to move away from feeling sorry for persons with disabilities towards a strengths-based approach. This focuses on the value of a child with disability

rather than the things they cannot do.

3. Care: The need for care and compassion towards persons with disabilities is explored and encouraged.
4. Relationship: Caregivers examine the relationship they have with their child and are encouraged to see beyond the 'disabled' label to build a stronger bond.
5. Advocacy: Caregivers are helped to become advocates for their child and others with disabilities in their community, ensuring that they get the services and support they need to reach their full potential.

More information can be found [here](#).

Linking development and humanitarian protection and care systems

Children are at higher risk of family separation during emergencies, and the frequency and intensity of both disasters and conflict is increasing in Eastern and Southern Africa as a result of climate change.⁹⁶ Building a strong care system during normal times builds family resilience for emergencies.⁹⁷ Interventions in emergency periods should be used to enhance the national care system, leaving behind a legacy of greater support to families.⁹⁸ It is vital to avoid creating parallel systems.⁹⁹ Experiences in Kenya suggest that this can be achieved by:¹⁰⁰

- using learning from care systems established in humanitarian contexts to inform national care systems (and vice versa);
- incorporating strategies to prevent separation during

humanitarian crisis in both disaster preparedness planning and care reform strategies;

- ensuring that care systems in humanitarian contexts both shape and reflect national policies on care;
- using social workers and community volunteers from areas close to refugee camps to support prevention and family strengthening activities; and
- engaging coordination bodies established to support care and protection at the national and local levels in family strengthening during emergencies.

It is also important to recognise that already vulnerable groups, including those with disabilities, are often particularly impacted by emergencies.¹⁰¹ For example, climate change related emergencies have been shown to have a disproportionate impact on access to water, food, and health and other services for persons with disabilities.¹⁰²

Services and support to prevent family separation

Identifying those at risk of separation

A first step in preventing family separation is to identify those at risk. For primary prevention (see figure 1), targeting can be at a national level, or focused on parts of the country or broad groups within society who are especially at risk of separation. This requires research on the drivers of separation which can then be used to:

- identify areas or broad groups with high levels of separation through the use of national data or community surveillance tools (see Box 14), and
- find out which parts of the country already separated children are from, for example, from residential care home records (see Box 9).

For secondary and tertiary prevention, specific families and children at risk of separation need to be identified. Identifying those at risk of separation may include the following.

- Using research on the factors that lead to separation to identify criteria, and then applying criteria to find specific children and families. Criteria may include, for example, elderly caregivers, previous separation within the family, high levels of poverty, or a child or

adult household member with disabilities or chronic health problems.

- Asking community child protection committees or social work volunteers to flag any children or families they are concerned about (see Box 7).
- Getting those working directly with children in other sectors (such as teachers and health care workers) to refer vulnerable children and families to social service workers.
- Identifying families at high risk of separation from those who are taking part in broader primary level prevention programmes, such as community awareness raising.¹⁰³
- Encouraging children and families who feel they are at risk of separation to seek help.

Children who have experienced violence are at higher risk of separation and social workers, including community volunteers, and others with direct contact with children may need to be trained to recognise common signs that the child is being abused or experiencing violence. Box 11 provides further details of how families with a high risk of separation can be identified.



BOX 9**Identifying children at risk of separation in Uganda¹⁰⁴**

In Uganda the USAID funded Deinstitutionalisation of Orphaned and Vulnerable Children Project (2014–2017) used a five-step process to identify at risk families to be targeted by family strengthening programmes.

1. Identified districts and subdistricts with the highest levels of institutionalisation of children.
2. Visited residential care facilities in the areas to find out where the children came from and identified 360 villages.
3. Consulted community members using participatory research tools to understand and prioritise the

risk factors that lead to separation. Six key risk factors were identified in each village for further exploration. Risk factors varied village to village.

