Save the Children

Family strengthening and support

Where families lack the support to provide adequate care, children are at risk of being abandoned, placed in institutions, and of being abused and exploited. Greater political and financial commitment is needed to help build parents' capacity to care for their children and to tackle the poverty and social exclusion that underlie many of the problems experienced by children and their families.

Around the world, millions of families are struggling to provide basic care and protection for their children.[1] In many areas, years of conflict, natural disasters, internal migration, chronic poverty and HIV and AIDS have reduced the ability of families and communities to care for their children. As a result, large numbers of children are living in extended families – often with insufficient support, or are placed in orphanages and other institutions. Across sub-Saharan Africa, the number of vulnerable households with children, including grandparent- or child-headed households[2], is increasing

In general care provided by the birth or extended family creates the best environment for a child's development and wellbeing. But it is also important to recognise that not all families are equally good at caring for and protecting their children from harm. Poor parenting practice, personal difficulties and substance abuse, for example, can all lead to violence, neglect and exploitation at the hands of family members where such families receive inadequate support.

Lack of support to families and communities also results in large numbers of children ending up in potentially harmful institutions. 4 out of 5 of the estimated 8 million children currently living in care institutions[3] , have one or both parents alive. With some support these parents would be able to continue to care for their child in their own home.[4] In Aceh following the 2004 tsunami, for example, 97.5% of children in residential care were placed there by their families so that they would get the education their families were no longer able to afford.[5]

Financial and social support is therefore vital to enable immediate and extended families to provide adequate care and protection for their children, and to avoid family separation and abandonment. Not only is it essential for the wellbeing and potential of millions of children, it is also vital for national economic and social development.

Why aren't families getting the support they need?

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child requires national governments to assist parents and legal guardians in their child-rearing responsibilities[6] and, in case of need, to provide material assistance and support programmes.[7] However, such supports are frequently lacking. In many countries, few mechanisms exist to ensure that appropriate support is channelled to families caring for children, and to those that are particularly vulnerable.

Typically, government budgets do not prioritise the care of children while they are in a family. Even where there are programmes to address poverty and other family stresses, the most vulnerable children and families (e.g. child-headed households, and migrant or refugee and asylum-seeking families without the correct papers) may not be able to access them. Programmes to strengthen families, though vital, are frequently not given enough emphasis as a means of preventing and responding to serious care and protection issues. Instead, resources tend to focus on interventions after the point that harm has occurred or the family has been separated or broken down.

However, experience shows that, where there is political will, children can be well cared for and protected in their families. Indonesia, for example, has embarked on a process of widespread reform to reduce the use of institutional care and to shift policies and resources towards supporting children in their families. Croatia has achieved important structural and legal changes to ensure that family and community-based care is given greater priority. And South Africa has built social protection and other mechanisms to strengthen families and prevent unnecessary separation.[8]

What must and can be done?

Poverty alleviation and social services are essential to strengthen families faced with adversity and risk. Such services and support include:

Universal services and resources
Services such as healthcare, education and community-based care should be available for *all* families.

Social services for families at risk or in need
These may be preventative, supportive or rehabilitative, and should be based on an assessment of the child and her or his family situation. They should build on individual and community-based resources. Programmes that can have the greatest impact in strengthening families include:

- prevention programmes focusing on the family's coping abilities and their social and economic resources[9]
- community-based supports such as child or respite care, and vocational training[10]
- in-home services where workers or volunteers provide guidance and support[11]
- family-centred community building, which brings together community leaders, families, and others to coordinate services that support and strengthen families[12]
- parenting education programmes.[13]

Income generation and economic support programmes
Programmes such as conditional or unconditional cash transfers, childcare grants, social pensions, tax benefits, subsidised food, fee waivers, microfinance, savings schemes, skills training and other livelihood opportunities can have significant direct and indirect benefits for children. Evidence shows that, where one person in a poor household gets additional financial assistance, the children in that household are more likely to be better cared for (e.g., to eat better, grow taller and go to school), and are less likely to have to do harmful work and be physically injured, abused or exploited.[14] Such measures are likely to increase family cohesion and functioning, reducing the numbers of children forced out of the home and onto the street or into institutions.

Combining these economic and social programmes can help mitigate many of the most extreme risks for children and the need for alternative care. Their success will depend on key factors such as:
- the degree to which children, parents, and other caregivers are consulted
- their ability to target the children and families most in need
- a supportive and coherent legal and policy framework
- trained staff and volunteers capable of supporting children and families and delivering programmes
- coordination across government departments and professions.

What we are calling for

- **Governments** to make a long-term commitment to building family support services and family-based alternative care, in line with the international Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children welcomed by the UN General Assembly in 2009.[15] This should be reflected in budget allocations, national strategies, and laws and policies that prioritise the prevention of family separation.
- **Donors** to ensure that funding is directed at preventative family support. This includes initiating and expanding social protection programmes that are combined with investments in family support services for the most vulnerable families and children, including those not in households, and promoting the training of an effective cadre of social workers capable of supporting vulnerable families.

- **UN agencies, NGOs and faith-based organisations** to raise awareness of the importance of family- and community-based care for children, and to encourage and support the application of the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children.[16] Agencies should evaluate the effectiveness of programmes that support family preservation and the care of children within their families in order to promote evidence-based practice.

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[5] ibid

[6] United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) Article18,

[7] *Ibid*, Article 27

[8] See note 4

[9] L Schorr (1997) in *Strengthening Families and Communities: 2009 Resource Guide*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau, Office on Child Abuse and Neglect, its Child Welfare Information Gateway, and the FRIENDS National Resource Center for Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention

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[16] *Ibid*