

Report



DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVES OF FOSTER CARE IN ARMENIA: RESEARCH RESULTS ANALYSIS

I would never give the child away to a foster family, because it's the child of a person close to me. However, I would like the child to get some kind of support to help him/her feel cared."

Guardian, Yerevan

"It was announced in the village municipality, and daddy has chosen me, as they didn't have a daughter, that's why they have selected me. He had read my autobiography and understood that I am in a bad condition and my daddy decided to take me."

Foster child, girl, Gegharkunik

Acknowledgements

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Abbreviations

CERC – Center for Educational Research and Consulting
CRC – United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
DPC – Deprived of parental care (see definition of key concepts, below)
DoFWCRP – Department of Family, Women and Child Rights Protection
FAR – the Fund for Armenian Relief
G/TC – Guardianship/trusteeship commission
MLSA – Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs
MoES – Ministry of Education and Science
NGO – Nongovernmental organisation
UNICEF – United Nations Children’s Fund

Definition of key concepts

The concepts explored in this research study are based on legal definitions in the Republic of Armenia.

Adoption

The permanent legal transfer of parental rights and responsibilities for a child.

Child

Any young person under the age of 18.

Childcare institutions

These include residential care settings or orphanages, children’s homes and other group living arrangements for children in which care is provided by paid adults. Care and protection boarding institutions or special schools are considered childcare institutions since children stay there overnight and are placed there primarily for care purposes.

Deprived of parental care

When a child’s parents (or their only parent) have: died; been deprived of their parental rights; been recognised as incapable; avoided bringing up their child; or have been legally recognised as missing or unknown.

Foster care

A formal arrangement where a child deprived of parental care (DPC) lives with an unrelated adult, couple or family, following a process to assess the adults’ suitability to care for the child. The decision to create a foster family is made by guardianship/trusteeship commissions (G/TCs), governed by Article 137 of the Republic of Armenia Family Code:

“The citizens (spouses or separate persons) who have expressed a wish to take a child (children) deprived of parental care... are considered foster parents. A child (children) given to a foster family... is considered as a foster child, and a family consisting of foster parents and foster children is considered as a foster family.”

Although the Armenian legal definition is used as basis for this research, the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MLSA) website also uses another term for this arrangement – ‘family orphanage’. It refers to foster carers as ‘parent-educators’.

In Armenia, foster care is not widespread. It is almost always long-term (i.e. lasts for years or until a child turns 18) rather than a temporary arrangement. Childcare experts interviewed for this research project primarily consider ‘foster care’ to mean the foster care programme initiated in 2005.

Guardianship

Guardianship (also known as ‘trusteeship’) is a legal device to confer parental rights and responsibilities to adults who are not a child’s biological parents. Guardianship is not assigned when a child is cared for by educational, medical or other social protection institutions. According to Article 134 of the Republic of Armenia Family Code, “Custody or trusteeship is established with regard to the children who are deprived of parental care with the purpose of keeping, rearing and educating children, as well as protection of their rights and interests.”

Guardianship is assigned by local authorities where the child in question lives, within one month of the need for guardianship being made clear. In exceptional cases, guardianship can be established by the Guardianship/Trusteeship Commission (GTC) where the guardian lives. Guardianship typically follows the death of a child’s parents, the removal of parental rights as a result of antisocial behaviour, recognition of parents’ inability to parent due to illness or long absence, or parents’ reluctance to care for children.

In Armenia, guardianship is more common than foster care. Although it is not effectively regulated, perceptions about the strength of the guardianship system are one barrier to the expansion of foster care.

Potential foster parent

People who submitted applications to foster during the 2005–2006 pilot programme in Armenia and passed evaluations, but who did not become foster parents, or

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who fostered a child but then cancelled their fostering contract at their, or the foster child's, request.

Programme

The Foster Family Service programme implemented by the Fund for Armenian Relief (FAR), which is the main focus of this study. With funding from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), FAR ran the programme from 2005–2008. Since then, it has been the responsibility of the Armenian government.

Specialised institution/orphanage

In this report, a 'specialised' childcare institution is one that focuses on caring for children with disabilities.

Executive summary

This report summarises the research study 'Development Perspectives of Foster Care in Armenia', which examined the foster care pilot programme introduced in Armenia in 2005. The study aimed to find out if the pilot programme succeeded, what problems arose, how the programme could be improved and how foster care in Armenia could develop and expand effectively.

The research was conducted by CERC in December 2012 and January 2013 and was financed by Save the Children Sweden. Through in-depth interviews, it captured key stakeholders' views on foster care and guardianship, including children currently in the care of foster families or childcare institutions. Despite being the first study of its kind in Armenia, there is a need for further research as this project covers a short period and only four regions.

Foster care is not a widespread practice in Armenia. As of December 2012 there were around 15 'active' foster families in the country, although there are government commitments to support 25 foster families. Around 500 children a year come under the care of legal guardians. And latest estimates suggest that almost 2,000 children, including children with disabilities, are cared for in boarding institutions and orphanages.

Key findings

Fostering in Armenia is mostly long-term, and often confused with adoption for this reason. Only two out of 15 foster parents interviewed for this research had experienced short-term fostering.

Overall, our research found that fostering is a positive experience for children and their foster families. Children interviewed in the foster care system were satisfied with the services they received. They successfully integrated in society, made friends and relationships, and could openly communicate with others in their community. Foster children and foster families interviewed for this study feel trust and affection towards each other. Foster care is credited with improving children's knowledge and behaviour. Experts interviewed for the study believe that

foster care is better at socialising children than institutional care, and is also cheaper.

However, the Armenian foster care model would benefit from some changes to improve outcomes for children. The foster families interviewed for this study indicated a need for additional support, though they weren't always direct about this. Two-thirds of the foster parents interviewed for this study (10 out of 15) don't want to foster another child for various reasons, including their age and challenging relationships with their foster child's biological family. Most potential foster parents don't want to foster either.

Even fewer existing/potential foster carers, including staff with specialist childcare experience, are willing to foster children with disabilities – most citing a lack of psychological preparedness and access to appropriate supportive services. At the outset of this research study, we presumed that adults who worked with children with disabilities would be willing to foster children with disabilities, but research findings indicate this is not the case for most.

This research study identified three key factors that limit the expansion of foster care in Armenia, in turn reducing the number of children in care who live in family-based care settings.

Firstly, there is a lack of awareness of different forms of foster care – even some experts don't know about all the potential types of fostering. Secondly, as reflected in the interviews with foster carers and key stakeholders, the limited availability of social services and social workers in Armenia, particularly in rural areas, reduces the support available to potential foster families. Finally, the current legal framework in Armenia hinders expanding foster care – especially short-term foster placements that may particularly benefit children with disabilities – because fostering is only available to children deprived of parental care (DPC), whereas institutional care is available to children who are not officially DPC.

Key recommendations

All forms of childcare in Armenia need additional support and regulation. Biological families need more and better community-based support services to reduce the need for fostering and other forms of alternative care. Similarly, the legal guardians of children and young people need additional support and a stronger infrastructure (as a preferable alternative to fostering).

In general, fostering should be seen as a temporary alternative to childcare institutions before children can return to their biological parents. To do this effectively, we suggest:

- Developing short-term and emergency models of foster care to meet children's needs effectively.

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- Improving the legal framework for fostering, especially clarifying the status of, and support for, foster children when they turn 18.
- Developing an infrastructure to underpin fostering – notably investing in community-based social services and social security (financial) support.
- Increasing ongoing child protection training for, and regular evaluation of, current and future foster parents.
- Devising a more comprehensive approach to the care of children with disabilities, particularly by increasing community support services and treating foster care as a paid job.
- Raising awareness of foster care and the support services available to families, particularly via TV coverage and community outreach activities.

Introduction

Background to this research project

The research project 'Development perspectives of foster care in Armenia' revealed the history and the current state of Armenian care – its introduction, functioning and potential for development through qualitative and quantitative research. A key aspect of the research was identifying the perspectives of different stakeholder groups, including children themselves.

The research study was conducted in late 2012 and early 2013. It was implemented by CERC, an Armenian research organisation specialising in evaluating educational problems, processes and institutions. The project was funded by Save the Children Sweden, a global advocate for equal rights for all children, including children's right to grow up in a family environment. Save the Children staff, including Armenian staff representatives and global child protection specialists, reviewed and commented on all research tools and the research report, and presented key findings to the Armenian Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs.

This research was the first study of its kind in Armenia. However, the research only covered a short period of time and a limited geographical area (Lori, Gegharkunik, Yerevan and Ararat provinces). Thus, there is a need to conduct more extensive research to identify the possibility of introducing foster care in other provinces of Armenia, assess public awareness of foster care among the whole population and willingness to become a foster parent, as well as to explore biological parents' views on foster care.

Alternative care for children

All programmes implemented by Save the Children are based on the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children endorsed by the United Nations, and regional and national legislation.

The CRC clearly specifies the importance of a safe family environment for children and the state's responsibility to ensure alternative care for all children who are deprived of a family environment. Save the Children works with governments and organisations to improve the lives of children, families and communities by using the Guidelines as a roadmap to focus on supporting a range of appropriate family environments for children without appropriate care. First and foremost, governments, donors, civil society, private sector and communities must commit to – and invest in – families, working to prevent children's separation from their families, supporting families to care for their children, and seeking alternative family-based care for children for whom alternative care is necessary and appropriate.

The Guidelines are clear that institutional childcare should be avoided whenever possible, and that institutional care must be time-limited, meet the specific needs of each child and follow quality standards. Equally, states' effort to improve institutions must not take resources from family support and the development of family-based alternatives. Research shows that leaving children up to three years old in institutions has an irreversible impact on their future development and socialisation.

Save the Children recognises that each individual child is different and as such, prioritises a variety of alternative care options based on what is in the best interests of that child.. The first consideration is to keep them in their biological families and if that is not possible, then in the extended family (through what is known in Armenia as 'guardianship' or kinship care). Ideally a guardian family would be selected following assessment, where the family could receive state support and monitoring if appropriate – conditions that are not currently met in Armenia. Another option for older children may be independent supervised living arrangements. If these options are not possible, domestic adoption or inter-country adoption are other forms of permanent family-based care if a child is not able to stay within his or her family. Foster care as alternative to institutional care and a way to care for a child in a family temporarily before a longer-term placement, such as kinship care or domestic adoption, can be agreed upon. Given the significant impact on a child's developmental, cognitive, and social development, Save the Children considers institutional care as the last resort.

The Armenian context

Since gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Armenia has undergone continuous social and economic reforms. The country, with a population of just over 3 million, has a fragile economy, high rates of unemployment and poverty and heavy dependence on external assistance.

Childcare and child protection in Armenia has undergone dramatic change since 1991 and is still in the process of development. While the legal bases for adoption, guardianship and foster care exist and placing a child

deprived of parental care (DPC) in an institution is officially a last resort (Armenian Family Code, Article 111.1), in practice institutions are still used more widely than other forms of care.

Nearly 2,000 children in Armenia live in residential care institutions. As well as six state orphanages and eight care and protection boarding institutions, the country has four other orphanages, which 'recruit' more children from vulnerable families. Over 80% of these children have at least one living parent – they are 'social orphans'. Around 800–1,000 biological families in Armenia temporarily leave their children in institutions in order to take them back when they can.

According to data provided by the Government of Armenia, 75% of children in state residential childcare institutions have some kind of disability. However, many NGOs and community advocates working with children in care believe this number is exaggerated. In 2012, there were two residential childcare institutions in Armenia that specialised in the care of children with disabilities – Gyumri Children's Home and Nor Kharberd Special Orphanage. In January 2013 the Mari Izmiryan Orphanage became specialised, caring only for children with disabilities (other children are being moved to other childcare institutions) and Yerevan's Zatik orphanage became a daycare centre. According to the MLSA's official website, on 6 November 2012 over 780 children were being raised in Armenian orphanages, 416 of whom were in specialised orphanages.

Local guardianship/trusteeship commissions (G/TCS) staffed by volunteers oversee the process of placing children under guardianship or foster care.

