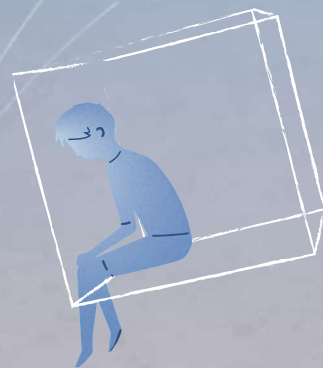Global Report on Children's Care and Protection

Understanding and preventing the separation of children from their families

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SOS CHILDREN'S VILLAGES

—— Foreword

This year, 2024, marks the 35th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which recognizes that children should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love, and understanding. The Convention affirms the role that parents and families play in the upbringing of children and requires State parties to ensure that children are not separated from parents unless that is necessary for their best interests.

Today, millions of children around the world are separated from their families in situations where this could have been prevented. During the period that I have been chairperson, armed conflict has been a dominant factor in the displacement of children, and their involuntary separation from parents.

At the Committee, we remain steadfast in upholding the principles of the Convention, particularly in emphasizing the need to prevent unnecessary separations and to support families in staying together. Articles 9, 18, and 7 of the Convention make clear that it is the responsibility of governments and societies to ensure families are supported in caring for their children and that, when separation is unavoidable, every effort is made to maintain the child's connection to their family.

This report is timely. It offers indispensable insights into the systemic issues - such as poverty, discrimination, and lack of access to essential services - that contribute to unnecessary separations of children from their families. The findings underscore that States have the capacity, and responsibility, to address these challenges through stronger coordination across sectors and greater investment in child protection, social protection, and family-strengthening services.

I am particularly heartened by the participatory approach taken in the research led by SOS Children's Villages and its partners. By actively engaging children, young people, families, and professionals across diverse country studies, this report ensures that the voices of those most affected by separation are heard. Their perspectives provide a deeper understanding of the challenges, and point to practical, grounded solutions.

I am sure this report will inspire policymakers, practitioners, and advocates to take meaningful action to prevent family separation and to invest in solutions that allow children to thrive within their families. Together, we can work to ensure that every child can grow up in a safe, loving, and supportive family environment.

Professor Ann Skelton
Chair, UN Committee on the Rights of the Child

Foreword

In a world facing multiple, simultaneous crises, the social fabric is being stretched to its limits. Insufficient investment in social development policies, coupled with outdated care and support systems, is failing children and families. This results in preventable child-family separation, affecting millions and hindering their ability to reach their full potential and exercise their rights.

We know that, in most cases, separation can and must be prevented at its root. However, this requires a robust response at global, national, and local levels, based on evidence and informed by the voices of those directly impacted.

What factors drive children to be separated from their families and placed into alternative care? And how can the social sector collaborate to prevent separation and transform children's lives? This flagship report seeks to answer these questions through participatory research aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of realities on the ground across diverse country contexts.

The report's findings reveal a complex interplay of factors driving child-family separation—from severe poverty impacting individual families to geopolitical challenges and the effects of climate shocks. These range from societal norms influencing perceptions of gender and violence to systemic issues that hinder families' access to social protection and justice.

Despite this complexity, some simple facts emerge universally—whether in low-, middle-, or high-income countries. It is rarely just one factor that leads to the loss of care; rather, it is the combination of multiple factors and the failure of care and support systems to address these issues in a coordinated manner.

SOS Children's Villages extends its gratitude to all research experts and participants who joined us on this journey to illuminate this complex issue. We commit to working alongside them to put the learnings into practice.

As we mark over 75 years of supporting children and young people who have lost or are at risk of losing parental care, this report serves as a vital guide for the future. It will help us respond more effectively and advocate for their rights and needs, drawing on lessons from the field and listening to their voices.

Preventing child-family separation is not only more cost-effective but also crucial to meet the best interests of every child. We believe that the findings and analysis presented in this report will be invaluable to all those working to ensure that children's rights are upheld.

