

Children’s care and how it can be strengthened:

A background brief for the Global Campaign on Children’s Care Reform

Introduction – caring for our children

Every child deserves the best start in life within caring families and communities, with access to health care, education, play and leisure time. Children thrive with consistent, nurturing, loving, and protective care from parents and family caregivers. Families provide crucial cultural, social, and economic connections and support during tough times.

The UN Convention of the Rights of Child (CRC) recognises the family, as the natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members, particularly children. However, families' ability to provide safe, nurturing care is threatened by adversities like extreme poverty, lack of access to education, healthcare and other basic services, conflict, migration, home violence, exploitation, substance use, illness, gender inequality, discrimination and lack of inclusive services.

The first aim of the Care Reform Campaign is to seek to ensure that states and other service providers deliver interventions designed to strengthen families and prevent abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence. Such services should be accessible to all children and their families, from birth through adolescence and up to adulthood. Some services should be universally available, such as parenting courses or early childhood education (daycare), in order to build strengths within families and prevent maltreatment. Other interventions, such as drug and alcohol rehabilitation or psychosocial support, need to be available when specific risk factors are identified.

Yet, around the world, in every country, some children are not protected, even in their homes, schools and communities. Children with disabilities and those living

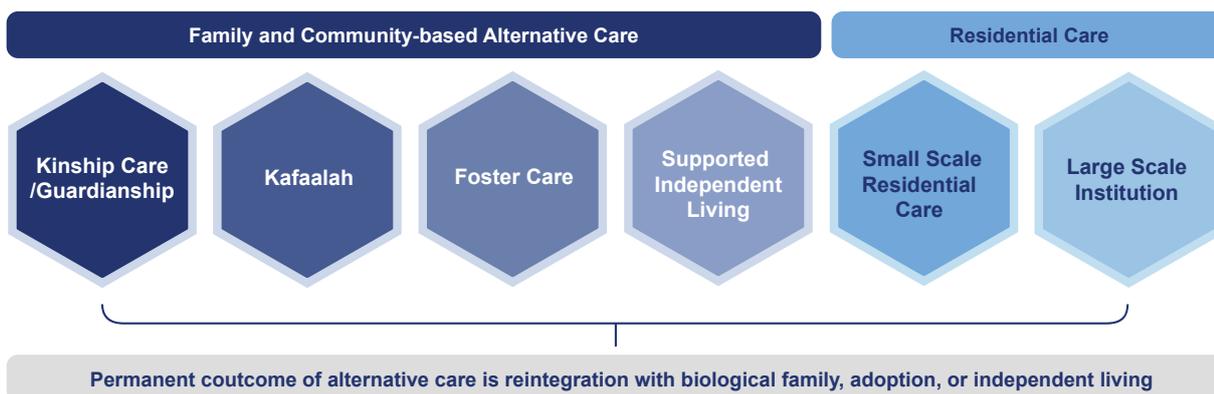
in places of conflict and natural disasters are especially vulnerable. In these instances, specific services will be needed which respond to children suffering harm, or at high risk of suffering harm. These services are typically guided by a case management process and respond to the unique needs and context of the individual child. In some cases, if determined necessary and in the best interests of the child, this may require the removal of a child from the care of their, parents or caregivers.¹

These children require an alternative arrangement, sometimes temporarily, to receive the care, protection and nurture they need. The second aim of the Care Reform Campaign is to ensure that this alternative provision of care is safe, nurturing, family-based care. The UN Convention of the Rights of Child (CRC) sets out that it is a state’s obligation to ensure this care is provided, and that it is safe, appropriate of the highest quality, and suited to the unique needs of each individual child.²

What is alternative care for children?

Millions of children around the world live in some form of alternative care. Global child rights instruments such as the UN CRC and the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children³ encourage States to provide a range of alternative care options. Having a range of options helps to ensure that each child that needs alternative care can be placed in the one that is most appropriate for their individual needs and situation. Alternative care should be used as a temporary measure, with processes and procedures in place to help facilitate eventual placement into permanent care through reintegration, adoption, or independent living to ensure children, and the societies they are part of, reach their full potential as they grow up.