Approximately 500 children a year come under the guardianship of an adult who is not their biological parent. This includes cases where children live with and are cared for by their guardians and instances when a child is appointed a guardian for practical reasons, even if the guardian is not their full-time carer.

Since 1999 various programmes in Armenia have created foster families, resulting in approximately 25 foster families in the country at the end of 2012. It is worth noting that not all 'approved' foster families actively foster all of the time, and not all foster families in Armenia exist as a result of the foster care programme studied in this research.

Experts interviewed for this research believe that most of the children who need to be placed in a foster family are children with disabilities who currently live in childcare institutions. Similarly, the position of the Armenian state body in charge of child issues is that only children with disabilities who live in childcare institutions are in need of foster care. However, the official position is also that children with disabilities who attend special and boarding schools and have biological parents should not be fostered.

Research goal and objectives

The research study 'Development perspectives of foster care in Armenia' aimed to highlight results from the introduction of foster care in Armenia. This included identifying perceptions of foster care, barriers to establishing foster care and what is needed to develop the practice in Armenia.

The research objectives were to identify:

- The characteristics of Armenian foster care.
- The support and supervision of foster families.
- The possibility of different types of foster care.
- The possibility of foster care for children with disabilities.
- Child rights protection in different types of alternative family-based care. The steps needed to expand foster care services. Collective views on different types of alternative care.

Research methodology

Expert interviews

In-depth interviews with 20 experts were used to find out stakeholders' perspectives on current foster care practice and how the quality of foster care services can be improved.

Expert research participants included representatives from MLSA, the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES), local and international organisations and regional and community child protection bodies (G/TCS).

Interviews with foster parents

In-depth interviews with foster parents were used to identify the needs of children under foster care and to find out what could motivate families to take children with disabilities under foster care.

The research team interviewed current foster parents in Armenia, as well as some parents whose foster children were over the age of 18. In total, 15 interviews were undertaken with foster parents, as well as parents who terminated foster care before the child's 18th birthday.

Interviews with children in foster care

In-depth interviews were used to identify the opinions of children in foster care about the practice.

During the research 14 children were interviewed, including all children under foster care at the time. Children over the age of 18 who stayed with their foster families were interviewed as well as the children under current foster care. In addition, one interview was undertaken with a child who used to be in foster care.

Interviews with potential foster parents

In-depth interviews were used to identify the expectations of potential foster parents and their willingness to foster children with disabilities.

Families who have registered as foster parents since 2005 and who passed the evaluation are referred to as 'potential foster parents' in this report, if they have not yet fostered a child, or if they did so but then ended foster care prematurely for some reason. During the research nine potential foster parents were interviewed – all potential foster parents apart from those whose current place of residence is unknown.

Interviews with guardians

In-depth interviews were used to identify the differences between paid and unpaid care and to understand what guardians need to improve the quality of children's care.

Nine guardians were selected by targeted sampling and then interviewed as part of this research project. The names of guardians in each community were obtained from the local authorities, and then 'real' guardians who live with and care for the children under their care were identified (as opposed to 'formal' guardians who have legal responsibility but no caring role).

Interviews with staff representatives from childcare institutions

These interviews were used to identify the willingness of workers from specialised schools and childcare institutions, who have professional experience of children with disabilities, to foster children with disabilities.

Our researchers interviewed 20 workers at special institutions in the regions covered by this research, including staff from Gavar Special School, Vanadzor Special School, Marie Izmirlian Orphanage in Yerevan and Nor-Kharberd Specialised Orphanage. The interviewees represented staff with many years of experience, and a variety of different professions and duties, such as psychologist, special educator and social worker.

Semi-standardised interviews with children in institutions

These interviews were used to understand the desire and willingness of children who live in institutions to live in a foster family.

The semi-standardised interviews were undertaken at Gavar, Vanadzor and Marie Izmirlian orphanages, Yerevan, as well as with the children cared for by Yerevan's Fund for Armenian Relief (FAR). In total, 80 interviews were conducted with children living in institutions, mostly over the age of 12. Child interviewees were selected on the basis of quota sampling and the interviewers were given instructions to select an equal number of girls and boys and an equal number of children from each institution.

Analysis of the research results

Armenian foster care in practice

Armenian law covers the adoption, guardianship and foster care of children. Article 111.1 of the Armenian Family Code indicates that placing a DPC child in an institution should be a last resort. However, in practice this is often the first step – many children are placed in an institution before a court decision about their status. Once a child is placed in an institution in Armenia, funding mechanisms favour the child remaining in the institution.

To try and combat this immediate placement into an institution, since 1999 various programmes in Armenia have created foster families. The first scheme, a joint initiative of the Municipality of Cretey of the French Republic, the Sister Cities Committee and the Ministry of Social Protection focused on fostering orphans aged 3–12, resulting in nine children being fostered in eight families across different regions.

Most fostering in Armenia has resulted from the Foster Family Service programme (henceforth referred to as the programme) implemented by the FAR, which was the main focus of this research study. Launched with funding from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), this programme formed 16 foster families in 2005–2008. FAR funded, supported and supervised these families before transferring its responsibilities to the Armenian government.

The goal of the programme was to create a warm and secure environment for DPC children who were living in childcare institutions:

1. To create a family network to provide a natural environment for children's upbringing and development.
2. To create support services for biological families and prepare them to be reunited with their children.

The government decided to prioritise long-term foster care in the pilot programme, partly because the children selected for the programme were classified as "DPC" and therefore needed long-term care.

The programme was planned in three regions: Yerevan, Lori and Gegharkunik – Yerevan had long waiting lists of adults who wanted to adopt children, Lori had been developing its social services, some of which were delivered by NGOs, and Gegharkunik because Gavar Orphanage staff, and especially its director, had a positive attitude towards foster care. Over 130 families, mainly (70.8%) from rural areas, expressed interest and registered to become foster families from the three regions.

In practice, foster families from Yerevan weren't included in this programme, partly because of assumptions that urban dwellers would be less likely to foster a child and partly because of funding limitations – the programme budget only

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covered care for 25 children. Instead, several cases of child guardianship turned into fostering in Yerevan, following an application and evaluation process.

In December 2012, 25 foster families in Armenia were receiving funding:

- Twelve beneficiary families of the Foster Family Service programme.
- Eight beneficiary families of the Cretey programme.
- Five families in Yerevan.

Despite the fact that foster care existed in Armenia before the Foster Family Service programme, and some foster families have been created through other schemes, experts interviewed for this research study primarily understand 'foster care' to relate to the Foster Family Service programme.

"By saying 'foster care' in Armenia we clearly understand the state programme of 2008 by which 25 children were given under care of families. Beforehand, training for parents was organised and the consent of children and parents were received, in order to see what the outcome will be." -MLSA representative

In addition to Armenia's 25 foster families, the beneficiaries of SOS Children's Villages are defined as foster parents by the experts interviewed for this research (but representatives of these families were not included in the research study).

"The SOS villages are an example of foster care, where sisters and brothers live together, again it is a family model, till now there were only mothers in those families, but we want to have a father, who will go to work and will be back home." -MLSA representative

Payment for foster care

Under the 1999 Cretey fostering scheme, foster parents signed an agreement with the Ministry of Social Protection. They received a monthly payment of Armenian drams (AMD) equivalent to USD 65 for each child's care and an annual payment (equivalent to USD 50) at the beginning of each school year.

The Foster Family Service programme also involved payments to foster families – this was clear to foster parents from the outset. All of the foster parents interviewed for this study mentioned that they initially received less money – AMD 50,000–60,000 (USD 123–148), but now they receive over AMD 85,000 (USD 210) per child per month. The programme initially stipulated that every family should receive Armenian drams equivalent to USD 140 for one child. This increased in 2008 when the state took over, linked to national budget funding stipulations for state childcare institutions.

The monthly amount of money given to a foster family for keeping one child is calculated by the amount of money stipulated for the care of one child in an orphanage, which is stated in the state budget of the Republic of Armenia in the given year.

One of the foster parents is paid for the one child's care and upbringing, with the minimum monthly wage stated in Article I of the Republic of Armenia Law on Minimum Monthly Salary, for two children... 150% of the minimum monthly wage, and for three or more children ... 200% of the minimum monthly wage.

Source: MLSA

How (potential) foster parents learned about fostering Public awareness of the Foster Family Service programme was raised via TV, radio, newspapers and community meetings. This study shows that foster parents in Gegharkunik region learned about foster care opportunities via the community – community meetings with the programme team, community announcements and local administrations. In contrast, most foster parents in Lori region mentioned they learned about it from TV.

"I was informed from the village administration that the children of orphanages were going to be placed in families, and whoever wants can come and take [one]." Foster mother, Gegharkunik
"Our son-in-law works at the town council. He came and said that there is such a programme, come to Gavar and register." Foster mother, Gegharkunik

"My relative learned about the foster care and told me." Foster mother, Lori

Potential foster parents also mentioned that they learned about the foster care opportunity either from TV or local administrations and meetings.

Parents noted that during community meetings the conditions for foster care were presented in detail: what documents were needed in order to register as a foster parent, the procedures to follow and that a contract would be signed. But there is one disputed question: at the beginning of the programme, potential foster parents were informed that foster care would be counted as (paid) work so that foster parents would accumulate work experience, but this issue has not yet been formalised.

"We decided to become foster parents as we were unemployed at that time, we would have work at home, ... we would gain important work experience, and it would be nice to bring up a child in [the] family."

Potential foster parent, Gegharkunik province

Payment of foster carers

Registration of foster families

During the first years of the Foster Family Service programme, it was coordinated in Yerevan by the FAR office, and in new centres established by the programme in Lori and Gegharkunik. These offices coordinated the registration, selection and evaluation of foster parent applicants, as well as follow-up support and monitoring.

Research interviews with foster parents and representatives of the Department of Family, Women and Child Rights Protection (DoFWCRP) and G/TCs for this study indicated that all foster parents submitted the extensive documents requested on time, including a copy of their passport, marriage certificate (if married) and permission from their spouse to foster, as well as details of their living situation, job role and income and health status. Around 300 families in Lori and Gegharkunik regions registered an application for foster care and around 121 of them were pre-selected as potentially suitable.

“It’s very hard for foster parents to collect so many documents. It isn’t enough that one wants to take care of someone else’s child, we make them go here and there to bring documents. The process of giving them documents should be facilitated.”
NGO representative

Evaluation of foster families

As defined in Armenian government decrees, the initial evaluation of potential foster parents during the pilot phase of the foster care programme took place within one month of their application. The programme evaluated applicant families in three stages – a preliminary evaluation, a main evaluation and a multi-agency evaluation.

Preliminary evaluation

Based on the documents they supplied, applicants were assessed on four standards.

1. Presence of two parents in a family

According to Article 20 of the Armenian Family Code any adult can be a foster parent but at the pilot stage of the programme the main emphasis was on two-parent families. Our research identified two single-parent families, one of which fosters a girl and the other a boy.

2. Distance of the applicant’s residence from the programme’s regional office and the region’s administrative centre

Potential foster families’ distance from the administrative centre of each region reflects the availability of social services and other forms of support for foster families. As Table I shows, potential and actual foster families were located no more than 68 km from the regional centres.

Table I Allocation of foster families by regions

	Foster families	Potential foster families
Gegharkunik region		
Gavar	1	
Lusakunk (67.6 km)	1	5
Verin Getashen (31.3)	1	
Astghadzor (37.2)	1	
Tsovazard (18.2)	1	
Tsovak (61.8)	1	
Lanjaghbyur (11.5)		2
Torfavan (66.4)		1
Khachaghbyur (68)		1
Total	6	9
Lori region		
Vanadzor	1	1
Stepanavan (35.3)	2	2
Gugark (16.5)	1	
Vahagni (20.3)	1	
Margahovit (20.2)	2	4
Shahumyan (7.4)		1
Dsegh (30.7)		1
Total	7	9
Yerevan		
Yerevan	0	7
Total	13	25

3. Availability of NGOs and other social services near the applicant's place of residence

This assessment was designed to facilitate ongoing supervision of foster families, which is less feasible in rural communities. According to experts interviewed for this research, the selection of rural foster families was somehow conditioned by local community governors’ preferences, but also by the positive reputation of the applicant families. Primary services such as schools and medical centres are available in all the communities where successful foster parent applicants live, but community-based social work was not available in any of the communities.