Dr. Dereje Wordofa
**President,
SOS Children's Villages
International**

Angela Rosales
**Chief Executive Officer,
SOS Children's Villages
International**

Introduction:
The global challenge of keeping families together

Every day, countless children worldwide experience separation from their families, a situation that can negatively affect their development and well-being, with impacts that may extend across generations. Ensuring that children grow up with the care and protection of their families is a significant challenge in low-, middle- and high-income countries alike. In Africa, approximately 35 million children have lost parental care, while 758,000 children in the European Union live in alternative care.

Although separating children from their families is sometimes necessary to protect them from immediate harm, such as in cases of abuse or neglect, there is growing consensus that many separations could be prevented with proper support. United Nations Member States recognize their legal obligation to uphold children's rights and the rights of parents and families as caregivers, as enshrined in international law. Under the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, children have the right to grow up in a family environment, protected from separation that is not in their best interests. Parents and families are primarily responsible for raising their children, while governments are required to support them in this vital caregiving role.

However, progress in preventing family separation has been hindered by the lack of reliable data on its root causes – data essential for developing effective care and support systems. This report aims to address these gaps by investigating the key factors that contribute to separation and provide actionable recommendations to prevent it. It draws on research conducted over two years involving SOS Children's Villages and academic partners, and it incorporates the perspectives of 1,179 children, young people, adult family members, and professionals from eight countries.

Global insights and localized data were collected and analyzed to provide a more comprehensive view of the challenges and potential solutions, serving as an essential resource for policymakers, service providers and international organizations dedicated to supporting families and ensuring children's care and protection.

The report comes at a pivotal moment as the international community approaches the 2030 deadline for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly those focused on the well-being of children and families. With discussions about the agenda for the period after 2030 gaining momentum, there is growing recognition of the need to prioritize the rights of caregivers and care receivers and to acknowledge the crucial role of the care economy.

By highlighting ways to prevent the unnecessary separation of children from their families, the report contributes to global efforts to meet international commitments and improve protections and support for children and their families. It offers evidence and recommendations to help shape a more equitable future for all.

What makes research in this report unique?

Researching the factors contributing to the separation of children from their families is particularly challenging due to the overrepresentation of higher-income countries in existing literature and the influence of both the objective capacity and subjective perspectives of those recording the reasons for children's admission to alternative care. This makes it difficult to consistently understand and document the phenomenon.

To address this challenge, the report integrates key findings from a systematic literature review of global research, and it introduces new data from country studies across various income levels, filling gaps in current research to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to family separation and ways to prevent it. By including countries from low-, middle-, and high-income contexts, the research provides insights that reflect a broad range of experiences, helping to expand understanding of family separation across diverse settings. The research combines information from existing studies on the circumstances in which children are separated from their families with findings on the specific reasons for separation within selected national child protection systems, particularly those leading to placements in alternative care.

Using a socio-ecological approach and cross-country comparisons, the study examines the complex interplay of family, community, and societal factors that lead to separation in various local contexts while also highlighting global patterns. It further identifies critical gaps in care and support systems revealed by the country studies, which contribute to children being placed in alternative care.

The participatory methodology, developed with input from children and young people, ensured that diverse voices were included, with attention to different ages and abilities. The study engaged 517 children and young people, 290 adult family members, and 368 professionals – including social workers, alternative care providers, lawyers, and judges – from eight countries: Côte d'Ivoire, Denmark, Indonesia, El Salvador, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, and Uruguay.

Situations of separation: Overview of literature and debate

A review of academic and non-academic sources reveals a variety of terms used to describe children affected by separation, such as 'children without parental care,' and 'unaccompanied and separated children.' The review outlines the diverse situations in which children may face or be at risk of separation, with research and international policy often focusing on specific cases rather than providing a comprehensive perspective. These situations vary across social and cultural contexts and are influenced by factors such as gender and age, with children potentially experiencing multiple vulnerabilities simultaneously, increasing the risk of separation. While not exhaustive, the list of situations presented in the report underscores the complexity of separation and highlights the need for more precise definitions, enhanced data collection, and more targeted responses.

