

Why family matters to me

Findings from digital storytelling
in eight countries



Family
for every child

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Introduction

Across cultures and contexts the family is universally acknowledged as of fundamental importance to child well-being, growth and development.¹ Yet in many settings, families receive no or limited support in their efforts to care for children. Children facing abuse or neglect within families often have no one to turn to. Families are also poorly understood, with little evidence in many countries of children's experiences of family life across the range of family types, and from children who have faced abuse, neglect and family separation.²

In this report, we examine what the family means to children and adults in eight countries³ using evidence from 59 short films made using the digital storytelling (DST) technique. DST uses storytelling methods to gain deep insights into feelings and experiences. Participants then create individual stories about aspects of their own lives using still images and sound.⁴

In total, 32 of these films were made by children living within extended, step, single parent and two parent families, and 12 of these films were made by children living outside of families in residential care or on the streets. The remaining films were made by parents or carers, or by staff from Family for Every Child's member agencies.

1. Preamble to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. UN (1989) *The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*. New York: United Nations.

2. Family for Every Child (2013) *Why Care Matters*. London: Family for Every Child.

3. Brazil, Egypt, Guyana, India, Kenya, Mexico, Russia and South Africa.

4. To see some of the films that were produced please go to: <http://www.familyforeverychild.org/dst/>

Findings

There are a range of different family types, all with equal value in children's lives

The DST films show how love and care can be provided within a range of different family types, and that abuse and neglect can also exist in all forms of families. For example, some children whose parents had remarried described discrimination and abuse at the hands of stepmothers or fathers; others talked of a new source of love and support from their new parent.

“My stepfather is like a real father to me. He looks after me and ensures that I have everything that I need. ... He treats me like his own child and this makes me feel happy.”

- 14-year-old boy, Guyana. To see a full version of this film go to: <http://www.familyforeverychild.org/dst/>

“One year later my father married a second wife. She used to cane me frequently and left me to do the household chores. She normally caned me a lot and did not want me to inform my father.”

- 15 year-old-boy, Kenya

Some child and adult storytellers whose parents had separated spoke of a deep relief at the end of years of conflict between their parents, others of a deep sense of loss, and both children and parents described the efforts that single parents went to to compensate for their absent partner.

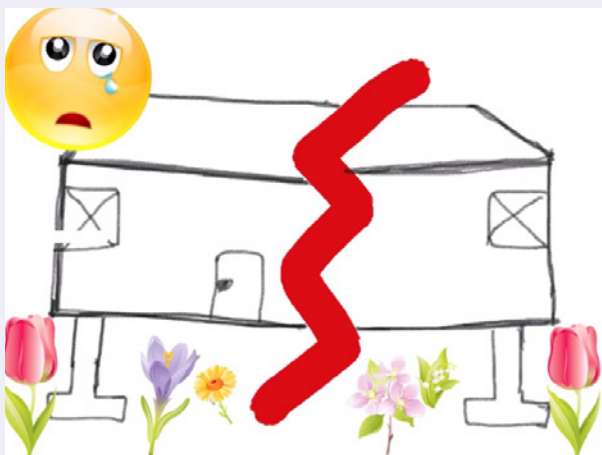


Image from a film made by a 14 year old in Guyana whose parents had separated

“At this time I felt like I was no longer part of a family. I was sad because Dad had left. Mum noticed that I was crying and sat down and talked with me. She said: ‘You don’t have to have a big family to be part of a family. We are still a family.’ After mum had talked to me I went to bed with a smile on my face. Mum makes me feel like I still have a father around because she supports me and shows me love by listening to me when I need to talk.”

- 12-year-old girl, Guyana. To see a full version of this film go to: <http://www.familyforeverychild.org/dst/>

“My father remarried and formed another family. The house was left empty and I could only ask myself: ‘But what about my family?’ I had many happy moments in that house like family gatherings, surprises, talks with my father or with my brother, and playing with my nieces. But I would look at my house and I would feel I didn’t belong.”