During the research the only community where a social worker was available (apart from regional centres) was Margahovit. As the supervision and funding of foster care have been implemented by the state since 2008, it was necessary to introduce social work institutes in the communities. According to the fostering contract and the G/TC statute, G/TCs are responsible for foster care supervision, but this did not always happen to a high standard – or at all – because G/TC members are unpaid workers (volunteers).

“Even the [fostering] contract affairs are regulated by us, although it should be renewed by the G/TC annually.”
DoFWCRP representative, Lori

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“At most once a year the village municipalities are calling to renew the [fostering] contracts.”

DoFWCRP representative, Gegharkunik

The foster families expressed positive opinions about the regional bodies and the support and supervision of G/TC representatives. For more detail, see the ‘Professional support for, and supervision of, foster families’ section.

4. Presence (absence) of children in the family

Four foster families who took part in the research did not have biological children, but this lack of parental experience did not appear to have a negative impact how the foster children or their foster families felt they were raised.

“After I was transferred to a family, I have never felt alone and sad.”

Foster child, boy, Gegharkunik

“When I get angry, I sit and cry, I never hit or beat. I have never needed help, I have always been able to find common ground with the child.”

Foster mother, Gegharkunik

“I always talk with the child in order to understand the child’s situation.”

Foster mother, Lori

Main evaluation stage

The main evaluation stage involved home visits, a detailed interview with a member of the applicant family (usually the head of the family), questioning other members of the family and monitoring.

The final selection of foster families was based on their assessment against four standards.

1. The family’s financial status

“Those families can become foster families, which have employment, stable income, and in rural conditions cattle and land.”

Most of the foster families interviewed in our research are rural residents who own cattle and land. Their average monthly income was AMD 100,000–150,000 (USD 247–371) – in line with average Armenian salaries – plus foster care grants. Despite this income level, not all foster parents have stable employment, mainly because of migration for work and agricultural demands. Most interviewees stated that fostering didn’t have a large positive or negative impact on their finances, because family finances are used in accordance with needs:

“The monthly income of the family amounts USD 250–300, not taking into account milk products from the cattle. Foster care for our family is neither income, nor expenditure. Sometimes it happens that my husband’s salary is completely spent on the child, and... the child’s amount, it is spent on family needs.”

Foster mother, Lori

2. Presence (absence) of biological children in the foster family

Having a child at home was considered a positive attribute of potential foster families. It is worth noting that in many cases the foster family’s own children had already grown up and left their home, so the parents wished to take care and bring up another child who needed them.

3. Relations between family members and agreement about becoming a foster family

In general the foster families discussed the decision to foster with family members before applying. But there were some cases when only one parent wanted to foster, which caused problems afterwards. This is despite the fact that the written consent of both parents is required to become a foster family.

“We have three sons, and because of not having a daughter we decided to take a girl. I was against, saying that it is hard to bring up a daughter, but my husband insisted... If the child would like to stay in this house after [she turns 18], I would be against it, and the father for [it]. The [authorities] promised to give a house, let them give it or the child will be left outdoors. My sons will get married soon, the family will get bigger, if she doesn’t marry and form her own family... [and] have her own place to live, we won’t be able to take care of her.”

Foster mother, Gegharkunik

“I am close [to] daddy; it’s hard to share with mammy. Daddy is friendly with me.”

Foster child, girl, Gegharkunik (the same family)

4. The motives for applying to foster

Ideally, a family’s motivation for fostering a child is to help the child, to bring happiness to the family and to feel young again.

The research highlighted the fact that there was no overriding consensus among experts or family members – some perceived foster care as a service and others viewed it as an honour. Our interviews identified a number of motives for becoming a foster parent.

a. They didn’t have their own child, had only child or only had children of one sex

“We are a married couple of 16 years, we don’t have a child, that is why we have decided to take a child. It is the right way for us, because we did not want to take a child from our relatives.” Foster mother, Gegharkunik

“Our child died during the earthquake at the age of nine, my wife got ill and she is unable to have [more] children. That is why we have decided to take a child and take care of him.”

Foster father, Lori

b. Their own children were adults or did not live with their parents

“We have five children, four daughters and a son. My daughters got married and my son has gone to seminary to study, we are left alone. We can’t live alone, that is why my husband decided

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to take a child to take care of him.”

Foster mother, Gegharkunik province

“We thought that soon our daughter will get married, and our son will go to live with his wife’s family. Why should we stay alone, we are going to take care of a child and... he brings the wood and helps us.”

Foster mother, Gegharkunik

c. They wanted to do something good

All parents expressed readiness to keep their foster child after they turned 18, except one case that was influenced by a change in the foster family structure. The majority of parents who fostered because they don’t have biological children or because their children have grown up, plan to continue caring for their foster child after the age of 18. Some foster families consider foster care as a form of adoption, although the Armenian model of foster care does not support adoption.

“We learned about the foster care programme at the village municipality, and wished to bring a child home, to help the child of an orphanage.” - Foster mother, Gegharkunik

d. They were unemployed

“After I learned about foster care on TV and being unemployed, I love working, I applied to the municipality of Vanadzor and got registered.” - Foster mother, Lori

5. The family’s wish to provide the necessary space and time for a child

Not all foster families were able to provide a separate room for the child – in Armenia it is common for families to live in one- or two-bedroom dwellings. There are some cases when the child’s bed is in the same room as their foster parents, or the child sleeps in the living room. There are cases when a family’s housing conditions were comfortable when they became a foster family, but worsened afterwards.

“I made my room myself. At first it was a big living room, together with grandfather we built a wall, placed a door, furnished [it], moved the computer here and it became a very nice room.”

Foster child, boy, Lori

“The wall of one of side of our house has been destroyed because of hail, because of that we don’t use one of the rooms, my mother and I sleep in the same room, in separate beds. There are two rooms, one of which is used as a kitchen, living room and dining room. The room is heated by a wood heater.”

Foster child, girl, Gegharkunik

Most foster parents spend time with the child; they play, do housework and go out together.

“We often organise family gatherings, celebrate birthdays, the new year and pay visits to relatives. I like it very much.”

Foster child, boy, Lori

6. The family’s attitude to relations between the biological family and the child

In general, children selected for the foster care programme were those who weren’t in touch with their biological families, but there were cases when a child had a biological family. When relations between the biological family and the foster family have not been supervised, problems have arisen between the foster family and the child (see the section ‘Foster care of children with biological families’).

7. Willingness to participate in training courses

The evaluation criteria required potential foster families to recognise the importance of the Foster Family Support programme’s training courses and be willing to attend them.

All foster parents eagerly attended training on different topics during the nine-month evaluation period, where they learned about foster care, its legal aspects, child psychology and child rights.

8. The family should clearly understand the difference between adoption and foster care

All foster parents interviewed for this research clearly understood the difference between adoption and foster care. Some foster parents who do not have biological children considered their foster child as their own child, but have not adopted the child because that is not possible under the programme. This question also relates to the perception of foster care – a foster parent who clearly understands their responsibilities knows that they could not adopt their foster child.

“At the beginning I didn’t think about the adoption, but now I think about it, he is my son.”

Foster mother, Lori province

Similarly, child interviewees who live in foster families think they will always stay there and address their foster parents as ‘mama’ and ‘papa’. In other words, they do not realise that the foster family is a temporary home until they become an adult or are reunited with their biological families, they consider it their own family. One child kept saying “my parents who adopted me” throughout the interview.

Effectiveness of the initial selection criteria

The programme’s criteria for selecting foster parents turned out to be effective and could usefully serve as basis for revised foster care procedures in Armenia. The objective criteria, such as whether foster parents have biological children, their income level, housing situation, proximity to social and public services are quite straightforward.

However, issues related to managing relationships with foster children’s biological parents and the future of foster children (e.g. how and where the child should live after the age of 18, and their entitlement to state benefits) need to be revised, based on evidence. The current system does not have specific mechanisms to manage relationships

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between foster and biological parents – this is left to foster parents, whereas the frequency of children’s contact with biological family members and possible reunification of biological families should be decided together with the child, foster family and biological family with professionals such as social workers or case managers. Foster families also require more specific information and training around these issues before fostering, particularly in the case of long-term placements.

On the basis of our research findings, we recommend the following steps to refine the evaluation and selection of foster parents:

1. Plan long-term training for future foster families.
2. Conduct a stage-by-stage evaluation rather than just an initial evaluation – parents’ perceptions may change during training, and even before the training some parents with good potential could be rejected based on the preliminary evaluation.
3. Pay attention to whether other members of a potential foster family agree with the idea of having a foster child in the family.
4. Professional services, not foster parents, should manage and regulate contact between biological parents and foster children, taking into account the child’s best interests.

Foster parents’ and foster children’s uncertainty about adoption needs to be resolved as it creates difficulties.

All children under foster care have the official status of children without parental care: but they cannot be adopted because the biological parent hasn’t refused the child or has not been legally deprived of their parental rights. The programme was clear that foster parents could not adopt children who have biological parents and that foster care is temporary care without parental rights. The programme specified that biological families should be reunited when the child/ren and parents are ready.

We suggest:

- Clarifying a child’s legal status before or during foster care so that foster parents know where they stand.
- This procedure should be initiated in childcare institutions and continue in foster care families, under the jurisdiction of appropriate bodies (DoFWCRP).
- The expectations required of foster parents should be clear and transparent for all.
- The procedures should clearly outline all cases when foster care could change to other forms of care, such as adoption.

This research indicates that families involved in the programme did not prioritise monetary reimbursement, because they have their own income but they didn’t refuse the offer of money because they were not high-income families. As ‘ordinary families’, the prospect of not getting state aid after adoption might have influenced the idea of adoption.

Multi-agency evaluation

Officially, this stage involved DoFWCRP staff, regional children’s rights protection departments, members of the local G/TC and FAR staff. However, our interviews with G/TC representatives indicated that they didn’t participate actively, but as they were well-informed about the community they could give useful information to help select the right family for a child.

“I know families that have passed, and it surprised me. [Selection bodies] should cooperate with the community, the community knows the families much better.”
G/TC member, Lori

This final evaluation process involved five stages, as outlined below.

1. Training the foster family

As mentioned above, all potential and actual foster parents participated in the training. But there were some cases in which only one foster parent actively attended the training.

“My son and husband were attending the training mostly.”
Foster mother, Gegharkunik

Foster parents mentioned that they were trained at the beginning of their foster care but that many questions have arisen since then – as the children grew up, the foster parents needed new parenting skills. One foster parent mentioned that training should be ongoing for this reason.

2. Case studies of children in residential institutions, selection of children for foster care

As part of the programme, children from FAR’s child support centre and Vanadzor and Gavar childcare institutions were placed in foster families, based on set criteria. The government’s primary requirement was that the children selected for foster care should be: outside the age of active adoption (approximately 0–6 years of age); classified as DPC; and want to live in another family. To assist selection, the programme team held meetings at the childcare institutions, gave presentations about foster care, and held special meetings with children who were considered ‘appropriate’ nominees.

Potential foster children’s personal files were then studied in detail, additional meetings were held with each child, and if the child had biological parent/s, their written consent for fostering was obtained, although the foster care decree did not require biological parents’ consent.

The children selected for foster care under the programme were primarily those who did not have strong and ongoing relationships with their biological family, but in some cases biological parents’ visits became more frequent after their children were placed in a foster family. Our interviewees attributed this to biological parents’ jealousy and shame, thinking that their child would love and become attached to their foster parents and would forget about them. Our expert and foster parent interviewees believed that biological parents sometimes felt ashamed that others were

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raising their children, and felt that local people would think they couldn't take care of their own children.