- children living or working on the street (or street-connected, homeless, runaway children)
- children who have been abandoned
- children whose parents or primary caregivers have died
- children who are described as orphaned and vulnerable children
- children who have experienced illegal adoption
- children in different forms of alternative care
- children in boarding schools
- children born out of wedlock
- children of adolescent/teenage parents or children whose parents are adolescents/ teenagers
- children who are internally displaced, (unaccompanied) refugees or asylum seekers
- children who have been left behind by parents or caregivers who have migrated
- children of families separated at the border, not reunified (e.g., due to migration policy), or both
- children who are victims of trafficking and exploitation
- children living with or whose caregivers are affected by HIV/AIDS or other serious illnesses/diseases
- children affected by mental or physical disabilities or children whose caregivers are affected by mental or physical disabilities
- children affected by different or multiple forms of violence (e.g., those experiencing abuse or neglect by their caregivers)
- children who are deprived of liberty in different situations (e.g., in the administration of justice, for migration-related reasons, in the context of armed conflict, or on national security grounds)
- children with detained or imprisoned parent(s)
- children in armed groups or gangs
- children engaged in harmful or hazardous work or child labour
- children who have experienced forced marriage
- judicially emancipated children (i.e., children who have chosen to rescind the guardianship of their parents)
- children whose parent(s) have separated, divorced, remarried, or are in new partnerships

Key findings: Factors contributing to children's the separation from their families

Children are separated from their families due to multifaceted and interconnected factors at the individual, family, community, and societal levels that put a family's caregiving and protective relationships at risk. These factors are usually not isolated events but may combine and accumulate over time, creating instability and unsafe environments within families. This is especially true when parents or caregivers do not have access to the resources and strategies needed to cope with the challenges they face.
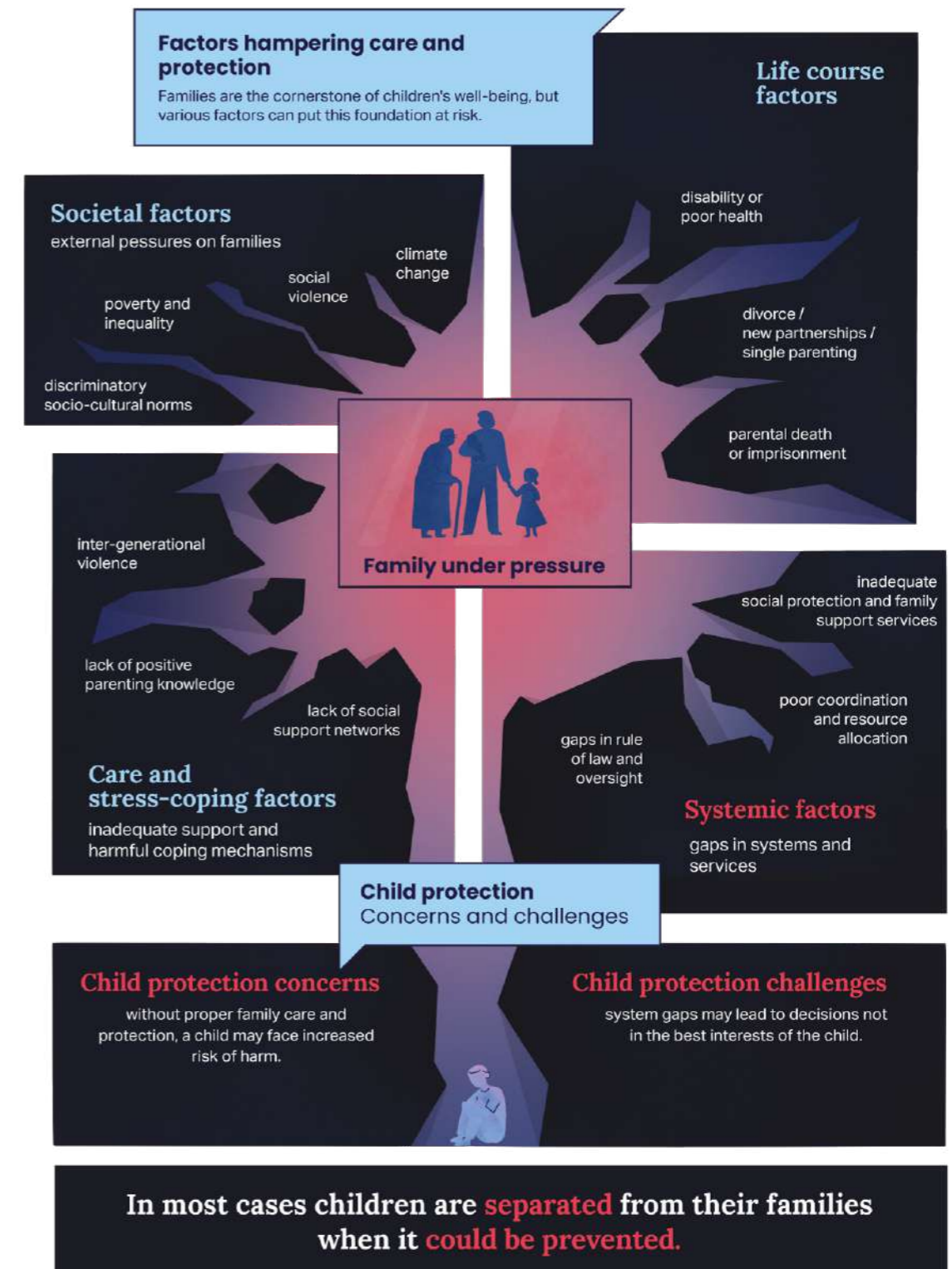
While the systematic literature review found that these factors are often context-specific and shaped by individual characteristics and the cultural and structural features of societies, research in the eight study countries showed that there are also common elements across societies and child protection systems.