Continuum Of Alternative Care For Children



In line with UN Guidelines⁴, alternative care should seek to maintain the child as close as possible to their habitual place of residence, in order to facilitate contact and potential reintegration with their family and to minimize disruption. In addition, alternative care options should recognise the importance of ensuring children have a stable home where they can form a safe and continuous attachment to their caregivers. In general, alternative care within a **family setting**, such as kinship care or foster care, where consistent carers are supported to provide quality, one-on-one support and love to the children in their care, is most appropriate and leads to best outcomes.⁵

Despite the guidance and the evidence, it is known that many children enter alternative care unnecessarily or are provided with a form of care that is not appropriate or safe for them,⁶ including an estimated five million children living in institutions.⁷ While such facilities are sometimes referred to as orphanages, this is misleading as most children living in these facilities have a living parent. **Institutional settings**, where mostly unrelated, children are being cared for collectively by paid or unpaid staff usually working shifts - have been shown to be a form of care that is often harmful to children. Decades of research on the development of children raised in institutions reinforces that institutionalisation is strongly linked with negative impacts on children's development, especially their physical growth, cognition, and attention, as well as their ability to form attachments and healthy social relationships throughout life.⁸ These harms continue to have a life-long impact.⁹ The third aim of the Care Reform Campaign is to progressively end the use of institutions.

Well-resourced **social services**, alongside education and health care, which focus on strengthening the capacity of caregivers, families and communities to meet children's needs are essential to prevent unnecessary separation of children from their families in the first place.

Underinvestment in alternative care and social services can have devastating impacts on individuals across their life course and comes at a significant cost to society.¹⁰ Attaining many of the Sustainable Development Goals, under the banner of leaving no one behind, requires consideration of children and families in need of care and support, many of whom are living in poverty, excluded from quality education, unable to access health care and are experiencing maltreatment. Furthermore, children living in care facilities are often not counted in national statistics and therefore progress towards global goals does not take them into consideration.

Strengthening the systems of children's care

There is a growing movement internationally calling for greater efforts to strengthen systems of children's care. This movement is called 'care reform'. The aim, as set out above, is threefold:

1. To provide services and support to ensure that children are looked after well in families and not unnecessarily separated from parents or family members who care for them;
2. To provide a range of safe, quality care options in family settings for children who need an alternative arrangement; and
3. To reduce the use of non-family-based care.



Experience and a growing evidence base has shown that to strengthen children's care, it is necessary to address the whole system, which is made up of interdependent and interconnected components. Improvements must be driven by a coordinated strategy to align legislation and policies, build social service workforce capacity, provide sufficient finance, and build data and evidence.¹¹ Strengthening care systems must also include a focus on shifting unhelpful societal perceptions, such as stigma towards children with disabilities or lack of understanding of the harms of institutional care, in order to break down barriers to children being cared for and create a positive environment which supports families.

Reforming children's care is a long-term goal that requires a strong commitment from all actors including governments and civil society leaders.¹² People with lived experience of care should hold a central role in guiding reforms, with due weight given to their experiences and meaningful opportunities for engagement and partnership. Child and youth advisory groups for the UN Day of General Discussion 2021 wrote that, "Children and young people want to be heard and listened to. All too often, adults do not consider their opinions in decisions being made about their lives and this needs to change."¹³ They call for the international community to take collective action to make sure that children and young people have a safe, nurturing family environment to grow up in, through targeted action in different regions and countries, acknowledging there is no one-size-fits-all situation.

It is important not to rush the process of change, but to ensure that families and communities are well-supported throughout the reform process. Support services must be available before children exit institutional care and return to

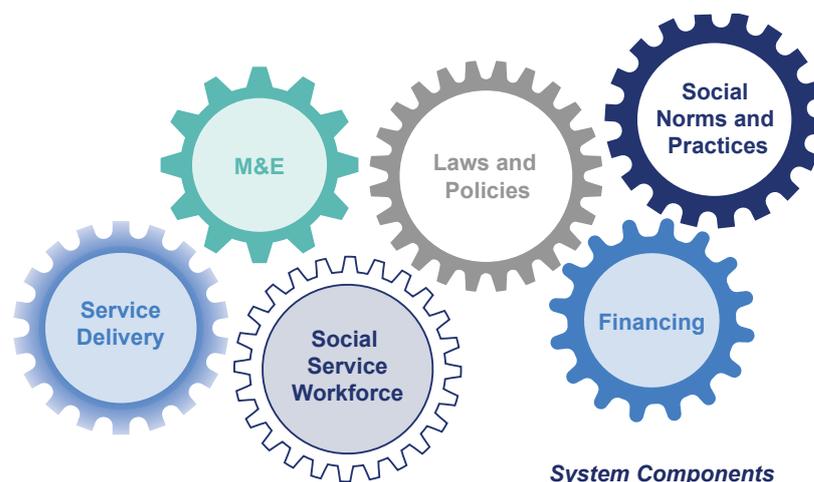
their families or move into family-based alternative care. Support is also required for those that enter adulthood having spent some or all of their childhood in alternative care— often known as ‘care-leavers’.¹⁴

Children’s care must be linked to education, health care, social protection and justice, as these sectors support caregivers or may have a direct role to play in decision-making for children’s support.