It is worth noting that our research team met with only one biological parent, which is not enough to draw firm conclusions, but some of the experts we interviewed expressed the following opinion: *"If the child has a biological parent, let that amount of money be given to him/her to take care of his/her child, if the biological parent doesn't suffer from any mental and/or physical diseases."*

"When biological parents learned that these families are given money for their children's care, they came and asked that money to take care of their children on their own."

MLSA representative

Experts noted that only the children who are DPC because they do not have biological parents (rather than because of parental shortcomings or absence) should be placed in foster families, in order to avoid further, particularly psychological, distress for the foster family and the child. Furthermore, the experts we interviewed believed that only children outside the age of active adoption should be selected for foster care.

3. Preparation of community members and relatives

Before foster placements were finalised, foster parents and the programme team prepared the local community and relatives of the foster family.

"At school he/she is a very respected child, everybody loves him/her. I have visited the school and warned the teachers and the headmaster to be attentive so that the classmates cannot offend, hurt and tease him/her, and such things have never occurred."

Foster mother, Gegharkunik

"Relatives accepted the news of the child's adoption joyfully. They were inviting the child to their houses, were presenting gifts, they love him/her very much."

Foster mother, Gegharkunik

"I feel a complete member of the village school, I have a lot of friends... I feel free in the village school despite the period when I was attending a school in Gavar from the orphanage. At school in Gavar two of us knew each other from the orphanage, and we were communicating with each other only. We used to know the other children of school, but they stayed away from us and we did the same. But here it is quite different, there has never been any difference between the children, I have friends and everything is fine."

Foster child, boy, Gegharkunik

4. Work with the selected children, matching a family and child, temporary placement in foster family

To match foster children and foster families before making a final decision, the programme arranged experimental visits and meetings involving several overnight stays with foster families.

One of the NGO experts felt that experimental foster placements could be difficult because if a family does not accept the child it may cause additional stress for the child. This expert recommended only short meetings between the child and the potential foster family.

Programme staff and local authority representatives told us that they aimed to find a family for the specific child, and not the other way round. However, foster parents interviewed for our research claimed that they mentioned the type of child they would like and were given that kind of child to foster, although there are some cases when foster parents said they 'wished' to have a boy/girl, but were given a child of the opposite sex and didn't complain.

Despite the principle of the child's need being considered first, there were some cases where the foster parents' choice was prioritised, although this wasn't apparently an obstacle in the child receiving appropriate treatment and care.

Some of the children interviewed for this research did not know why they were placed in their particular foster family, though they were very pleased to be there. Other children we interviewed thought that their foster families had selected them.

"When we were told that there was such a programme, I wished to be placed in a family of pedagogues, and for me exactly such a family was selected. At the beginning, I stayed for a few days' trial. Afterwards, when I got used to the family and my opinion was asked by the foster care programme workers, I was finally placed here."

Foster child, boy, Lori

"The main reason for my allocation to this family is that my own father's name is the same as my foster father's name."

Foster child, boy, Gegharkunik

"It was announced in the village municipality, and daddy has chosen me, as they didn't have a daughter, that's why they have selected me. He had read my autobiography and understood that I am in a bad condition and my daddy decided to take me."

Foster child, girl, Gegharkunik

"Three children from the orphanage were taken to one family. My current mother came, she liked me and selected me. I stayed in the family for two days as an experiment. Afterwards, I permanently moved there."

Foster child, boy, Lori

"They selected me, I didn't participate in the selection. This was the last family, the other families refused me after looking through my files. At first when I came it was very hard, especially in terms of meals – mama cooked very greasy, and for me eating greasy soups was very unusual."

Foster child, girl, Gegharkunik

"Seven or eight children were brought to our house, they said to take one of them, someone close to our heart. My son, who attended those training sessions, is very canny, he said, 'let's take

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this child'. It was a very poor child, they gave him to us in order for them to grow up together, to communicate and become a bit adroit."

Foster mother, Gegharkunik

5. Placing a child into a foster family, signing contracts

The final decision on foster care placements involved members of the programme team, province-level child protection bodies and MLSA representatives.

At the start of the programme, fostering contracts were signed between the foster family's local G/TC, the FAR office and the foster family. Initially these projects were renewed monthly, then every three months and finally annually, based on monitoring results.

Since 2008, fostering contracts have been signed between the local G/TC and the foster parent and renewed annually. All parents confirmed that they have signed the contract and are familiar with all of its points. They mentioned only one point of confusion – initially they believed that the contract stated that each foster child would receive a house when they reached 18, but then they understood this was not in the contract. Some of the potential foster parents also said they were told that foster care was to be considered as work in the contract, but then this was not included in the contract. Foster parents also mentioned delays in receiving their foster care grants, due to contract extensions and the new financial year.

Professional support for, and supervision of, foster families

During the initial programme years the working group visited foster families and held separate meetings with parents and children twice a month. Once the state took over the programme in 2008, these visits became monthly.

"There were some cases when we visited the foster family by watching his/her behaviour and how he/she felt, there was no need to ask about it."

DoFWCRP representative, Gegharkunik

"The system of supervision works very well. At the beginning every month, twice a month they were visiting the child, holding separate conversations with us and the child. During recent years visits are paid twice a year. In 2012 the social worker had personal meetings with the child, once in the summer, and for the second time a month ago."

Foster mother, Gegharkunik

Although the initial programme officially ended in 2008, FAR's workers still periodically pay visits to foster families. During our research fieldwork, two children were at FAR's children's support centre because they needed a psychologist – their foster parents had referred the issue to FAR. Interviews with those children were conducted at the FAR office. Regional bodies also periodically pay visits to and telephone foster parents, who in turn keep in touch

with the regional body and FAR staff – they know the phone numbers and can call them up any time. In general, foster children are also acquainted with the programme team members, mentioning that team members have visited them and they can call them if they need to. However, children and adults perceive this source of support differently – the majority of foster children consider their foster family as their own family and do not want a third party to be involved in their family problems.

In this sense the G/TCs' role is not active – they are informed that there are foster families in the community, they keep in touch with them and meet them to renew contracts but rarely (if ever) visit them. This is because G/TCs do not want to interfere in family life, but also because G/TC members are volunteers – they have their own direct responsibilities to the G/TC, which are a struggle because they lack time and sometimes the appropriate skills and abilities. There are two families in which a foster parent is a G/TC member, and other cases in which G/TC members are more informed about the community's foster families and pay frequent visits to them.

Some parents, especially those who have fostered a child for a short period of time, complained about the support services available to them, saying they were initially told the child would receive all that was needed, but when the child had health problems and they didn't receive any help, the child was returned to the institution. The fostering contract clearly states that providing medical treatment for a child is the responsibility of foster parents, but in general, according to Armenian law, all DPC children have the right to unpaid healthcare services.

"It so happened that the child was ill, we had bought medicine and had taken to the hospital, we shouldn't wait for someone to come and help, this is our child."

Foster mother, Lori

Despite this slight misunderstanding about healthcare, all parents were generally pleased with the support services. Only in two cases were parents uncertain about fostering children after the age of 18, specifically in relation to housing provision. Despite concerns about the latter, most of the foster parents (with the exception of one) stated that they won't leave the child 'outdoors' if the state does not provide a house for a child, but the issue causes uncertainty for both foster parents and foster children. The children we interviewed are unaware that their foster family is only obliged to keep them till the age of 18 – they believe they will live there forever.

"They should give the promised house, or the child will be left outdoors. My sons will get married soon, their spouses will come and we won't be able to keep the child."

Foster mother, Gegharkunik

"The most serious problem is the absence of the law to regulate the further life of children after 18. Children are left outdoors."

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State support should exist.”
G/TC member, Lori

Foster parents observed that children need to work with a psychologist, especially in cases when the child has biological parents and is in touch with them, or is unaware about his/her biological family.

“I am very much concerned about the uncertainty of my past, what could have happened that at the age of three when I was put to an orphanage. I would like to see my biological parents. It is a painful topic for me and I always think about that and it makes me sad. I wish I knew whether they exist or not.”

Foster child, boy, Gegharkunik

Financial reimbursements for foster carers are no longer supervised, but before 2008 the programme team ensured that foster children were not in need of anything. Since the state took over the scheme in 2008 there has not been a mechanism for supervising the money given to foster families – the G/TC and DoFWCRP representatives we interviewed felt that would interfere in family life (see the section ‘Payment for foster care’ for more information).

“Should we have gone and asked whether and on what the money was spent? It is a family, it can happen so that in one month the child’s money will be spent on wood for home heating, and in the other month the whole amount is spent on the child.”

G/TC representative, Lori

The programme was supposed to develop individual work plans with the foster parents, but the foster parents were unaware of this. Parents’ attitudes towards services such as psychological support differ – only those who use the services consider them important.

Foster care outcomes

Foster care has economic and social impacts. The Armenian state pays AMD 85,000 (USD 210) to foster parents, whereas childcare institutions receive a state allocation of AMD 184,000 (USD 604) for each child, so from a financial point of view foster care is cheaper. But these situations are not directly comparable. As the experts told us, children in childcare institutions are allocated more money, but they also use more services – such as those of psychologists and social workers – that are mostly not available in foster families or in the community. On the other hand, children in institutions do not grow up in a family atmosphere or have roots in the community, depriving them of the chance to use those models in the future.

Foster care, as an alternative form of family-based care, benefits a child’s active socialisation, which is why many experts find foster care the most preferable form of alternative care (after guardianship by a family member or close family friend). All experts, children and foster parents noted that children’s behaviour has changed a lot after staying in a foster family.

All parents interviewed for this research said they were informed at the outset that the children had ‘unusual’ behaviour and they were ready to deal with that, but they then faced many unforeseen problems. The parents all mentioned that the children had very little knowledge for their age when they were fostered. Some were even illiterate despite being of school age, so their foster parents send them to additional classes.

“At the beginning the child was very nasty, had a very rude manner of speaking, and all were surprised how we managed to educate such a child.”

Foster mother, Gegharkunik

“...He lied a lot, stole from home, he was very grubby. He advised me to keep a lover in order to earn money. He tried to beg... (recalling his life with his biological mother). I am very strict with the child. At the beginning the child was offended – I was explaining, I was trying to make him understand. Now, he is not that way any more. I teach him to keep clean by [telling him off], explaining and supervision.”

Foster mother, Gegharkunik

“When I was a child I used to be like a boy, I had a haircut like boys had, but now I do my hair like girls do... At the orphanage I used to be more of a free thinker, neglected, unruly, nasty, I didn’t attend the classes. But here I have reasonable freedom, I have become a housekeeper. I did all the housework when granny had an operation, for the first time I cooked, milked a cow. Now I do whatever I like, but with the advice of an adult.”

Foster child, girl, Gegharkunik

“In the orphanage children used to contact each other in order to give hope to each other, but in general those contacts are false. Everything is different in the family and with friends here.”

Foster child, boy, Gegharkunik

Foster care of children with biological families

One peculiarity of foster care as a form of alternative childcare is the need to maintain relations between the child and their biological family in order to facilitate the child’s return to their family in the future. In many countries, such as the US, UK and Australia, this can be a great source of stress to the foster family.

All foster parents interviewed for the research said they were informed at the beginning of the programme about the need to maintain relationships between the child and their biological family. They said they were not against maintaining relationships, and had never prevented contact with biological families.

“When the biological mother was released from jail, she started to call the child more rarely, the child was expecting warmth from her, but did not get that and the child was very sad. We were justifying the mother’s coldness saying that she was unable to come, ‘you shouldn’t be sad, you should always know that whether she is or not, we are always going to be by your side’.

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My husband calls the child's biological mother to come, invites her to our home... to communicate with her child, but she does not come."

Foster mother, Gegharkunik

"Granddad [the child's foster father] has found my family. Granddad has organised the meeting with my mother, my mother has invited us to her house, and we also have visited her. We call each other. Two days have passed since the last time we talked to each other by the phone."