- Woman, Mexico

“There is no other day that brings more anxiety to me than Father’s Day ... I always feel his absence, I am always missing someone who was, with his weakness and strength, a father.”

- Man, Brazil

Many of those who made DST films were currently living with, or have spent significant parts of their childhood living with, grandparents, aunts or uncles, or other members of their extended family. Some of these film-makers spoke of the pain of being separated from their parents, but others viewed their new carers as their new parents. Whilst in many instances these carers provided love and support, in other cases children experienced discrimination and abuse.

“My parents decide to live somewhere else so my sister and I lived with my aunty. It was quite hard but I managed to live with them.”

- 13-year-old girl, South Africa

“I went to live with my grandmother and she ended up becoming my mother.”

- 14-year-old girl, Brazil

One participant described being sent to live with her grandmother at a very young age and then being moved into residential care as her grandmother felt she would receive better care there. She was later adopted and found a new source of love and support.

“From the first time I saw her, I knew she was the mum of my dreams. I didn’t have to wait long. She took a shine to me and one week later I was there, in a new home with a new life.”

- Girl, Brazil

Policy implications

- Policies should not provide support to one particular family type (such as offering tax breaks only to married couples) in the assumption that this offers the best upbringing for children. Children can be well cared for in all family types, and support should be offered equally to extended and nuclear, single and dual parent families.
- Separation from parents is often a traumatic experience for children, but extended family carers can in some cases offer better or equal care, and can become substitute mothers or fathers. This should be recognised in how they are treated in the law.
- Decisions about the extent to which children need to be monitored and protected from abuse and neglect should be made on a case-by-case basis, rather than making blanket assumptions that, for example, all children in two parent households are safe, and all of those in stepparent families are at risk.

Families are often a vital source of love, affection and support

Parents and other carers spoke of the strong love they feel for the children they care for.

“I thought that I would end up alone, just me and my husband, but God has given me a grandson who is growing up with so much love and affection. He brings me happiness and the strength to deal with anything.”

- Grandmother, Brazil

Several DST films were made by the mothers of children with disabilities in Russia. These mothers were often placed under pressure to put their children into institutional care, but spoke with gladness of their decision to keep their children with them. One mother described her initial horror at learning her son has a disability:

“God, no, no, no. A heart cry reached every part of my body and flew away and filled up the whole world. Everything had changed in my life in one moment. When I examined some information about [his disability], I realised that my whole life would have to go hand in hand with my son. You cannot leave him by himself for a minute. He cannot live in this world without permanent support.”

But, with support, this was followed by:

“Bright colours replaced the black colours of our days. I started to cheer with every little step of my son on the way to development – the first time he responded to his name, took his shoes off by himself, learned to drink from a cup, brought a ball when I asked him. All of these achievements made me feel a real storm of emotions. I am full of happiness and pride at these moments. This is victory with a capital ‘V’ because just to learn one skill can take long weeks and even months of daily work.”

- Mother, Russia. To see a full version of this film go to: <http://www.familyforeverychild.org/dst/>

Child storytellers commonly described the love and support offered by family members during normal and tough times in their life. Children value the advice and guidance from their families, but also like to be listened to.

“My mum sometimes gets worried and carries a lot on her shoulders, but I know that this is what a mother’s care is like and when she speaks, I always follow her advice because it’s always right. Sometimes I don’t understand it but above all I love her and as well as being my mum she is also my best friend.”

- 14-year-old girl, Brazil

“I stopped stealing money and I thank my parents for changing my life.”

- 14-year-old boy, Kenya. To see a full version of this film go to: <http://www.familyforeverychild.org/dst/>



“To overcome my addiction, my mother helped me a lot. She knew the difficulties I face in doing so and would encourage me constantly. ... In all these years after I left home, I was living on the streets and was addicted to these substances and my mother never stopped supporting me. ... She would look after me and it is only due to her support I was able to completely overcome my addiction... Now when I sometimes think of those days I feel if my family had not helped me then I would never had been able to overcome my addiction.”