4. Discussed these risk factors with community members to identify households who had all or some of the risk factors, or where community members felt that there was a particular risk of separation. This led to the identification of 7,176 at risk households.
5. Identified households with medium or high risk (determined by the number and type of risk factors) and visited these families to verify levels of risk.

Improving decision making around separation

Improving decision making around separation involves targeting five groups of stakeholders that commonly have a say in family separation.

- **Children:** Although children's agency is often limited, evidence shows that they can make decisions that affect their care. For example, they may choose to leave home to work, marry, or live with another family member.¹⁰⁵
- **Families:** Families can decide if a child should be sent away to marry or work or live with another family member. Families often have a role in decisions about entry into residential care, and proactively seek placements.
- **Communities:** In some cases, community or religious leaders become involved in decision making on care. For example, families may turn to them for support in deciding the best care arrangements for the child.¹⁰⁶
- **Gatekeeping bodies:** These include the courts or committees established to make decisions around children's care.
- **Residential care providers:** Although ideally all decisions around entry into residential care would be regulated by gatekeeping bodies, in reality providers often have their own criteria about which children can enter their facilities and may recruit children in the community.¹⁰⁷

Enhancing decision making by children, families, and communities to prevent family separation includes the following.¹⁰⁸

- Provide information and advice so that children, families, and communities can make informed decisions. Raise awareness about the harm caused by separation.
- Encourage families to make plans so that children can be cared for by another family member if their current caregiver can no longer care for them.
- Promote participation in decision making around family separation, including the involvement of children.
- Link families to gatekeeping bodies, social workers, and other service providers so that they can receive the services and support needed to continue to care for children.

Gatekeeping bodies should become involved in decision making on separation when there are concerns about children's wellbeing, or/and where children are being considered for placement into residential or foster care.¹⁰⁹ The following is needed to ensure that these bodies separate children from families only when necessary and in the child's best interests.¹¹⁰

- Providing legislation and guidance for gatekeeping bodies that prioritises keeping children within families. Guidance should include clear thresholds that help to determine levels of risk that necessitate separation.
- Raising awareness of the harm caused by family separation amongst gatekeeping bodies and enhancing the capacities of all of those involved in these bodies to make decisions in the best interests of the child.

- Enabling gatekeeping bodies to refer families and children at risk of separation to services and support.
- Overseeing gatekeeping bodies and monitoring trends in decision making to determine if children are being separated only when necessary and in their best interests.
- Minimising any bias or discrimination within gatekeeping bodies. For example, assumptions around the capacity of parents with disabilities to care for their children.
- Involving a range of stakeholders in decision making (see Box 10).

Work is needed to ban this active recruitment of children by residential care providers and ensure that decisions

are instead made by gatekeeping bodies. Whilst these bodies are being established, efforts may need to be made to improve the entry procedures of residential care facilities to minimise the use of residential care. Encouraging residential care providers to reduce the number of children entering this care may require support to transform facilities so that they have another purpose, such as supporting family strengthening.

It should be noted that not all family separation is the result of a decision. In emergencies, children may be accidentally separated from families in the chaos surrounding the emergency or deliberately separated as part of survival strategies.¹¹¹ Strategies to prevent separation during emergencies are discussed below.

BOX 10

Case conference committees in Kenya¹¹²

Case conference committees have been established in Kenya by the Directorates of Children's Services with the help of Changing the Way We Care. The committees bring together a range of professionals involved in supporting vulnerable families. These individuals vary case by case but may include government children's officers, NGO social workers, staff from residential care facilities, teachers, and

health care professionals. The social worker in charge of the child's case presents the case to the committee, who then discuss the best ways to support the child and family to prevent separation. The committee's goal is to ensure that children can remain in families. Where this is not possible, they can recommend appropriate temporary alternative care placements.