Foster child, girl, Gegharkunik (the same family)

However, maintaining relationships between a child and their biological family during foster care is not always perceived in the same way by children, foster parents and experts. Some of the current and potential foster parents think it is much better if a foster child doesn't have a biological family, because that complicates matters. Others think that if the child has (or will have) a biological family they do not (or would not) prevent relations between them and the child.

Research in the UK or US shows the importance of the child keeping in contact with his or her biological family. This could be due to the short-term nature of Western foster care models in comparison to long-term foster care experience in Armenia. In long-term foster care (over six years now in Armenia), parents consider the foster children as part of their family and have difficulties perceiving their role as merely a 'service provider'; they rather feel like second parents for foster children.

"It would be better if the child doesn't have a biological family in order that child can stay in our family till the end."

Potential foster mother, Lori

"One day the baby asked 'daddy, the child who is taken under foster care should not have relative', my mind is in several places." Foster father, Gegharkunik

"I think it is wrong when the biological mother or father is brought to see the child. If they were good parents they wouldn't leave their child in an orphanage, and if they did so, what kind of parent are they to be paid attention to and invited to see their child? Besides, they can cause quarrels in the family. The child shouldn't be disturbed."

DoFWCRP representative, Gegharkunik

The programme did not specify that children should call their foster parents 'mother' and 'father', but in all but one case (where the child called her foster parents 'granny' and 'granddad' because of a great age difference) the children called their foster parents 'mama' and 'papa'. In one case this caused conflict with a child's biological mother, which caused psychological problems for the child.

During this study researchers met only one biological parent, who felt aggressively towards the foster family. This is interesting to note, but we cannot draw conclusions from a single interviewee.

"I was told that my children call them 'aunt/uncle', but then I learned that they call them 'mom' and 'dad'."

Biological parent, Yerevan

There were some cases of children refusing to stay in their foster family because of a biological parent, although they expressed no desire to leave before being in contact with their biological parent.

"The children [a sister and a brother] have a biological mother, who visited us for three and four times and revolutionised the children to the bad side. After the mother's appearance and false promises, the children decided that they didn't want to live in the village, there was no future, and their mother would take them, would give them everything. But she did nothing, she put the children against us, and they didn't want to say with us."

Foster mother, Gegharkunik

All of the children who don't have biological parent/s or who have no contact with their biological parent/s considered their foster family as a biological family.

"This year, at school children were asked to draw their family tree and the child without thinking drew our family tree, one of the branches of which was him."

Foster mother, Lori

Foster children who have biological parent/s and keep in touch with them in some way find it hard to emotionally separate their biological and foster parents, as they do not consider their foster family as a temporary arrangement. *"A few years ago my biological mother called me and I was surprised and stressed. My mother calls and tells me that she knows that when I turn 18 the family where I live now will not keep me any longer. Soon I will turn 18 and I understand that the family where I live now is going to keep me as long as I wish until I get married."*

Foster child, girl, Gegharkunik

Overall, the lack of desire to foster a child who has biological parents is connected to a wish to avoid difficult psychological situations. This was a common response among potential foster parents, which is likely to be why they were not selected as foster parents or why their foster placement did not last long. Foster parents take a foster child as a part of their own family, which makes it hard to become separated from the child, especially if they are not sure that the child's biological family is a sufficiently warm, loving and secure environment.

Current foster parents understand that eventually a child should be reunited with their biological parents. However, especially in cases when there is only one foster child in a family, foster parents do not wish to return the child to their biological family. But in general, foster parents haven't prevented their foster children from keeping in touch with their biological parent/s.

Child rights protection in alternative family care

The research studied the question of children’s rights protection in guardianship and foster care. Experts noted that guardianship has both positive and negative points in this sense. On the one hand, a child’s guardian is his or her relative or acquaintance and so often more acquainted with the child and more likely to be held accountable by the extended family for their supervision of the child. On the other hand, the Armenian state does not currently support or supervise guardians so experts cannot be certain of how well guardians protect the children in their care.

The question of children’s rights protection in foster families should be studied from several angles.

All experts noted that foster care is preferable to institutional care for the child, but also highlighted the fact that children can get into vulnerable situations in foster families. They stated that all foster children know who to turn to if their rights are violated, though such cases have not yet occurred. However, a child might be beaten in a foster family and not tell anyone, especially if they consider their foster parents as their own parents – as usually happens.

“I don’t speak about my problems at home, I don’t share my thoughts with anyone. My friends can understand me better. Rarely, I share my thoughts with my brother. I don’t speak about family affairs in public.”

Foster child, boy, Gegharkunik

The rights of children were generally not violated in the process of foster family selection. In some cases the selection of foster parents was based on the child’s opinion, but in other cases the child’s opinion was not taken into account despite the fact that they were already 10 years old, the age at which children have a right to express their opinion in a court of law in Armenia.

Siblings

It is essential to place siblings in the same foster family.

Republic of Armenia Family Code, article 139, items 2 and 3
It is prohibited to place siblings in separate foster families, except if it is in their interests.

There is only one case when two out of four siblings from the same institution were placed in two different families. According to experts this was based on the children’s best interests, as foster families were not ready to take care of the other two children. Later this caused a problem as two brothers were placed in two different families in the same community. One brother started comparing the families, then as a result refused to live in his foster family and returned to the institution. The child has now completed army service and lives with his brother’s foster family, a fact that causes discontent in the foster family.

General care

Our research results indicate that foster children live in a family atmosphere, except in some cases when children noted conflicts in their family, or relations between the foster parents and the child were not strong and the child turned to friends to solve his problems. Both parents and children stated that foster children are involved in daily family life, including household chores, family relationships and family events. All of the foster children involved in this research attend school or a vocational educational institution. The children receive food and clothing, though a few children indirectly mentioned that they are not always provided with clothes.

Interviewer: When was the last time you bought clothing for yourself?

Child: *“As soon as [I get] a chance... It’s OK.”* [with no sense of embarrassment or concern]

Physical and humiliating punishment

No children or parents interviewed for this research ever mentioned foster children being beaten. However, ensuring that a child is not at risk of physical violence requires assessing more than the child’s viewpoint, as cultural norms mean that some Armenian children may consider beating a ‘normal’ or ‘deserved’ response to bad behaviour.

Telling a child that they can be returned to an institution as a form of punishment is a violation of their rights and a form of psychological pressure.

“There are a lot of cases when the child’s own mother beats him, but the child cares for his mother anyway, and cries when you prohibit him from getting in touch with her.”

NGO expert

“He is a naughty child. We frighten him, saying that we will return him to the orphanage in order to waken him to attend school to study, but in vain.”

Foster mother, Gegharkunik

Labour

There are cases of children’s rights violations in terms of involving children in labour, although this question should take into account the general context in Armenia. Table 2 shows the results of research carried out in 2008 in the country.

Table 2 Children’s participation in household work

Types of work at home	Quantity	Percent
Meal preparation	159	11.1
Shopping	818	57.3
Cleaning	695	48.7
Laundry, ironing	246	17.2
Household repairs	101	7.1
To bring water or wood	215	15.1
To take care of other children	35	2.5
To take care of sick or elder	20	1.4

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members		
Animal care	204	14.3
Farming, gardening	392	27.5
Construction of building	23	1.6
Similar other works	54	3.8
No answer	19	1.3

The same kind of figures applied to child labour in the foster families interviewed for our research. As the foster families are primarily rural families who do not have their own children living with them, the children in foster care are involved in household chores. Most of the children don't have any problem with this, but there are some cases when it has been problematic.

"I don't like doing rural work. There are some jobs that I do sometimes, but there are some I don't do and that's it, and it causes a quarrel... I was working at the market, my cousin was trading clothes, and I was hanging the clothes in the morning and removing them in the evening."
Foster child, boy, Gegharkunik

Examples of significant child protection failings

Some of the children need a psychologist because of their memories of the past, uncertainty about the future and age-related development. During the research two children were working with a psychologist at FAR.

Two cases illustrate the negative and far-reaching child protection impact of returning foster children to their biological parents without proper planning and assessment. In the first case, two sisters lived in a foster family for five years, but were returned to their biological mother at her request. The biological mother insisted that she had continually asked to have her daughters back but was refused. Experts believed the mother's desire was unrealistic as she hadn't tried to take control of her own life and she refused to visit the children to build her relationship with them.

The children's return to their biological mother, against their will, was based on the fact that the foster family had another religion, but our research found that the biological mother also used to attend the same church.

Case moderator: *"At the time of my visit [to the biological mother's house] the heater was off and the temperature outdoors and indoors was the same. The house lacked elementary... hygiene... During my visit the children were dressed in dirty clothes and looked dull. The mother is unemployed, because her husband forbids her... The mother mentions that her husband is an explosive person; he breaks something when he is angry to get calm, but he has never hit her or the children... [The] children were crying and wanted to return to their foster family, as they find the living conditions there more comfortable, and besides they have become attached to the foster parents. The children are still in transition – it has been only one month since they met their mother's husband. During my visit [the mother's husband] was repeating, 'why have*

you brought the children... when they are under foster care everybody helps, and since we have brought them, no one helped'."

Regional bodies responsible for monitoring the foster family noted that they were not informed before the children's foster placement about the foster parents belonging to another religion, but on learning about it decided to move the children:

"Visits to this family were frequent and then it unexpectedly turned out that the foster parent was a Jehovah's Witness... A parent can be a Jehovah's Witness, but ...the impact couldn't be avoided on the children's upbringing... A session of the commission was held on this topic and the foster mother was invited, a priest was invited also and all insisted that it had an impact on children. A casual visit was made, but the foster mother tried to prove that she didn't influence the children. During the [initial] evaluation of the family, in my opinion, that woman was a sectarian already, but we couldn't find that fact out..."

DoFWCRP representative, Lori

If we observe all this in terms of child rights protection, the children were not ready and did not want to return to their biological parent. During the research team's visit to the family, this was proven by one of the children protesting against her biological mother, and demanding to be returned to the foster family.

Another clear example of a child rights violation is a case of a sister and brother who were in foster care and refused to stay in the foster family after rebuilding their relationship with their biological mother. This resulted in a decision to return the siblings to a childcare institution (orphanage). The biological mother didn't take care of the children afterwards, resulting in these children remaining in institutional care. The purpose of this analysis is not to lay blame for these events, but to emphasise that relationships between biological and foster families should be supervised and regulated.

"We loved those children, everything was fine, but one day their mother called and said that she would come and take them back to Russia. Since that day the children turned against us and didn't want to listen to us."

Foster mother, Gegharkunik

Experts interviewed for this research stated that children, biological families and foster parents should be informed of their rights by social workers and through education and training. The decision to return a child to an institution or their biological family should involve a psychologist, as well as biological and foster parents.

Possibility of different types of foster care

Long-term foster care was the main focus of the programme, but there were also two cases of short-term foster care where children have already returned to their biological families.

Some experts involved in this research study find long-term foster care preferable as it is an opportunity to provide a child with ongoing care, whereas others think that when the child is taken under long-term foster care this leaves the biological family in a desperate situation (around 800–1,000 biological families in Armenia temporarily leave their children in institutions in order to take them back when they can). Many experts believe that if a child doesn't have biological parents, adoption is a better option than foster care.

According to the experts we interviewed there are opportunities, and a need, for the introduction and development of other types of foster care in Armenia (although some of the experts were unaware of various different types of foster care). They stated that the wider public should be informed about foster care, particularly about long-term foster care, before attempting to introduce other types.

The experts think it is particularly necessary to introduce short-term foster care, as there are cases where a child's only biological parent has health problems and temporarily placing the child in a childcare institution is an additional stress for the child. In such cases, some experts think that short-term foster care could be a better way to organise the child's care (although others believe that short-term foster care will also subject a child to unnecessary trauma). Short-term foster care faces legislative barriers, as it does not currently have any legal status and only DPC children can be taken into foster care.

Some expert research participants believe that short-term foster care is only feasible when a child can choose where he or she wants to live.

"Short-term foster care is right, and when the child's family crisis passes the child will make a decision whether to return to the biological family or to stay in the foster family."