Examples of strengthening care systems

Reforming children’s care and building a system of family supports looks different depending on the context and strengths and weaknesses of the existing system. A few examples include the following:

- In **India**, the COVID-19 pandemic was an impetus for reconnecting children living in institutions with their families since government mandates required children be sent out of congregate care and, often, that facilities be closed. In 2021, the Government of India’s Mission Vatsalya was passed as a **roadmap** for achieving child protection priorities, including phasing out institutional care, providing increased support to families and developing family-based alternative care.¹⁵
- In **Scotland**, people with **lived experience of care** were at the centre of a three-year-long review of children’s care. The review process involved many children, young people and adults who had been in care at some point in their lives. They guided the design of the review, were consulted and shared their experiences and continue to be central to holding the government accountable for the “five promises” that were made at the conclusion of the review to ensure all children grow up loved, safe and respected.¹⁶
- **Cambodia’s** Family Care First was a **coordinated, collective effort** is led by the Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation, with 60 members and resources from USAID, Save the Children and other donors. The aim is to prevent family-child separation and increase the number of children provided with family care. The initiative emphasises **sharing learning** between its diverse actors through events, exchanges and communities of practice.¹⁷
- In **Rwanda**, as part of the government’s ambitious *Tubarerere Mu Murungu* (Let’s Raise Children in Families) programme, emphasis was placed on building an effective **workforce** to ensure children and families were properly assessed and supported. This included setting out clear roles and responsibilities for volunteers and professionals, providing oversight and referral systems.¹⁸
- In **Australia**, the over-representation of children in care with **disabilities** and from **indigenous communities** has been widely documented and acknowledged. Part of the response has been an investment in **data and research** to publicly track progress on key indicators of system improvements, such as those linked to fulfilling the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle which aims to reduce the over-representation of these children in care,¹⁹ and to generate evidence on children’s safety and wellbeing when they are in care, such as the Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study.²⁰
- In **Moldova**, as part of achieving a goal of zero children in institutional care, a two-year pilot is being implemented, informed by a global desk review of good practice,²¹ to illustrate how to recruit, assess, train, conduct matching, and provide appropriate support to **specialised foster carers** with the skills and knowledge required to care for children with complex needs.
- In **Guatemala**, a focus was placed on developing agreed multi-agency pathways for children to safely exit child protection homes and reunify with families. These pathways were guided by social workers’ use of **case management** tools and processes to strengthen families and community connections.²²
- In **Ukraine**, in the context of Russia’s full-scale invasion, a **package of social services** was developed and is being rolled out with the aim of preventing unnecessary separation of children from their families. This includes advancing a new ‘resilience service’ that provides counselling and parenting support for needs stemming from the **conflict**. The package of social services is a key component of the country’s newly authorized national Strategy to Ensure the Right of Every Child to Grow Up in a Family Environment.²³



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- ³ United Nations General Assembly (2009). Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/673583?v=pdf>
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- ⁵ van IJzendoorn, op cit.
- ⁶ Cantwell, N et al. Moving Forward: Implementing the ‘Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children’, CELCIS, 2012, <https://www.alternativecareguidelines.org/>
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- ¹³ Make Our Voices Count: Children and young peoples’ responses to a global survey for the Day of General Discussion 2021 on Children’s Rights and Alternative Care available at: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/HRBodies/CRC/Discussions/2020/DGD_Report_EN.pdf
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- ¹⁵ For more information see: <https://wcdhry.gov.in/mission-vatsalya/>
- ¹⁶ For more information see: <https://thepromise.scot/what-is-the-promise/>
- ¹⁷ For more information see: <https://www.familycarefirst.org>
- ¹⁸ For more information see: <https://www.unicef.org/rwanda/reports/child-care-reform-programme-rwanda>
- ¹⁹ For more information see: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/child-protection/atsicpp-indicators/contents/indicators/placement>
- ²⁰ For more information see: <https://dcj.nsw.gov.au/about-us/facsiar/pathways-of-care-longitudinal-study.html>
- ²¹ For more information see: <https://bettercarenetwork.org/library/the-continuum-of-care/foster-care/good-practices-of-foster-care-for-children-with-complex-needs-findings-from-a-rapid-review-of-the>
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