Social services and case management support

Case management is:

*"a way of organising and carrying out work to address an individual child's (and their family's) needs in an appropriate, systematic and timely manner, through direct support and/or referrals."*¹¹³

In the context of preventing family separation, case management involves social service workers carrying out the following steps.¹¹⁴

- **Identifying vulnerable families in need of case management.** This [section](#) of the report provides a description of strategies to identify families at risk of separation. Not all families at risk of separation will need case management support. This is only necessary when the child is at risk of harm or of imminent separation, or when the child or family have complex support needs. Box 11 provides an example of a tool used to identify such families.
- **Assessing the child and family.** This is usually done using an assessment tool which covers key domains of wellbeing, including material/financial, housing, mental and physical health, education, disability, risk of abuse, neglect or exploitation, relationships within the family, and wider support networks. As many family members as possible should be involved in the assessment which should focus on strengths/protective factors that can be built on. In some cases, a two phased assessment is advisable; an initial assessment to identify and address immediate risks, followed by a more thorough assessment.
- **Developing and implementing a case plan.** Outlining and supporting strategies to enhance child wellbeing, protect children from harm, strengthen the family, and enable the child to remain with their family. This often includes referral to the other services and support outlined in this paper. Case plans should be developed in partnership with the child and family and include goals and actions to achieve these goals.



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- **Monitoring and reviewing the case plan.** Regularly monitoring the child and family to review progress and check that the child is safe and adjusting the case plan as needs change. Monitoring is likely to be needed regularly at the start of the case management process, and then reduce in frequency as the family becomes stronger. The case plan should be reviewed at least every three months.
- **Closing the case.** This happens once the goals of the case plan have been achieved, and the family can care for the child well without social services engagement. As each family is unique, there can be no set timeframes for case closure. It is important to balance the need to avoid rushing this process with the need to close cases to free social worker time to support new cases.

BOX 11

Identifying families at risk of imminent separation in need of case management support¹¹⁵

In Kenya, Changing the Way We Care have developed a set of tools for identifying and supporting families at risk of separation. This includes a list of factors that may signal imminent separation and the consequent need for case management support. These factors do not automatically mean case management is needed, and social service workers are encouraged to visit and assess these families before making a decision. The factors include the following.

- Being told or suspecting that a child or adult in the family is at risk of violence, abuse, exploitation, or neglect.
- Being told or suspecting that the family is struggling to care for the child and is considering placing the child in residential care

or sending the child away to work.

- The family having placed a child in residential care in the past.
- There being an adult or child with disabilities in the family.
- Elderly or isolated caregivers that lack strong social support networks.
- Evidence of marital discord.

Information is also provided on common signs of abuse, such as children knowing about or being involved in 'adult issues' which are inappropriate for their age or stage of development, having angry outbursts or behaving aggressively towards others, or becoming withdrawn or appearing anxious, clingy, or depressed.

Case management is often used as part of secondary and tertiary prevention when broader primary prevention of separation initiatives are inadequate.¹¹⁶ Although case management can make a vital contribution to prevention efforts for a minority of families who are at high risk of separation, the overuse of case management can create problems. Case management is resource intensive, and it is beyond the capacity of most child protection systems in Eastern and Southern Africa to offer this form of support to all children at risk of separation. Trying to offer case management too broadly can overwhelm the child protection system, leading to a failure to protect children at high risk of harm.¹¹⁷ Case management must therefore be carefully targeted.

Reducing abuse, neglect, and exploitation in families

As outlined above, violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation are key causes of family separation in Eastern and Southern Africa. The INSPIRE framework on ending violence against children outlines seven key strategies to reduce this maltreatment, most of which are covered elsewhere in this document.¹¹⁸

- Implementing laws and policies (see [here](#)).
- Changing social norms supportive of violence against children (see [here](#)).
- Creating safe environments for children.
- Parenting programmes and other caregiving supports.
- Income and economic strengthening, as there is a correlation between poverty, stress, and violence, and between poverty and the use of child marriage and child labour (see [here](#)).
- Responses and support services, including through social worker case management support (see [here](#)).
- Education and life skills services (see [here](#)).