G/TC member, Lori

"I am against when the terms of short-term foster care are fixed, like 2–8 months. What if it is 2–6 months, so what type is it then? Specialists should establish the terms in each case. The short term is also considered as foster care, a service and even in this case it should be considered as work experience for a person. It should be considered as work experience in the case of long-term foster care. If you pay a person it should be considered as work."

DoFWCRP representative, Lori

It is interesting that both the experts and childcare institution staff find short-term foster care preferable for

children with disabilities as they feel foster families probably will not be able to take care of such children for a long period. However, some experts said that children with disabilities should be taken into long-term foster care to achieve tangible results.

There was some discussion about the necessity of introducing crisis foster care, noting that such cases may require fostering several children at short notice. No potential foster parent and no childcare institution staff that we interviewed were ready to foster a whole family, considering it too much effort. Despite this, the Armenian foster care programme involved one such case.

"In my opinion, it is hard to take a whole family under foster care as the family requires a very specific support."

Staff member at a special institution, Gegharkunik

Possibility of foster care for children with disabilities

A meeting with MLSA staff confirmed that the state's stance is to fund only the foster care of children with disabilities. All experts mentioned that the problem of children with disabilities is an important one since as a result of state policy two orphanages have closed and the number of children residing in other institutions has decreased, but the number of children with disabilities has increased. This is the reason for restructuring one general orphanage into a specialised orphanage for children with disabilities. In January 2013, more than 386 children with disabilities lived in such institutions in Armenia (See Table 3).

Table 3 Children with disabilities in specialised residential childcare institutions in January 2013

Age	Mari Izmiryan Specialised Orphanage	Gyumri Children's Home	Nor Kharberd Special Orphanage
0–18	79		
0–6		127	
6–18			180

"Today, we have three orphanages for disabled children in Gyumri, Yerevan and Kharberd, the total number of children is about 520, which makes 80% of the children who are raised in institutions. Most of those 80% disabled children have severe disabilities."

MLSA representative

Experts are concerned by the lack of, and the sometimes incomplete, organisation of community services for the foster care of children with disabilities. This will require providing the complex services that children currently receive in institutions in the community. One challenge is making these community services accessible to foster families and biological families (supporting biological families is the MLSA's priority), enabling them to raise children with disabilities in the community rather than sending them to an institution. The experts we interviewed recommend

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introducing community services such as daycare centres to help parents to work and to ensure that children with disabilities receive specialised support.

In terms of how much money the state should provide to foster families to care for children with disabilities, the experts believe this can only be determined following special analysis. Some experts don't see the foster care of children with disabilities as a realistic prospect in Armenia, saying that even potential foster parents would not like to foster those children.

"No one would like to take a child with disabilities, because communication with them is hard psychologically."

G/TC member, Lori

According to the experts interviewed for this research study, Armenian society needs to accept foster care as a positive phenomenon before referring children with disabilities to foster care. They note that foster care for children with disabilities is a very complex process and that only specialist professionals who like to work with such children should foster children with disabilities. Even then, experts believe the foster parents of children with disabilities will require continual training and special professional services to solve the additional problems they will face. They believe that specialist services such as rehabilitation centres for children, or branches or outreach services of specialised orphanages, should be introduced in large communities. Such rehabilitation centres have already opened in some communities.

"Foster care is possible for children with disabilities only with one condition, i.e. if the question is approached professionally and the selection of both family and children is conducted very professionally. For example, there are 1,000 types of mental disorders and other disabilities... A whole team of specialists works with one child in the institutions, and the same should be provided in the family. The disability should be observed as a social problem, not a health problem, and one shouldn't pity the disabled. The programme will succeed as soon as that stereotype is broken." DoFWCRP representative, Lori

"We have few services for children with disabilities in the community, there are some communities where daycare centres exist, which were introduced by the NGOs, for example the Bridge of Hope in some communities of Tavush province. In our special orphanages the children are left by both parents, for whom the main reason is the lack of services for organising the care for those children." MLSA representative
MLSA representatives noted that there are 8,000 children with disabilities in Armenia. This makes having the required minimum services available in urban communities a priority, so that the children of nearby rural regions will be able to benefit from those urban centres.

No potential foster parent (those who passed the programme's primary evaluation) expressed a wish to foster a child with disabilities. But it should be mentioned that the potential parents haven't been asked this question

during the evaluation process – this information was obtained during interviews for this research study. It is also worth noting that some potential foster care parents were not selected for fostering because their viewpoints and attitudes were not deemed appropriate.

As noted above, experts interviewed for this research believe that workers at special institutions would be the most suitable foster parents for children with disabilities, considering their knowledge and experience – as they come into contact with such children every day, they are familiar with their needs. However, the research results show that most of these workers do not share this viewpoint. Furthermore, we found that staff at special institutions were not well-informed about foster care.

Some of workers at specialised public education and care institutions did express a willingness to foster children with disabilities, but only with certain conditions: financial support; support in making necessary home modifications; and for children with less severe problems.

"I will take a child with disabilities under foster care, but not the one with physical needs, as I am unhealthy myself. The child should have self-care skills."

Staff member, specialised institution, Gegharkunik

Other colleagues at special institutions are strongly against fostering a child with disabilities, citing an awareness of how many specialists work with one child and the fact that it would be impossible to conduct this extensive work in a family setting.

"As soon as you get into it there is no way back, because you don't have the right to quit it half way... It's better not to start then change your mind."

Staff member, specialised institution, Ararat

Only one or two foster and potential foster parents expressed a desire to become a foster parent for children with disabilities, and only in case of special support system. This topic is covered in more detail in the 'Collective views and beliefs about alternative care' section.

Steps towards the development of alternative care institutions

The research examined how various stakeholders see the development of alternative care institutions and what steps should be undertaken in this direction. Their proposed development actions involve:

- Clarifying perceptions and expectations.
- Raising awareness.
- Capacity building.
- Developing the foster care infrastructure.
- Improving the legal framework.
- Funding.

These steps are outlined in more detail below.

Clarifying perceptions and expectations

The perception and definition of 'foster care' has an impact on the rights and responsibilities of foster parents. All experts interviewed for this research mentioned that the government should clearly define its expectations of foster families: is long-term foster care the care of a child (up to the age of 18) with financial support and relevant supervision, or is it unconditional devotion to a child (even beyond the age of 18) with housing support provided by the foster family?

Our expert interviewees felt that the government should treat foster care as an important state resource in order to develop an institutional system of foster care; it needs to regulate the field while leaving service provision to specialised NGOs. But most importantly they felt the government should develop a carefully planned, customised social package for foster families, including monthly payments and paid duties delegated to community members. Furthermore, they stated that all foster care payments need to be monitored to track how foster families manage them, providing foster families with continuous support services.

Experts also considered the institutional position of foster care to be rather unclear. If the government is responsible for foster care then it should be accountable for its management and development, but they believed this is not often the case. In reality, they believe the government neither financially supports nor controls the implementation of foster care.

Raising awareness

As noted above, expert research participants believe that raising public awareness of foster care will contribute to public opinion on the practice and also boost the number of potential foster parents.

"I believe the problem is in insufficient coverage. The information about foster care should be broadcast on TV so that people can learn about fostering a child."

G/TC member, Lori

Capacity building

Foster care experts stressed the importance of sustained capacity building among foster parents and community service providers, particularly G/TC members but also staff at childcare institutions. They believe this will improve these groups' understanding of their duties and therefore strengthen their performance.

"I would pay more attention to those mid-level officials who design programmes; to their involvement in professional capacity-building programmes so that they better understand what a foster family is, its benefits and what steps should be undertaken to increase the number of foster families. Since 2008 foster care has been state funded, and there was an intention to increase the number of foster families. Apparently it didn't happen. The problem is in officials' misperception of foster care; without proper research and facts, they conclude that it will sabotage guardianship as an already formed means of

alternative care."

NGO expert

Developing the foster care infrastructure

According to experts included in this research study, the improvement and expansion of foster care in Armenia, particularly the care of children with disabilities, requires continuous investment in, and sustained development of, the following community services: social work, psychological services, G/TC activities and monitoring, and daycare and rehabilitation centres.

Improving the legal framework

Experts pointed to a need to improve the existing legal framework to support the development of foster care – legislation around foster care needs to be clearly developed and defined to avoid stagnation or a decrease in the number of foster families over time. They recommend covering all foster care mechanisms by government decree, for example the support measures for foster children after the age of 18. NGO experts, G/TC representatives and foster parents all mentioned this uncertainty.

Furthermore, experts believe that foster care should be legally accessible not only to DPC children (as currently defined by the law), but also children in difficult life situations, who could especially benefit from the introduction of short-term and emergency types of foster care.

"A few years ago there were 25 foster families, now we should have at least 40 of these families. If we haven't reached that number, it means something is not working well."

NGO expert

Experts think that in this area the government should seek to meet at least average standards rather than minimum standards.

"The definition 'without parental care' should be substituted by 'in difficult situations'. I have suggested it multiple times and I am going to propose it again, because nowadays in Armenia children in difficult situations are in greater need of foster care."

DoFWCRP representative, Lori

"Despite the fact that our government has signed several agreements with the European Union the institution of foster care has not been established in Armenia. Despite initial European funding for the development of foster care, the government was unsuccessful in its independent implementation of further measures and failed to scaffold the institutional system of foster care. During 2005–2007 the number of foster families was 25; since then this number has remained constant. It means that the state has not fulfilled its obligations. If it had, the number of children in orphanages should have decreased at the expense of increasing number of children in foster families. UN reports clearly illustrate the extent to which foster care is beneficial for the government – both economically and from the perspective of children's rights protection. However, the process is not being carried [out] despite extra credit and a higher rating for the government. This clearly shows the level of corruption in

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all of this. As far as I am aware there is no legal protection for foster families. Although they've somehow adopted the idea of foster care, no steps were taken to protect these families legally."

MoES representative

"The issue is not about distributing benefits; in fact it is the worst option. A person must be provided with at least minimal welfare: housing and job."

NGO expert

Funding

Experts also highlighted a need to change the funding structure in special institutions, as current methods of funding hinder the reform of foster care and cause conflicts of interest.

"One of the reasons for foster care contraction is that our institutions are financed per child. If there's a shift from funding per child to funding per service provided, the institutions will be willing to take on board 80 children instead of 100 and get the same funding for the service. This will give the child more chances to leave the institution. The main issue is in the conflict of interests." NGO expert

According to our interviews with foster parents, the funding for foster care is generally satisfactory. Nevertheless, in some cases foster parents do not believe current funding is sufficient to meet all of a foster child's needs, particularly their general and professional educational needs. Foster parents suggest that funding for children should increase as they grow up, because older children have more expensive needs. Experts told us that foster parents should be provided with supplementary social benefits, such as tax exemption and free access to some services in addition to financial compensation.

Collective views and beliefs about alternative care

In international terms, foster care is a service where foster parents are service providers who are paid for the service they provide. There are two polarised standpoints on foster care. One view is that foster care is a service equivalent to work, so foster parents should receive financial compensation – a salary and the amount necessary to cover foster children's needs/child allowances. In this model, the government needs to monitor service providers constantly. In contrast, the other view of foster care holds that if foster parents view foster care as a job and a duty, it will be difficult to expect them to become 'real' parents of foster children.

"It is painful to regard work as means of financial gratification only. If foster parents approach foster care as their job, they will be suffering because there are so many problems arising during foster care."

NGO expert

The Armenian experience illustrates the impact of this polarity. On one hand foster care was designed as a system based on compensation for the care services provided. On the other hand, where potential foster parents were primarily motivated by compensation, their applications were denied, "... in all cases when financial support for the child was the only motivation, a negative conclusion followed". *"I decided to become a foster parent first of all because it was a job, and back then we were unemployed. In addition it wouldn't hurt to have a child in the house, another member of the family. Putting an extra plate on the table does not cause us any inconvenience."*

Potential foster parent, Gegharkunik

"I heard about foster care on TV, and having no job (whereas I love working), I applied to the Municipality of Vanadzor and registered for foster care."

