

Family values: An investment case for prioritizing foster care for unaccompanied migrant and refugee children in Italy

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Summary

For migrant and refugee children, the treatment they experience on arrival in Italy can either ease or add to the distress and trauma that they may have already experienced on their journey to Europe. Children seeking protection and asylum in Italy have often faced tragic circumstances. Many have fled from war, conflict and violence in their countries of origin, and many have endured extremely dangerous journeys to reach Italy.

Some 16,000 children and adolescents are currently being housed in reception facilities in Italy. They have arrived in the country alone, without their parents or legal guardians, and have been in grave danger of abuse and exploitation at every stage of their journey.

The central Mediterranean migration route from North Africa to Italy is one of the most dangerous globally. Between April 2015 and April 2025, approximately 3,500 children died or disappeared as they attempted to reach Europe via the central Mediterranean, according to UNICEF estimates. Children who survive the journey often arrive in need of urgent medical attention, psychosocial support, legal guidance and language support.

Foster care is a crucial, child-focused approach for children who have arrived in Italy on their own. It is established by law as the primary option for alternative care for refugee and migrant children arriving in Italy without their parents or legal guardians. However, just 4 per cent of unaccompanied and separated children who arrive each year – with the exception of children from Ukraine – are placed in family-based care such as fostering. This means that the remaining 96 per cent are housed in institutions.

This is a missed opportunity. Unlike residential care, foster care upholds the right of every child and adolescents to grow up in a welcoming and loving family environment where they have the nurture and safety that are essential for their personal development. It promotes a broader sense of community for families while ensuring that the children and adolescents welcomed into these settings have stability and support. It leads to improved health, better educational outcomes, and greater social participation in adulthood.

Cover image: © UNICEF/Chiari/2024 Nasim, from Bangladesh, with his foster family in Italy.

Above: © UNICEF/Anicito/2023 Mahdi, who arrived in Italy alone, now welcomed into a family.



Foster care is not only far more beneficial for children and societies than residential care: it is more economical. According to UNICEF's financial planning tool, foster care offers a relationship-based and inclusive solution for both families and the children placed with them, who receive greater support, and provides a net saving for institutions in comparison to the costs of residential care.

Since 2017, the *Terreferme* project – supported by UNICEF in collaboration with Coordinamento Nazionale Comunità Accoglienti (CNCA) – has demonstrated that the average daily cost of a foster care placement for a municipality was €37 in the first year and €23 in the second. In contrast, municipalities report spending up to €100 per day for each child living in a residential facility – and these costs could be even higher.¹ Residential care costs are continually rising, placing a burden on the entire welfare system, and residential institutions often fail to provide adequate care for children, who are often left in under-resourced facilities that struggle to cover all of their necessary expenses.

In contrast, the bulk of the costs associated with foster care – around 70 per cent – covers the work of professionals engaged in training, promotion, matching children with families, and managing foster care placements, including case monitoring and family support.

This investment strengthens the social work force system and service – which helps to sustain the model – compared to public spending on residential care that also needs to cover fragmented costs as well as the costs of room and board.

Finally, evidence-based models of family-based care offer returns that are up to 10 times higher than the costs of residential care as a result of reduced inequalities, greater inclusion, and stronger social protection systems.

¹ The reference to the €100 daily limit, as the maximum eligible expense – not applicable to Extraordinary Reception Centres (CAS) – is based on the expenditure thresholds established for centres funded through the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) of the Ministry of the Interior, designated for the reception of unaccompanied and separated children. The costs related to both residential reception and foster care are largely covered by the National Fund for Asylum Policies and Services (FNPSA), also managed by the Ministry of the Interior. This fund represents the main instrument through which the Italian State financially supports reception measures, with the aim of ensuring protection, inclusion, and pathways to independence for beneficiaries.

Above: © UNICEF/Pagetti/2021 Mamajang, 17, from Gambia, and his adoptive grandmother Maria prepare lunch.



Methodology

UNICEF created a tool that estimates and analyzes the costs of implementing a foster care model for unaccompanied and separated children. The tool was developed for Italian municipalities and the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies.

The tool estimates:

- the cost of a single foster placement and the total cost of foster placements over a fiscal year, based on the specific characteristics of the municipality, the type of foster care, and the selected intervention package,
- and
- the cost of activities that aim to promote a widespread culture of foster care, based on predefined targets.

Above: © UNICEF/Trovato/2024 Mohammed, 17, with his foster family in Milan.

Data: Experiences of unaccompanied and separated children

Data collected in [2023](#) and, more recently, [in April 2025](#) by UNICEF through the [U-Report On The Move](#) platform found that:

42 per cent

4 in 10 adolescents are unaware that unaccompanied and separated children can access foster care.