Poverty alleviation and social protection

As outlined above, poverty often contributes to family separation. Social protection is a key strategy for addressing poverty and is defined as:

“A set of policies and programmes aimed at preventing or protecting all people against poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion throughout their life-course, with a particular emphasis towards vulnerable groups.”¹¹⁹



Social protection programmes can include social transfers (e.g., cash transfers, in-kind transfers, and tax credits), social insurance (e.g., health and unemployment insurance), reducing unemployment and improving household livelihoods.¹²⁰

Evidence from across Eastern and Southern Africa shows that social protection programmes can reduce poverty and address other factors that lead to family separation.¹²¹ For example, in Rwanda, the Vision 2020 Umurenge Programme cash transfer programme reduced stress and increased carers' confidence, thereby enhancing the quality of care provided to children in the household.¹²² Children in households that received South Africa's Child Support Grant had an eight per cent higher probability of living with their parents than children in other homes.¹²³ In Uganda, household economic strengthening combined with other services and support was associated with a halving of rates of family separations in some areas.¹²⁴

Poorly designed social protection programmes can also increase the likelihood of family separation. For example, in Ethiopia, social protection programmes have increased child marriage in some areas as they provide families with the resources needed to pay for wedding

costs.¹²⁵ Cash transfers in Rwanda have been used to buy alcohol, leading to violence in the home, and increasing the risk of separation.¹²⁶

To maximise the benefits and minimise the risks of social protection in relation to family separation, the following is vital.¹²⁷

- Review existing government social protection programmes and check that they are accessible to the families most at risk of family separation. For example, ensure that there is adequate support to elderly caregivers and families caring for children with disabilities. Social protection programmes should be open to all family types, including kinship carers, multi-generational and single parent households. In Mozambique, specific efforts have been made to target young mothers through social protection programming.
 - Use a 'cash-plus' approach to address the drivers of separation as it is rare for poverty alone to be the cause of family separation. This can include providing awareness raising, case management support, parenting programmes, and referrals to other services to those receiving government cash transfers. In South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe, social protection programmes that combined cash transfers, parenting programmes and improved access to child protection services reduced rates of violence in the home (see Box 12).
 - Have reducing family separation as an explicit goal of social protection programmes, as with Kenya's Orphans and Vulnerable Children cash transfer programme. Regardless of whether programmes aim
- to reduce family separation, monitor the impacts on family separation to check that it is not increasing amongst households receiving grants.
 - Ensure that social protection programmes do not overload the child protection system by placing onerous demands on social workers. The engagement of social workers in administering social protection schemes can mean they have little time to provide monitoring and support to vulnerable children and families.
 - Help families to access existing government run social protection programmes through raising awareness of these programmes and case management support. If these are not available, create supports for families such as savings and loans groups, combined with capacity building in livelihoods and financial resource management.
 - Ensure that in-depth assessments are made, including around any risks, before allocating social protection support, and give priority to those with the highest levels of vulnerability.
 - Avoid long-term financial dependency on government or NGO financial support by developing programmes that gradually reduce reliance on social protection. Ensure that social protection programmes include training on financial literacy and an exit strategy to avoid this long-term dependency.

The Regional learning platform on care reform in Eastern and Southern Africa has produced a [resource on social protection](#) and care which provides further information.

BOX 12

Cash-plus care in South Africa¹²⁸

In 2017, the Sihleng'imizi (meaning 'we care for families') Family Programme was introduced to complement the Child Support Grant in South Africa. Recipients of the grant participated in 14 weekly group meetings involving five families in each group and facilitated by a social worker. The pilot of this showed that in addition to economic impacts, the programme led to improvements in several areas that can affect family separation.

For example, the programme reduced violence in the home, improved communication within families, reduced mental health problems amongst caregivers, and increased awareness of child protection risks and monitoring of children's whereabouts. Importantly, the programme increased access to support networks as families were paired with other families who they continued to connect with after the weekly meetings had finished.