- Images from a film made by a boy in India

The first image shows the boy sniffing solvents, the second his family worrying about him, and the third his brother trying to stop him taking drugs. To see a full version of this film, go to: <http://www.familyforeverychild.org/dst/>

“Mum said to us: ‘You can have friends, but you must follow the goodness in them. Don’t do the bad things that they do, do the good things. You can learn from them.’”

- 10-year-old girl, Guyana. To see a full version of this film go to <http://www.familyforeverychild.org/dst/>

“After dinner I went for sleeping but I kept thinking that I came so late and instead of getting angry at me, scolding me, they listened to me and understood me. ... They would take my opinions, get me things of my choice only, discuss my room with me while our house was under construction.”

- 15-year-old boy, India

DST films made by adults demonstrate that the need for family support does not end with childhood.



“It is in my family I find comfort so I went to speak to my mum, my brother and grandmother. They welcomed me with open arms and I felt the safety I needed.”

- Woman, Brazil

Image from the film showing the support of the woman’s family surrounding her.

Many of the DST films were made by children or adults from impoverished households, and children did speak of the importance of families providing food and other basic needs. However, children

spent far more time highlighting how families met their emotional needs. Many of the stories suggest that simply having the time and space to be together, to eat together and to have fun together, is what means most to children.

“The favourite part was when she gets paid at the end of the month, that was the most exciting thing for me, because she took us out shopping, we did things as a family together.”

- 13-year-old girl, South Africa

“I like when I am with her in the kitchen and she makes me the food that I enjoy, and when me and my siblings are together.”

- 14-year-old girl, Egypt



Images from a film made by a girl in India showing her father taking her into town for a treat

Policy implications

- Families are vital to child well-being, and efforts to support families and avoid family separation should be prioritised by policymakers in the same way as, say, health or education. There should be more debate and research on how families can be better supported.
- As the need for family support does not end in adulthood, it is vital that adults who have no or limited family contact, such as care leavers, are provided with other forms of support.
- Efforts need to be made to encourage families to listen to, as well guide, children.
- Policies in area such as employment, migration and housing need to acknowledge the importance of families having the opportunity to be together in a safe environment.
- Institutional care is not the solution for children with disabilities, and instead proper support must be offered to families.

Families are a key source of identity for children

Storytellers commonly spoke of the importance of ritual and celebration in their families, and of how families provided them with a sense of identity and belonging. The DST films show how families impart core values and cultural norms. As noted in the examples provided above, families often taught children the difference between right and wrong, steering them away from addiction or crime. In India and Guyana, girls spoke of the pressure that their families placed them under to conform to gender norms. However, the films also suggest that families can in some cases offer a safe space where gender norms are challenged.

“I cannot wear the clothes of my choice or have my friends over and these things appear very small to my family but for me they are big things. I feel very bad thinking about these restrictions. It feels like I have no identity in my home.”

- 15-year-old girl, India

“My mother has always supported me but my father often says to my mother: ‘You send her here and there and do not stop her from going out of the house; you only have spoilt her!’ Due to these instances only my parents often fight and sometimes my mother gets influenced by my father and tells me: ‘You belong to someone else, whatever you will do and earn from, you will give only to your in-laws.’ Listening to her talk like this I feel very bad. Such times, I feel very lonely. I think that my father anyway was against me but now my mother too is telling me all this. Such times I feel that there is no one to care for me in this whole world. When I am sad, I ask my mother ‘Ma, would you really not allow me to study?’ Then she says: ‘You study and focus on your studies, you become something in life when you get older, do not work like me in other people’s houses.’ Beyond this she doesn’t say anything. But then I understand that Mummy puts restrictions on me due to my father.”

- 16-year-old girl, India

“In our religion girls stay indoors, but my father ignored this practice and gave us all the happiness he could.”

- 16-year-old girl, India

Policy implications

- Children need families not just for food and shelter but because they give them a sense of who they are and what is right and wrong. When children are living outside of families (e.g. in residential care or on the streets) efforts need to be made to help them maintain or regain their identity (such as teaching them the language or traditions of their homes) and to guide them to make the best choices in life.
- Any efforts to change harmful cultural practices must recognise that cultural change starts at home and within families.