42 per cent

4 in 10 believe they would feel better supported in a family setting.

53 per cent

More than half of respondents stated they would prefer to live with a family rather than in other types of accommodation.

24 per cent

1 in 5 adolescents highlighted the need for foster families to better understand children's cultural backgrounds, respecting cultural differences.

19 per cent

Almost 2 in every 10 would choose to live in a reception facility.

67 per cent

Almost 7 in 10 felt confident that their own families would approve of the choice.

64 per cent

More than 6 in every 10 young people consider full-time foster care to be the most effective form of care.

62 per cent

More than 6 in every 10 young people believe that information about foster care within their community is scarce or nonexistent.



Mohammed's Story

Mohammed arrived in Italy from Egypt at the age of 16.

"They had told me there were schools here where I could study until I turned 18, and then it would be easy to find a job," he recalls.

However, once he entered a reception facility, he discovered a different reality:

"It wasn't what I expected. I wanted to leave — there were so many of us, and we did very little. I realized that if I stayed, I would never achieve my goals."

It was at this moment that Mohammed met Daniela and Alberto. Daniela had been a foster mother before and Alberto wanted to become a foster parent.

"Like Daniela, I really connected with the idea of offering support to young people who might have temporary needs — offering them hospitality, strength and support, even if just for a short but meaningful time," explains Alberto.

"At the beginning, I didn't speak much," says Mohammed.

"They encouraged me to learn the language, to take courses, not to remain idle. I used to complain, but then I understood and realized how much all of that helped me."

"I talk a lot now; I always have something to say. I've learned Italian so well," jokes Mohammed, "that I can always answer back and share my opinion."

For Daniela, the path was clear:

"When you foster, a person enters your home who already has a life, a story of their own. There's a missing 'first part' that you have to compensate for, slowly getting closer and finding your own way together."

Mohammed approached the idea of foster care after speaking with his biological mother back in Egypt, concerned that the decision might scare her. Daniela and Mohammed's mother talked on the phone, with Mohammed translating.

"We are doing well now. I feel good. They give me love and treat me like a son — that's what matters to me," says Mohammed.

Above: © UNICEF/Trovato/2024 Mohammed, who arrived in Italy from Egypt as a child.

UNICEF's support for migrant, refugee, and asylum-seeking children and adolescents in Europe

UNICEF collaborates with governments and other partners to strengthen national child protection, social protection, and migration and asylum systems.

We work with civil society organizations to ensure that minors can access psychological support and the other forms of community-based assistance they need.

In Italy in particular, where the majority of arriving children and adolescents are unaccompanied, UNICEF partners with authorities to improve protection standards and monitoring mechanisms in reception centres for unaccompanied and separated children.

With UNICEF's support, Italy has established a network of legal guardians for these children - a process that is now being replicated in Greece.

We advocate for family-based care solutions, including foster care, to be prioritized whenever they align with the best interests of the child.

We call for the standardization and strengthening of professional support for families and guardians, before, during and after foster placements; greater coordination among institutions (including the judicial system); effective implementation of the 2024 Guidelines on foster care; and increased public awareness of foster care as a priority option for migrant and refugee children and adolescents.



Recommendations

Following the pilot of the foster care model conducted in Italy, including within the framework of the European Child Guarantee, UNICEF recommends the following for all stakeholders involved in the child protection system.

- 1. Promote family foster care as the primary solution**, where compatible with the best interests of the child, through a standardized national system with clear protocols, dedicated services, adequate resources, and a skilled network of foster families and specialized professionals.
- 2. Strengthen multisectoral governance** by ensuring structured coordination among ministries, local authorities, the judiciary and civil society, to provide a sustainable, integrated and participatory response for the protection of unaccompanied and separated children.
- 3. Enhance the competencies of all stakeholders** (judges, social workers, guardians, practitioners and volunteers) through continuous training on the standards, principles and practices of family-based care and on the application of best interest determination procedures.
- 4. Reduce bureaucratic barriers and standardize practices** by simplifying foster care placement procedures, harmonizing planning tools and defining Essential Levels of Services to ensure territorial equity.
- 5. Ensure the centrality of the child throughout the process**, promoting active listening and respect for their rights at every stage of the reception and protection pathway.
- 6. Make the system transparent and evidence-based** through effective mechanisms for monitoring, evaluation and data collection to ensure quality, accountability and the continuous improvement of policies.

Above: @ UNICEF/Trovato/2024 Korka, who recently turned 18, with the family that welcomed him.



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Above: © UNICEF/Anicito/2023 Mahdi and Ilaria, his foster parent, during an afternoon study session.

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