Health, education, and disability services

In addition to social protection, addressing the causes of separation involves improving access to and the quality and relevance of mental and physical health, education, and disability services. Those working in the child protection and care sectors can contribute to improvements to these services so that they enhance family separation in several ways.¹²⁹

- Identifying existing service provision through mapping and making referrals to case management support or other family strengthening interventions as required.
- Training education and health care professionals on the importance of family strengthening and ways to identify families at risk of separation. Efforts should be made to ensure that these professionals make referrals to social service workers where necessary.
- Encouraging service providers to consider ways to reduce family separation through service design. For example, schools can raise awareness about the risks of family separation and ally their parenting knowledge, attitudes, skills, behaviours, and practices.¹³⁰

Research and guidance on ‘parenting’ recognises that these interventions should be extended to a wider range of caregivers, including kinship carers.¹³¹ Parenting and caregiver interventions are sometimes defined narrowly as structured ‘parenting’ or caregiving programmes, involving weekly group sessions sometimes combined with individualised support (see Box 13 for an example of such a programme). However, evidence from around the region suggests that other supports can also be used to improve parenting/caregiving knowledge, attitudes, skills, behaviours, and practices. This might include for example, peer support groups or mentoring from more experienced caregivers (see Box 3).¹³²

Parenting or carer interventions have been shown to reduce key causes of family separation, including parental/carer stress and poor emotional wellbeing, violence against children, and weak relationships between children and caregivers.¹³³ There is some evidence globally of parenting/caregiving programmes impacting on levels of family separation.¹³⁴ Despite these positive outcomes, it is important not to over-emphasise the benefits of parenting or caregiving supports. These programmes do not deal with structural causes of family separation, such as poverty and lack of access to education. Used in isolation, they are unlikely to solve many of the key problems that families face.¹³⁵

Key components of the successful parenting or caregiving support include the following.¹³⁶

- **Parent/caregiver led.** Support should be dictated by parent/caregiver needs and preceded by consultations. Any group sessions should centre on exchanging knowledge between one another. Parents/caregivers, especially those with experience of caregiving, are often resistant to outsiders telling them what to do.
- **Child led.** Children, especially older children, should also be consulted in programme design and asked about the type of caregiving they would like to receive. Efforts should be made to gather the perspectives of commonly excluded children, such as those with disabilities.
- **Use active learning techniques.** Methods such as role-play and exploring scenarios are more effective than lectures.
- **Strengths-based and non-judgmental.** Programmes should seek to identify and build on strengths. Facilitators should try to understand why a parent or caregiver may consider family separation, recognising that these choices often arise from lack of services and support rather than being a ‘bad’ parent or caregiver.
- **Context specific.** Parenting/caregiving programmes cannot be imported from one context to another without adaptation. Programmes should reflect local cultures and challenges faced by caregivers. The use of local facilitators is also essential.
- **Inclusive.** Programmes should be based on an understanding of who is involved in children’s upbringing. Efforts may need to be made to expand programmes beyond mothers to include fathers, older siblings, grandparents, and other relatives involved in children’s care. Special attention needs to be paid to ensuring that discriminated against groups, such as young single mothers, or caregivers with disabilities, participate in programmes.
- **Promote gender equity.** Programmes should challenge gender norms and promote gender equity and respect. Gender-based violence and harmful practices are commonly associated with family separation and should be addressed in parent/caregiver support programmes (see Box 2).
- **Combine theoretical knowledge with practical guidance.** Parents/caregivers may need to be given some knowledge on areas such as the developmental stages of the child. However, they also, and often mainly, need practical help in responding to challenges in their caregiving.

- **Tailored to the type of caregiver/children in their care.** For example, parents or other caregivers looking after adolescents may need help shifting relationships to allow teenagers greater independence and autonomy, within clear boundaries. Kinship carers often need help balancing caring for their own children with caring for children in kinship care, managing contact with parents, and dealing with the bereavement and loss and consequent behavioural difficulties amongst children. Elderly caregivers may need assistance understanding current parenting norms. Caregivers caring for children with disabilities

also face unique challenges, and caregiver supports must be adjusted to meet their needs.