Families can be a source of discrimination, violence, abuse and neglect

Although the report so far has largely focused on the positive aspects of family life, children and adults also highlighted significant abuse and neglect within families. Several children reported physical abuse or neglect, which led in some cases to children running away from home to a life on the streets. Some children were forced into work by neglectful or exploitative families.

“Even though I was happy, one thing made me sad. My father never treated me well and used to hit me for anything. Even, when he asked me to bring him some food and by accident I dropped it on the floor, he beat me hard with a belt.”

- 10-year-old boy, Egypt

“My dad continued to cane me each time he was drunk. I could not take it any more and decided to go away from home to the streets. I normally got my food from the dustbins. I begged for money from passers-by.”

- 15-year-old boy, Kenya

“My uncle used to always hit me and my mother. I went to live on the streets but they were awful and I learned some bad things living on the streets.”

- 10-year-old boy, Egypt



“My father would leave me and my brothers many days in the house with nothing to eat. We used to be so hungry sometimes we totally cried. ... I can’t remember when, but we started begging on the streets because there was nothing in the house to eat. I use to think that people would look and think: ‘These boys don’t have a family? Why are they begging on the streets?’ This made me feel ashamed. ... [My father] was supposed to love his children but he spent his money partying with his friends and we had to find food for ourselves. I was unhappy and sad all the time.”

- 14-year-old boy, Guyana. To see a full version of this film, go to: <http://www.familyforeverychild.org/dst/>

Image shows him and his brothers left at home alone by his father

Child storytellers were deeply affected by violence between their parents, and again, in some cases this led to separation from the family.



Image from a film made by a 15-year-old girl in Kenya. The image shows her father beating her mother

“I heard loud voices and it came from downstairs. I ran down and my heart was pounding and there my parents were, fighting.”

- 12-year-old boy, Guyana



Image from a film made by a 14-year-old girl in Egypt showing her mother and father fighting

In a number of stories, children who had experienced violence in the home were placed in residential care, sometimes after a period on the streets. For most of the children who took part in this project, this temporary care in small children's homes offered a sanctuary and an opportunity to grow and develop (though some of the stories and evidence from elsewhere⁵ suggests that residential care, especially in large-scale institutions, is by no means always beneficial for children).

Children reported that drug and alcohol abuse by parents or carers exacerbated levels of violence in the home, and also that their separation from families exposed them to drug and alcohol abuse.

“My dad used to come back home drunk, he used to cane me without any reason. ... My dad continued to cane me each time he was drunk.”

- 15-year-old boy, Kenya

5. See EveryChild (2011) Scaling down. Reducing, reshaping and improving residential care around the world. London: EveryChild.



Image from a film made by a 15-year-old girl in Kenya showing her father drinking and then beating his children

“The drugs did not make me feel very good but they made me forget about the things that were happening at home.”

- 15-year-old girl, Kenya

Several children felt they were not treated equally to siblings or other children in the household, and this discrimination hurt them deeply.

“These might seem very little things for others but when I feel this it really hurts me, I feel a kind of loneliness. ... I just want to ask my mother, if she loves everybody, why is it visible only for my sister?”

- 14-year-old girl, India

Policy implications

- Child protection systems need to be put in place to prevent and respond to abuse and neglect within families. These can be formal government systems, involving social workers and other professionals, or less formal community-based systems, or a combination of formal and informal systems. However, children need someone to turn to when they have been abused and neglected, and a clear message needs to be delivered that such abuse and neglect is not acceptable.
- Child protection systems need to be closely linked to strategies to address domestic violence between adults, and alcohol and drug abuse.
- Children need to have safe, appropriate alternative care options open to them as it is not always in children's best interests to remain within a family where violence and abuse take place.

There is a strong link between being part of a family and education

Many of the child storytellers talked about their education in their stories. Children talked of parents and other carers supporting them to attend or do well in school, though in some cases this 'support' was viewed by children as excessive pressure to achieve.

“I realised how much my mother cared for me, working day and night and educating me. I resolved to study well and become a successful person one day.”