Foster mother, Lori

Some potential and current foster parents consider foster care as a job, as it was presented to them at the start of the programme. Other foster parents, willingly or otherwise, continued to care for their foster child after the age of 18, indicating that for them, foster care is more of a relationship than a job (although the programme originally planned for foster care up to a child's 18th birthday).

The representatives of G/TC and DoFWCRP agreed that foster care is primarily a service but also noted that some families keep foster children after 18 although they are not obliged to. This issue was apparently not regulated in advance, or was expected to be automatically settled in a similar way to orphanages, which don't have to care for children over 18 – yet foster parents continue to care for grown up foster children while awaiting state-level regulatory decision-making.

At the same time, experts acknowledge that foster parents are expected to fully dedicate themselves to foster care. Everyone considers foster family as an alternative care institution, a way of organising childcare. Biological families in Armenia do not receive state support, and therefore some argue that foster families cannot be considered as alternatives to biological families.

Foster care policy experts have stressed that children with disabilities in Armenia – in particular those who live in specialised orphanages – require foster care the most. In contrast to the decreasing number of children without disabilities in childcare institutions, the number of children with disabilities in these institutions apparently keeps increasing. Some experts disagree with this, believing that the number of children without disabilities in childcare institutions is *not* decreasing, and that therefore those children also need to be either reunited with their biological families or settled in foster families. A group of experts believes that after the foster care institute is restructured there should be a thorough needs assessment of the children who require foster care the most.

According to the NGO representatives involved in our research, children in all kinds of institutions, including

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orphanages and boarding institutions, need to be settled in foster families if returning to their biological families is impossible.

“Nothing can replace the biological family, but a foster family can successfully substitute a boarding institution and provide the child with family care at least until the age of majority. Meanwhile, the child can be fully integrated into the foster family, which can help him/her develop and use their full potential. We all know that the development of a child growing up in an orphanage falls short in comparison with that of a family.”

NGO expert

In their interviews, children automatically compare orphanages with their foster families, and they always prefer the latter.

“... If a child is left without a parent he/she may choose the option of foster care because in orphanages they generally care after everyone, but in a foster family one feels particularly loved and cherished. In orphanages, when a child is sitting alone and crying, nobody approaches to find out the reason, whereas in the family everyone takes care of him, and all the family wants him to become a good man.”

Foster child, boy, Gegharkunik

Attitudes around fostering and children's age

Some experts say that (long-term) foster care should be delivered only to children over the age of seven or eight so that younger children can be adopted more easily. Others advocate for the inclusion of younger children as they can more easily adapt and integrate into foster families.

During the fieldwork for this research study, the youngest child in foster care in the research area was eight years old and the oldest 17. There were nine boys and four girls identified as being in foster care. The duration of foster care was 6–7 years on average.

Potential and actual foster parents' attitudes about fostering

The majority of foster parents (10 parents) are against fostering another child. They noted that either they are too old for it or their family structure has changed. Other reasons include unsuccessful relationships with their previous foster child/ren and the fear of not being able to establish a positive emotional relationship with another child. Some also mentioned that their own biological or foster child is against them fostering another child. One foster parent said that he would not be willing to become a foster parent again because the end of foster care process is often vague and unclear (meaning the uncertainty of care and housing after the age of 18).

“I once asked the child: ‘do you want us to bring you a sister from the orphanage?’ He said he did not want us doing anything like that.”

Foster mother, Lori

Three foster parents expressed willingness to foster another child if they were better paid. Only one of these foster parents confirmed that they would foster another child if their current child needed a sibling. Most mentioned government provision of housing to foster children when they turn 18 as a precondition for fostering again. They also mentioned a second condition – the absence of biological parents or clear guarantees that a foster child's biological parents would not cause trouble (which they often do, as our research has shown).

The majority of potential foster parents do not want to foster either. They blame changes in their housing conditions or family structure, as well as their failed attempts at fostering and an inability to form a stable relationship with a foster child. Some claimed they have lost their motivation due to previous rejection for fostering.

Some potential foster parents expressed interest in parenting a child up to eight years of age. These adults would also prefer to foster a child of the opposite sex to their biological child/children (although this is a wish rather than a requirement).

“If you foster a child from a young age, you can keep him for a long time. In my case the child was already 14 years old when we took him, and bringing him up in our own family style was difficult.” Potential foster parent, Lori

Among potential and actual foster parents only three expressed a willingness to foster a child with disabilities. They also noted that they would do it only for adequate financial compensation, professional support and effective and sustainable community support centres. The most common reason for not wanting to foster children with disabilities was a lack of psychological preparedness.

Attitudes of children living in institutions towards foster care

This research study included interviews with children living in residential childcare institutions, with the aim of understanding their willingness to settle in a foster family, and their general level of awareness about foster care. We questioned children from Vanadzor, Gavar and Yerevan branches of Marie Izmirlyan Orphanage as well as children from FAR children's support centre, who had been temporarily relocated there from FAR boarding schools or other care centres.

Overall, 80 children living in institutions participated in the research – 47 girls (58.75%) and 33 boys (41.25%). Most of the children we interviewed were older than 10, but we also included younger children to make our research more representative.

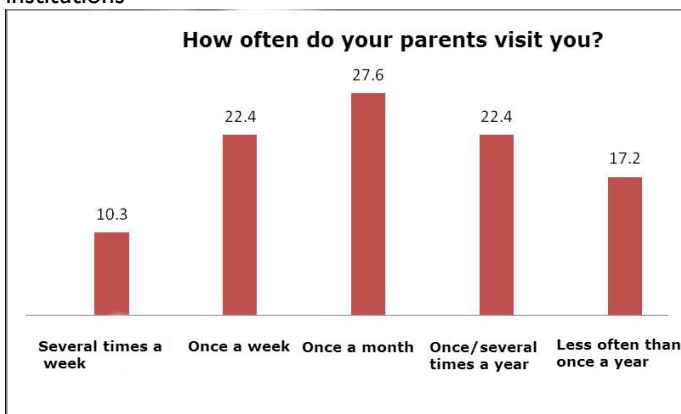
Table 4 Age of children who participated in the research

under 9	10–12	13–15	16–17
6	33	26	15

Out of 80 children, only five didn't have parents – the remaining 75 have one or both living parents. Among these 75 children, 17 (22.6%) told us that their parent/s don't visit them in the institution, but only eight of them wanted to live with another family. Meanwhile, nine children said they did not want to be settled in other families.

The other 58 children (77.4%) who have parents said their parent/s visit them in the orphanages. The frequency of visits is outlined in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Frequency of parental visits to childcare institutions



Among all 80 of the children we interviewed in institutions, 31 (38.75%) expressed a willingness to move to a foster family, out of which 19 were girls and 12 boys. Only three of these children don't have parents.

Children who had parents and wanted to settle in a foster family said they would like to have kind foster parents who wouldn't argue, get cross or beat them. Among the children willing to be fostered, only eight have parents who don't visit them – the other 23 children have visiting parents but still want to move to another family.

Of the 80 child interviewees, 49 children (61.25%) said they did not want to live in other families. Nine of these children had parents who didn't visit them, and the remaining 40 said their parent/s visited them occasionally.

We asked the children: "If you had an opportunity to chose to move to another family or stay, what would you do?" 55% of the respondents (44 children) answered that they would stay, and the remaining 36 children said they would go. In some cases children noted that they would move to another family only on the condition of adoption.

The children's reasons for not wanting to live in another family were:

- Hearing about adoption cases where the child has died (some children confused adoption and fostering).
- Being afraid that foster parents would discriminate between them and their own children.
- Knowing of cases where a foster child was brought back to an institution.
- Having biological parent/s who won't let them be fostered or won't understand their desire to live in another family.
- Feeling that fostering is new and uncertain.

Guardianship in Armenia

Research participants drew interesting parallels between guardianship and foster care in Armenia. One MLSA representative stated that 551 children were placed under guardianship in 2010 (data for 2011–12 is not yet available).

Experts consider guardianship as an alternative family care institution, which exists despite the fact that it doesn't receive any financial support from the Armenian government.

"There is a good tradition among Armenians: the extended family will never let a stranger become a guardian for the child; the relatives and close friends would take care of the child."
DoFWCRP representative, Gexarkunik

"Due to my financial situation the neighbours are always telling me to hand over the child, but I can't, it's impossible. The child has got used to me, and won't go anywhere else."
Guardian, Yerevan

Both guardians and NGO experts noted that the government's position on guardianship as an alternative care institution needs further clarification. From this point of view guardianship is in conflict with foster care, as expanding foster care is considered a challenge to the future of guardianship.

The approach to guardianship as an alternative care institution has positive and negative aspects. The positive side of guardianship is as an alternative to institutions for DPC children. The negative side is the lack of state support (both financial and professional) for guardians. Some experts hold that the government should allocate financial resources to support guardianship, while others believe that providing financial resources could put core principles at risk.

"If the government starts financially supporting guardians, people will know that guardianship is state-funded, and everyone will do it for money."
MLSA representative

"[Among] 'foster care – guardianship – institution', guardianship is the best element as the child remains among family members;

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it is much better for the child to stay within a biological family.”
DoFWCRP representative, Ararat

“If the family has a child under guardianship, it is highly recommended that the government provides some assistance to the family, be it moral or financial. It is wrong to attach an ‘extra’ child to the family budget without supporting the child at least up to the age of 18.”
Guardian, Yerevan

“The guardians need financial support or encouragement. The guardian parent can be either one of the relatives or a total stranger. In any case, the guardian must be paid for his work; this will stimulate more responsibility.”
G/TC representative

Experts outlined how in many (if not all) cases, guardianship is quickly assigned without checking the guardian’s family conditions, financial status and childcare facilities. The results can be disastrous: children often arrive in childcare institutions soon after being appointed a guardian, but their legal status prevents foster care or adoption.

“In the case of guardianship, children are usually given to their extended families. This is the unique advantage of guardianship over foster care. Guardianship is free of charge but the child is always under the supervision of a relative or a family member. Nonetheless, there are also many grave cases of failed guardianship that remain concealed and accepted as relatives’ legitimate actions.”
G/TC representative

“The government neither pays the guardians, nor questions the ways children in guardianship are being raised. Children are the greatest wealth of the country, and the government has to know about their wellbeing: if the child is left hungry or not, if child labour is being abused or not. Since the government doesn’t pay for guardianship, it is not interested in the future of these children. Thus it should provide financial support and control expenditures, so that the money is spent directly on the child.”
NGO expert

There is an opinion that unlike foster care, where money or the sense of having a job can be the main motivator for fostering, guardians have no financial incentives to take care of a child. Some therefore say that guardianship needs to be supported financially, but others feel that funding complicates matters.

Experts insist that, prior to providing guardianship with state assistance, an investigation should be arranged in order to identify the ‘real’ guardians (those caring for DPC children, rather than those appointed for legal convenience) and make decisions about who to support accordingly.

“The child profits more from guardianship because there are no financial issues involved. Being unpaid, guardians don’t put difference between the children, they don’t take on their role of a guardian as a job.”
G/TC representative

“Nowadays, [biological] parents often leave for Russia. They appoint the child’s grandmother or grandfather as a guardian so that grandparents could manage the child’s documents. But the parents are also present; they leave and return occasionally.”
NGO representative

“There are a lot of community guardians, but not all of them are real guardians. When parents are abroad, the community appoints guardianship to grandparents [to] solve legal issues related to travel of the children and unification with their parents.”
G/TC representative

Some of the guardians we interviewed wanted to send their child to a special care institution, but did not do so because of public opinion. The others had never considered giving their child away to a foster family or institution, but have always expected some state support. The guardians we spoke to received occasional assistance in the form of food or other benefits, but this kind of help was never permanent.

“I would never give the child away to a foster family, because it’s the child of a person close to me. However, I would like the child to get some kind of support to help him/her feel cared.”
Guardian, Yerevan

NGO representatives also voiced the opinion that the state should support guardians by developing a comprehensive package of social benefits.