- **Incorporated into government policies and programmes to ensure wider reach.** Box 6 shows how this has been done in Namibia and Botswana.
- **Used in conjunction with strategies designed to address the structural causes of separation.** Parenting programmes should never be viewed as the solution to violence in families or family separation; other interventions that deal with poverty, inequality, and lack of access to services are also needed.

BOX 13

The Families Together programme in Kenya¹³⁷

The Families Together curriculum in Kenya builds on the existing evidence-based parenting curriculum, *Skillful Parenting*, developed by the NGO, Investing in Children and their Societies. Families Together was adapted to intentionally reach families at risk of separation and undergoing reintegration. *Families Together* covers core evidence-based parenting content, but places strong focus on factors known to lead to family separation in Kenya, such as weak bonds or attachments with caregivers, and the challenges faced by those caring for children with disabilities.

Caregivers are invited to attend nine group sessions delivered by pairs of skilled facilitators to parent peer groups of around 18–24 parents and caregivers. Each session lasts 2.5 hours. Sessions cover:

- Family relationships
- Child development and meeting children's needs
- Caregiver self-care
- Values and discipline
- Communication
- Building strong and secure attachments
- Communicating with children about safety
- Helping children feel safe, secure, and loved.

The programme is also delivered through home visits to parents and caregivers who are unable to attend group sessions, because of mobility problems, distance from a local group or frailty.

The home visit version is presented as a simple flipbook and each session lasts around 45 minutes. The topics are similar to the group sessions but with a greater focus on building personal skills and opportunities for discussion about individual successes and challenges. The parenting sessions are usually delivered as part of a home visit conducted by a case worker delivering case management support.

A team of disability experts were brought in to review and modify the curriculum to be disability-inclusive. Inclusive language and images were incorporated into the programme, and disability-sensitive parenting techniques were highlighted. The programme was tested with parents and caregivers looking after children with disabilities.

The programme recognises that parenting/caregiving programmes alone cannot solve all the problems that families face, and the programme is provided alongside other forms of support including household economic strengthening, and referrals to services.

In a survey, three-quarters of families found sessions to be useful and those carrying out home visits have noticed positive changes in families.

"We can sit down as a family and talk on matters concerning our families. Now we can share ideas, and this brings peace and contentment within the family." (Caregiver who took part in the programme)

Building connections to the wider family and community

Extended family and community support is a core strength in many communities that can be built on. This is vital for the relevance, cost-effectiveness, and sustainability of family strengthening programmes.¹³⁸ Family and community support for family strengthening can be enhanced in a variety of ways including the following.¹³⁹

- Ensure community participation across family strengthening activities including evidence collection, programme design and evaluation, awareness raising, and as part of the social service workforce.
- Work to identify or trace members of the wider family or social network that could offer support as part of case management processes.
- Carry out research to understand the role of extended family community support in family strengthening.
- Train social service workers to appreciate and build on supports from the extended family and community. This may require social workers developing a new, more collaborative mindset.
- Map community organisations that already support vulnerable groups and ensure that they are aware of the importance of preventing family separation.
- Establish or strengthen community-based child protection committees, which use community leaders and members to monitor and support vulnerable families.



- Build community resilience as part of disaster and climate change preparedness strategies, including identifying specific roles for community members in preventing family separation.
- Challenge social norms which see discrimination against and exclusion of certain groups from communities (see here).
- Use peer-to-peer support groups as part of parenting/caregiver support.
- Include community members in some sessions in structured parenting/caregiving programmes to encourage empathy and collaborative problem solving.
- Raise awareness about the risk of separation as a result of emergencies prior to the onset of humanitarian crises. Explain to children and families the dangers of family separation and what they can do to reduce the risk of separation. Develop clear messages on the prevention of family separation for parents, children and the wider community which clearly state the role each of these actors can play.
- Train humanitarian actors across a range of sectors in contexts where there is a high likelihood that children could be placed in residential care facilities on the importance of preventing family separation, effective strategies for prevention, and prioritising family tracing and reunification.