- 17-year-old girl, India. To see a full version of this film, go to: <http://www.familyforeverychild.org/dst/>

“She only gave me advice saying that school is very important in my life. I said to myself that this time round I have to listen to what my mother is saying, I promised her that I will never miss school again. [Up] until today I have never missed school without my mother’s permission or the teacher’s permission.”

- 15-year-old boy, Kenya

“I remember my father saying: ‘You should be studying but no, you are reading adventure books. I wouldn’t be surprised if you got into a bad school and then I would have very little to do with you.’ I felt so crushed, saddened, disappointed. It was like a giant came up to me and stomped me in my heart. I thought: ‘Why is he doing this to me?’ His words still exist in my head.”

- 14-year-old boy, Guyana



“After a few days of leaving my life of addiction I asked my mother to enrol me again in school. I wanted my studies to start again. My mother was very happy to hear this, she said: ‘I feel I finally have my son back.’ Due to the love and support of my family, I now feel happy and have resumed my studies.”

- 15-year-old boy, India. To see a full version of this film, go to: <http://www.familyforeverychild.org/dst/>

Images showing him reunited with his family after a period on the streets, and then happily back at school again

“In my family I am the most ahead in my education. Due to my mother’s help and support I am able to move ahead in my life, able to fulfil my dreams. Due to her love and trust I feel free.”

- 16-year-old girl, India

In some cases, carers were unwilling or unable to support children in their school, leading to dropout or poor achievement.



“My sister would make me work all the time due to which I missed school and eventually had to drop out. ... My father had wanted me to study and pursue higher education but my sister sold all my books. ... My father had dreams for me to become a police officer and this dream won’t be fulfilled now.”

- 16-year-old girl living with her sister after the death of her father, India

Image shows her sister making her work in the home; this led to the girl dropping out of school

Children in residential care, who had often experienced abuse and neglect and instability in their families which prevented them from attending school, spoke of education as a key benefit of alternative care.

“Because my mother was afraid for me, she sent me to Hope Village [residential care facility] where I stayed with other children. I went to school so I could learn and excel.”

- 10-year-old boy, Egypt

Policy implications

Education policymakers should recognise the links between children’s home lives and their ability to attend or do well in school. For example:




- encourage parents to play a more active role in children’s education, by, for example, involving them more in the running of schools;
- identify and support particularly at-risk children through schools, making referrals to child protection systems where necessary;
- particularly support children who are outside of families and therefore not receiving the support and encouragement that families commonly provide.

Conclusions

More than anything, these films highlight the importance of listening to children to both inform policy change and identify individual support needs. They show how DST can be used as an effective tool for gaining insights into children's lives. In some cases they provide us with new knowledge about children's priorities; in other instances, they confirm what we already know, but provide further power to our arguments that can be used in advocacy and communications around care. The films suggest a number of country specific preoccupations, or issues that especially affect certain groups of children. For example, children in Guyana repeatedly spoke about education and the enormous pressure which their families place on them to achieve. Children from the streets of Nairobi and Delhi spoke about the linkages between separation from families and drug abuse. Girls in India and Guyana spoke about gender norms and the role of families in enforcing or challenging these. This suggests that most of all policymakers must make efforts to understand the particular needs of children in their contexts and to shape responses based on these perspectives. However, the films did also reveal some more generic issues which seem to apply to children across all of the contexts. These suggest that policymakers must consider whether:

- enough is being invested in families as the best place for children to grow up;
- legislation and support for families recognises the validity of a range of different family types – e.g. are extended family carers, stepparents and single parents all able to access the support they need?
- there is adequate recognition of children's emotional as well as their material needs;
- child protection systems are able to address significant abuse and neglect within families, and whether these systems acknowledge that this abuse can take place in families of all kinds;
- there is alternative care provision for children for whom families are not a safe option that promotes their well-being, and that this provision is as family-like as possible;
- those working in education recognise the linkages between children's education and their care and make efforts to provide schools as close to home as possible that offer a protective environment for children.

Find out more about the work we do at:

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