Conclusions and recommendations

The research touched upon all its objectives; it identified the experiences, problems and outcomes of foster care in Armenia and discussed different types of foster care, including for children with disabilities, taking into account various stakeholders’ and beneficiaries’ attitudes towards alternative care institutions. We looked into different scenarios of alternative care institutions in Armenia and tried to understand how these institutions can affect the protection of children’s rights. Here, we present our conclusions and recommendations.

The overall picture of the foster care experience

With one or two exceptions, the experience of foster care in Armenia has been positive, although the model needs serious revision and additions – the state concept of foster care is largely guided by, and concerned with, costs more than a child’s best interests.

It is important to note that the children under foster care interviewed for this research were satisfied with the opportunities they have received, and have never regretted

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choosing this type of alternative care. Both foster children and foster parents mostly feel trust and affection towards each other. Children in foster care have successfully integrated in society, made friends and bonded with foster relatives, and can openly communicate with others inside their community. Most importantly, these children have grown up in a family, and understand the nature of family life and parenting – opportunities they did not have while living in institutions.

However, foster parents, children and other members of foster families indicate – directly or indirectly – the need for additional services to support foster care, in particular those provided by professional experts. The analysis of failed cases of foster care supports this argument.

The implementation of foster care requires specialised training. At present, the selection of foster families, work with children, subsequent foster placements and monitoring of foster families is officially implemented by DoFWCRP and G/T-Cs, but it is clear that these structures cannot carry out these functions effectively. Our research indicates that DoFWCRP staff are more reliable than G/T-Cs in terms of professional assistance and support – they are generally more progressive and have greater awareness and skills. Therefore, until a new institute of case managers is formed it is logical for DoFWCRP to fulfil these functions.

Our recommendation: To develop foster care as a model for children with all types of issues, including disabilities, as well as short-term and crisis foster care.

Specific conclusions and recommendations

Uncertainties about foster care

The research showed that public sector experts, foster parents and children often do not have a clear understanding of foster care in Armenia. If foster care is not a job, why is it paid? Does the remuneration cover child's expenses only, or is it also to encourage foster parents?

Another source of confusion is that many foster families are perceived as biological families. The bonding in foster families sometimes causes problems if biological parents reappear in a child's life.

The third main uncertainty relating to foster care relates to responsibilities after a child turns 18.

This issue is a big touchstone in foster care. Foster parents are left unsure, with no clear decision or state regulation about the division of duties after the child reaches 18. Foster parents currently have to face this problem on their own, but would welcome encouragement and support from government.

Our recommendations:

1. Equal support has to be provided to biological parents and foster parents; in general, an increased support is provided for all parents
2. It is essential to explain to children that foster care is a temporary care service and an opportunity to live in a family environment while finding for them and with them a permanent solution based on their best interest.

How to protect foster children from violence and exploitation

In the same way as in biological families and childcare institutions, children in foster families can theoretically experience violence and exploitation. There is a need to develop specific methods or mechanisms to help detect such exploitation and provide timely intervention. This fact is also related to the irregular nature, or absence, of foster care monitoring and supervision that is mentioned above.

Our recommendation: Include the protection of children from violence and corresponding responsibilities in the training programme for current and future foster parents.

Managing contact between foster children and their biological families

Foster children's contact with their biological families is a big issue and among the most difficult tasks in foster care both globally and in Armenia. The aim is to return the child to their biological family after their family problems settle down if in the best interest of the child to do so. However, the process of contact between a foster child and their biological family is not clearly perceived in Armenia – either by experts, foster parents or foster children themselves.

When taking a broad view on this issue, it should be stressed that the presence of biological parents often discourages people from fostering children. They try to avoid psychologically stressful situations with biological families. Foster parents do not perceive themselves as service providers and they accept their foster child/ren as part of their family. This leads to further complications in returning a child to their biological family, especially when foster parents do not believe that the child's biological family can offer a warm, loving and safe environment.

Our recommendations:

1. Relationships between biological parents and foster children should be regulated and supported by professional services in cooperation with appropriate authorities, and should not be the responsibility of foster parents.
2. There should be clear procedures for case management and assessing individual best interest, especially to help a foster child's relationship with their biological parent/s has a negative impact or places the child at risk.
3. Provide additional support to biological parents to reduce the need for alternative care in the first

place, and to help them reunite with their children after foster care placements if in the best interest of children

Regulation of a child's status

According to the Armenian Family Code, any child in foster care should be a 'child without parental care'. In many cases this prevents children from being placed in a family environment via foster care (rather than a childcare institution).

The main official purpose of foster care is to organise a child's temporary care before a permanent solution is found based on the child best's interest. This could include returning the child to their biological family, but also adoption and/or guardianship. The legal requirement for a child to be 'without parental care' seems unnecessary and complicated. This requirement favours adoption or guardianship (permanent care), rather than also supporting temporary care in a foster family as a intermediate but at times necessary step. Children in Armenia who do *not* have the status of 'child without parental care' can be accommodated in institutions if there are strong indications that the child cannot be left in the family due to high levels of risk. The same principle could be applied in foster care, to assist the development of family-centred care in Armenia.

Fostering children with disabilities

At present, children with disabilities who live in family settings – and biological and foster parents who care for such children – do not have access to the same number of professional and community-based care and support services as children living in institutions.

Judging from this research, it is unlikely that current or potential foster parents or special institution staff would agree to foster children with disabilities. However, interviewees indicated that this may change with the right support measures in place, such as financial compensation and professional support from institutions, rehabilitation centres, assessment centres and special schools. There is a need to investigate how many biological parents would take their children with disabilities back from institutions if the costs of specialised services, including transport costs, physiotherapy, speech therapy, etc were met by the state.

Raising public awareness and positive perceptions about foster care and clarifying the support packages available to foster families could also play a role in the prospects of settling children with disabilities into foster care.

Our recommendations:

1. Design and plan childcare support packages for specific types of children with disabilities, including access to medical and social services.
2. Establish community support services for the care of children with disabilities to help biological families care for their children themselves.

3. Organise extensive awareness-raising campaigns in the country about the support available to carers of children with disabilities, and foster care as an alternative to institutional care.

Guardianship in Armenia

According to the survey participants, guardianship is the best type of alternative care (a view shared by Save the Children), as it means a child remains with family members and is less exposed to trauma. However, guardianship is often at odds with foster care in Armenia; the reform and expansion of foster care is considered as the biggest challenge to maintaining guardianship. But Armenia needs a variety of care options, because there is no single care solution to many difficult situations.

Our recommendations:

1. Clarify the state's position towards guardianship as an alternative family-based care option and support guardians and children under guardianship based on assessed needs.
2. The state should support and oversee all types of alternative care. The type of care, supervision, and support should be decided on a case-by-case basis, based on the child's best interests.
3. Based on the income of the family, the state should financially support guardian families and design a social support package for guardians based on their needs and those of the children under their care. This should be developed through more in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with community members to ensure the support is socially acceptable and similar to other services for poor families in the area.
4. Conduct in-depth research on adoption, in order to understand factors that hinder and promote it, as well as links with and solutions related to the foster care system.

Criteria/procedures for selecting potential foster parents

The current documents currently used to select foster parents are mostly administrative. There is a need to assess foster parents' skills as well, to ensure appropriate relationships with foster children and to protect children from potential risks. This will involve revising the legal documents and procedures involved in establishing foster care.

The selection criteria developed during the foster care programme examined here are likely to be the basis for future foster care procedures in Armenia. Some of these criteria are objective, such as the presence of children in the foster family, the level of material security, housing, and the minimum permissible social and public services near the foster family. However, a deeper understanding of the problems faced by foster children, the regulation of relationships between a foster child and their biological parent/s and issues relating to the future of a child are important issues that require more awareness, capacity building and time.

Our recommendations:

1. Plan long-term training for future foster families.
2. Conduct stage-by-stage evaluation of future foster parents: their perceptions may change during training, and some applicants with good potential could be rejected before the training, based on preliminary evaluation.
3. Pay attention to whether other members of a foster family agree with the idea of having a foster child.

For more detailed analysis and recommendations relating to the evaluation criteria, see the section 'Effectiveness of the initial selection criteria'.

General recommendations

I. Investing in families is crucial for the wellbeing of children and societies. Children need, and have a right to, effective care and support in a positive family environment. This is vital for their physical, emotional and psychological wellbeing as well as their development into happy, healthy and productive adults. Supporting children - particularly those in poor or marginalised families - to be cared for effectively by their own families and communities can include a range of interventions such as cash transfers, parenting education, day care, social work support, and linking them up to basic services (e.g. health care and education).

Awareness-raising

- Targeted awareness-raising campaigns could help to boost the development of foster care in Armenia by making people as familiar with foster care as they are with guardianship or adoption.
- There is also a need to raise children's awareness of foster care, to ensure they have more balanced perceptions about the system.
- Some specialised institution staff have very low levels of awareness about foster care, so it is vital to raise particular awareness of the fostering needs of children with disabilities.
- According to the research respondents the best way of raising awareness is TV.
- The second stage of awareness-raising after mass media should be face-to-face meetings with community members and families, which will allow them to acquire the necessary information and avoid misunderstandings.
- Foster families and children should be continuously informed about child protection rights, by social workers and via ongoing training.

Capacity building

- Building the capacity of foster parents and community service providers on an ongoing basis is essential for the stability of the foster care model. Capacity building should be regularly organised by a competent and experienced service that can also provide professional supervision and support to foster families.

- Foster parents should receive regular training throughout the whole process of foster care in order to address the needs of foster children in an effective and timely manner. Foster parents and children also need professional support to help solve their personal problems.

Infrastructure development

- The development of foster care (especially for children with disabilities) requires ongoing investment in, and the development of, community services such as social work, psychological support, G/TC monitoring and other activities, daycare, home care and rehabilitation.
- Experts responsible for foster care placements require specialist services to help them inform, evaluate, select, train and monitor the foster families under their direct supervision.
- The demand for foster care is higher for children beyond the active age of adoption (children aged around six or older). Foster care for these children requires measures to regulate their legal status and offer the adoption of children in institutions. Instead of being kept in orphanages, all children (especially the youngest) should be cared for in family-based settings.

Development of an assistance package

- It is necessary to establish a range of support packages for all alternative types of care. These should differ in form, volume and frequency to meet the needs of all children in care.
- There is a need to develop a well-organised social security package and financial monitoring system for foster families. Community-based social workers and G/TC members should also be ready to support foster families and take care of their responsibilities, for which these professionals should be paid.
- Foster parents and children should receive continuous support to learn from others' experiences and from professionals to help them care for children with behavioural problems, especially in potentially harmful cases where biological family members have unpredictable contact with a foster child.

Improvement of the legal framework

- Improving the legal framework will contribute to foster care reforms and help to clarify misunderstandings about foster care. All foster care mechanisms must be accurately described and approved at government level. In particular, the responsibility for foster children after the age of 18 must be addressed and clarified.
- Foster care should not be limited to children without parental care (as defined by current law) but legally available to other children in difficult life situations. These children could mostly benefit from the availability of short-term and emergency types of foster care.

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- The funding mechanism for specialised institutions must also change; it currently hinders the reform of foster care, causing conflicts of interest.

Children with disabilities as candidates for foster care

- The improvement of foster care for one particular group – children with disabilities – requires a more comprehensive approach. Care should be planned for all those children who cannot stay with biological families, irrespective of their problems.
- In future there may be greater demand for more specialised foster families to care for children with disabilities.

Possibilities of different types of foster families

- The foster care programme in Armenia has mainly focused on long-term foster care, but there is a clear need to invest in and develop other types of foster care, particularly short-term and emergency foster care.
- Long- and short-term foster care are both also important for children with disabilities –biological parents who wish to place their children in institutions should be offered home care/group care and respite care – options that do not currently exist in Armenia.
- All types of foster care need to be developed, taking into account different children’s needs. Conditions should be defined for each type of foster care, including the timeframe, salary and oversight/supervision. All participants in foster care should understand that children receive family-based care regardless of their needs.
- The state should treat foster care as an important resource, develop the system and regulate it, while NGOs should provide services that form the basis of a specially-designed social support package for foster families.

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