Notably, the findings suggest that separation is not just the result of family dynamics but rather the interplay between them and the environments in which children and families live and where they can access help within the community, wider society, and the State's care and support system.

- **Challenging life circumstances or shocks**, such as parental death, imprisonment, divorce, disability, single parenting, and poor physical or mental health, increase family strain but become reasons for separation when the family cannot access the necessary social support to build resilience and self-reliance.

- **Limited access to stress-coping and caregiving resources** can increase the risk of separation when caregivers, overwhelmed by their circumstances, turn to harmful coping mechanisms such as substance use, harsh discipline, or neglect. These behaviours are often linked to unaddressed adverse childhood experiences, which may affect the next generation. These resources are related to individual characteristics and a lack of formal or informal social support networks and community-based services, including mental health and psychosocial support.

- **Several societal factors diminish family caregiving abilities**, including widespread violence, poverty, inequality (e.g., gender), and harmful socio-cultural norms that perpetuate discrimination, stigma, and social exclusion (e.g., towards single parents, ethnic minorities, or children with disabilities). Humanitarian crises, environmental degradation, and the climate crisis exacerbate these pressures.

- **Gaps in laws, policies, and services** within a State's care and support system play a major role. The lack of preventative measures and people-centred approaches to policy and service delivery across social sectors (e.g., child protection, social protection, education, health, justice, etc.) makes it difficult for families to identify and access the support they need to cope with their challenges. Even in countries with preventative services, provisions are often inadequate or inaccessible due to social or physical barriers.

- **Inappropriate child protection decisions** about removing children from their families can lead to unnecessary separation. In cases where decision-making processes are not robust, and

resources are limited, professionals may not have the capacity to fully assess family situations and provide appropriate support. This can result in children being placed in alternative care prematurely and against their best interests. Furthermore, gaps in preventative services and family support often lead to the perception that separating children from their families is the only viable solution, even when family-based interventions could be the most suitable form of support. These challenges are further exacerbated by weak state oversight and inadequate enforcement of the rule of law.

Why children are separated from their families

Factors hampering care and protection
Families are the cornerstone of children's well-being, but various factors can put this foundation at risk.