Preventing family separation in emergencies

Strengthening families through the services and approaches described above will help build their resilience and reduce the likelihood of separation during emergencies. In addition, steps for preventing family separation in emergencies may include the following.¹⁴⁰

- Ensure adequate investment in strategies to prevent separation during emergencies, including primary prevention, which is often neglected.
- Carry out research on risk and protective factors for separation during past emergencies and normal periods. Consult communities and determine if any groups are especially at risk of separation. Use this evidence to inform emergency preparedness plans.
- Monitor levels of separation during emergencies and explore why separation is happening (see Box 14), including considering whether parents are intentionally separating children in a belief this will increase children's access to services and support. Adapt strategies to prevent family separation accordingly.
- During emergencies, raise awareness amongst parents and caregivers about the importance of keeping children close by.
- Give children identity tags and ensure they know key information about their families. Quickly identify and register any separated children. This will help ensure that separation is for the shortest period possible.

BOX 14

Community surveillance of separated children in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)¹⁴¹

The community surveillance tool was piloted in ten villages in Northern DRC to track levels of separation. Three focal points were chosen in each village. Focal points could include a village chief, an elected member of the community or representatives of a youth group, women's group, or a child protection committee. Focal points were provided with mobile phones, phone credit and training. The village was split into zones covering 100–150 houses, and each focal point was allocated one zone. Focal points used text messages to report details of any separated

children in their zone to a project coordinator. Focal points identified separated children through visits to households, observations, or reports from other community members. In some cases, focal points made announcements in church or enlisted other volunteers. Over the 11 weeks of the pilot, 62 new separations were identified. Although the tool was primarily used to identify and support already separated children, the methodology could also be used to identify and target prevention efforts to high-risk communities or families.



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Conclusion

It is of vital importance to ensure that children across Eastern and Southern Africa can grow up protected and nurtured in families. This is recognised in national, regional, and global guidance, and prioritised by children, parents, and caregivers. Separation is harmful to child wellbeing and prevention is far more cost effective than alternative care or reintegration.

Effective family strengthening for prevention requires the use of child-centred approaches which focus on the best interests of the child and enable child and caregiver participation. Strategies should include discriminated against groups, use strengths-based approaches, and recognise the role of wider family and community networks. Solutions must be sustainable, scalable, and context specific. Work with individual children and families should be tailored to their unique needs. It is vital to identify and address factors that both place children at risk and protect them from separation. These factors exist at the level of the child, family and community and wider society.

Systems of child protection and care in Eastern and Southern Africa need to be orientated to preventing family separation. This means:

- a strong evidence base on reasons for separation and effective existing strategies for addressing this separation,
- policies, strategies, and guidance on prevention,
- coordinated inputs from across a range of sectors,

- a social services workforce with the commitment and capacity to strengthen families,
- prioritising prevention in the financing of care systems, and
- supportive social norms that promote family unity.

A range of services and support are required to prevent family separation in the region. Some prevention strategies need to be targeted at entire communities, and others require more intensive work with families and children. The following are vital for effective services and support to prevent family separation.

- Improve decision making around separation within families and communities and in more formal decision making involving the gatekeeping bodies or residential care providers.
- Provide social services case management support for especially vulnerable children and families.
- Reduce root causes of separation, such as abuse, neglect and exploitation, poverty, and lack of access to services.
- Build the capacity of parents and other caregivers in relation to childrearing.
- Enhance the role of the wider family and community in strengthening families.

Particular efforts need to be made to prevent the separation of children with disabilities, and to stop separation during humanitarian crises.

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