Life course factors
- disability or poor health
- divorce / new partnerships / single parenting
- parental death or imprisonment

Societal factors
external pessures on families
- poverty and inequality
- social violence
- climate change
- discriminatory socio-cultural norms

Family under pressure

Care and stress-coping factors
inadequate support and harmful coping mechanisms
- inter-generational violence
- lack of positive parenting knowledge
- lack of social support networks

Systemic factors
gaps in systems and services
- inadequate social protection and family support services
- poor coordination and resource allocation
- gaps in rule of law and oversight

Child protection
Concerns and challenges

Child protection concerns
without proper family care and protection, a child may face increased risk of harm.

Child protection challenges
system gaps may lead to decisions not in the best interests of the child.

In most cases children are separated from their families when it could be prevented.

Key findings:
What influences child protection decisions on separation

When children come to the attention of child protection authorities (e.g., in cases involving violence against children, child labour, early or forced marriage, street-connected children, etc.), the ability of the child protection system to function as an effective gatekeeper is crucial to ensuring that separation occurs only when necessary, in the child's best interests, and as a last resort. Members of the social services workforce, including social workers, child protection officers, judges, alternative care providers, and other relevant decision-makers, often face challenging and emotional situations and must make difficult decisions, sometimes based on limited knowledge, training, and high degrees of uncertainty. Many professionals involved in the research indicated that decisions regarding child protection cases are not always appropriate. In some countries, children are separated from their families and placed in alternative care not due to protection concerns but for access to services like education, healthcare, food, or clothing – contradicting international guidance that poverty alone should never be a reason for placing children in alternative care.

Key gaps in child protection systems influencing inappropriate decisions on separation include:

- **Lack of capacity and support for the social services workforce:** Decision-makers often face resource shortages (e.g., staffing, budgets, time, transportation), lack of supervision, insufficient mental health support, inadequate training on children's rights, and limited opportunities for ongoing professional development. These challenges lead to burnout, high turnover, and poor recognition of their work, which hampers the ability to make decisions in children's best interests. Insufficient investment in the workforce also leaves decision-makers without the necessary resources to fully support families, contributing to unnecessary separations.

- **Dysfunction in parts of the child protection system:** Weak legal and normative frameworks, poor coordination among actors (e.g., social workers, judges), and the absence of standardized decision-making tools hinder effective practices. These deficiencies are compounded by a lack of proper mechanisms to promote children's and families' participation in case discussions. Cultural beliefs, societal norms, and biases, particularly related to poverty and gender roles, can influence decisions, making it harder to ensure fair outcomes. Advocacy, awareness-raising, and data collection are critical to building a more robust system that properly safeguards children's best interests.

- **Referral options and service availability:** Decision-makers often lack access to the range of services needed to support families and prevent unnecessary separation. Gaps in social protection, basic services (e.g., education, healthcare), day-care, and family strengthening services leave vulnerable families with few alternatives. This issue is worsened by limited community-based family support services and the absence of proper judicial or administrative procedures for admitting children into alternative care. As a result, children are often separated from their families to access these services, with an over-reliance on institutional care fuelled by the belief that children may be 'better off' in such settings.

- **Balancing objectivity and subjectivity in decision-making:** Cultural norms, social beliefs, and the personal characteristics of professionals (e.g., background, experience) can heavily influence decisions. While objectivity versus subjectivity in child protection decisions remains debated, it is widely agreed that decisions should be evidence-based, unbiased, and balanced with professional judgment. In many cases, the lack of resources and insufficient training contributes to subjective decision-making, often leading to placements that do not prioritize the child's best interests. In particular, more research is needed in middle- and lower-income countries to better inform policies and tools that support child protection decision-making and gatekeeping functions.

Insights from children, families, and professionals

Children and families in the study expressed a strong desire for love, protection, and the chance to live in safe, supportive environments. Their suggestions for change included support for improving family communication, increasing access to education, healthcare, housing, and economic stability, and ensuring psychological and social support. Child protection professionals echoed these views, calling for better-resourced systems that enable them to fulfil their roles effectively, including increased support for social workers, better coordination among service providers, and psychosocial support for families.

Conclusions and recommendations

The separation of children from their families can have long-term detrimental effects on their development and well-being. To address this, both State and non-State actors must design and implement evidence-based strategies that tackle the root causes of family instability, such as poverty, violence, and inadequate access to services. This research underscores the importance of adopting a socio-ecological approach, recognizing that factors such as social norms, economic conditions, and environmental stressors shape family dynamics and can become compounded over time. The report also highlights key challenges, including inconsistent definitions in data collection and incomplete data on the reasons for separation and the placement of children in alternative care by public authorities. These challenges hinder a full understanding of the issue. National child protection systems often fail to adhere to the principle of necessity, leading to separations driven by access to basic services rather than genuine protection concerns. Addressing these systemic issues is critical to breaking cycles of trauma, poverty, and instability, thereby preventing long-term societal costs and improving outcomes for children and families.

As the international community works towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and fulfilling obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, addressing family separation is essential to safeguarding children's rights. The evidence and recommendations in this report provide a roadmap for policymakers, advocates, and stakeholders to build stronger, more resilient families. By fostering multi-sector collaboration across child protection, social protection, health, and education, stakeholders can create coordinated systems that provide early intervention and preventive care to vulnerable families, reducing the likelihood of unnecessary separation.

The report calls on governments to improve care and support systems to keep families together and protect children. It emphasizes the importance of evidence-based, rights-driven prevention and early intervention to address the root causes of separation. Governments, donors, and implementing partners should collaborate to create integrated, multi-sector systems that holistically meet the needs of children and families while fostering safe, stable, and supportive environments. Strong coordination among child protection, social protection, health and education sectors, justice, rule of law, and development cooperation will be integral to creating and delivering these systems.

The report identifies **three key policy priorities**: enhancing preventative child protection, ensuring basic living standards and social inclusion, and implementing people-centred policies and services. For each priority, the report recommends actionable steps for governments, donors, and implementing partners to strengthen care and support systems and keep families together.

Recommendations to improve care and support systems to keep families together and protect children

Enhance preventative child protection

1 Scale-up anti violence programmes targeting adults and children

2 Expand parenting support programmes

3 Reform child protection systems

Ensure basic living standards and social inclusion

4 Develop inclusive social protection systems

5 Ensure universal access to support services

6 Promote gender, disability and age inclusion

Implement people-centred policies and services

7 Improve evidence-driven system design and delivery

8 Foster multisector collaboration and coordination

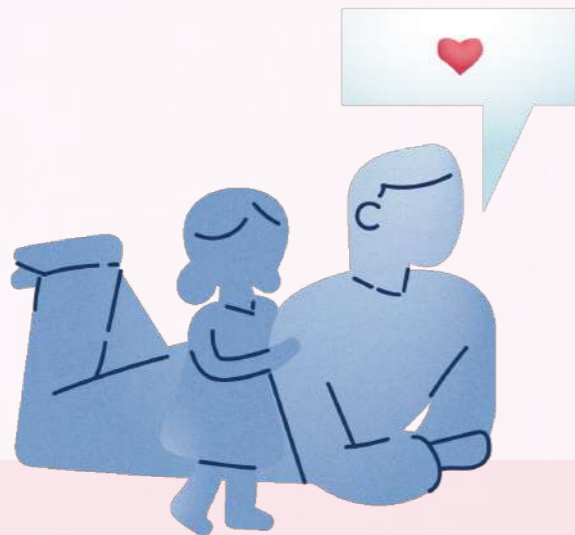9 Promote the participation of children and families

Recommendations to enhance preventative child protection

1. Scale-up anti-violence programmes targeting adults and children

- Governments should promote **public awareness campaigns** targeting both adults and children to break the cycle of violence and promote safe family environments in their communities. These initiatives should focus on educating citizens about the harms of domestic and gender-based violence, child labour, and other harmful practices. They should provide education on respectful relationships, human rights, and early signs of violence, ensuring cultural and gender sensitivity.

- **Legal frameworks** must be developed or strengthened to criminalize violence, especially violence against children, women, and marginalized groups. Laws and policies, such as the prohibition of corporal punishment, must be enforced to shift social norms and protect children from harm.

- Governments should also provide the necessary **support services for victims/survivors**, including emergency hotlines, trauma-informed counselling, shelters, and case management, to help them access legal, medical, housing, and financial assistance.
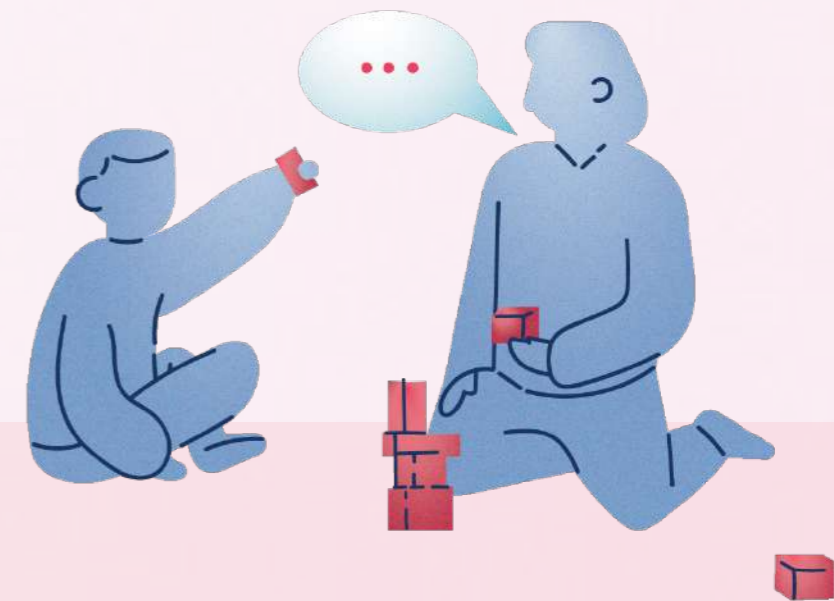
2. Expand parenting support programmes

- Governments should expand **programmes that improve care practices** for all caregivers with parental responsibilities, prioritizing families in vulnerable situations. These programmes should focus on breaking harmful cycles and preventing the transmission of intergenerational trauma associated with abuse, neglect, and violence. They should cover training in stress management, non-violent communication, emotional bonding, and positive discipline, alongside access to necessary support services.

- **Programmes must be evidence-based and grounded in human rights** principles, incorporating key frameworks such as attachment theory, trauma-informed care, and protective behaviours. They should also include gender- and disability-responsive content to ensure inclusivity.

3. Reform child protection systems

- Policymakers must **update and harmonize legal and policy frameworks** to prioritize children's rights, ensuring family separation occurs only in the child's best interests and aligns with international standards. Frameworks should be simplified, integrated across sectors, and supported by adequate financial resources. Key reforms include reducing bureaucratic delays, improving oversight of service providers, and ensuring continuous monitoring and evaluation, with particular attention to intersectional discrimination based on gender, disability, and age.

- **Strengthening gatekeeping mechanisms** is essential to ensure alternative care is only used when necessary. Alternative care should be temporary and safe and prioritize children's return to their families or adoption when in the child's best interests. Governments should also phase out unregistered service providers and end institutionalization.

- **Adequate resources** must be allocated to support rights-based child protection systems. This includes investments in family support, community-based services, and strengthening care and child protection professionals to address workforce shortages and ensure they receive the necessary emotional and professional support to perform their work.

- Governments should enable professionals to **prioritize referral to a range of family strengthening services** over alternative care. Coordination across public services and NGOs is vital for providing timely support.

- Lastly, **care and child protection professionals** need proper training, guidance, supervision, support (including emotional and self-care), resources, and collaboration opportunities. Improved working conditions and recognition will empower them to make decisions in the child's best interests.

Recommendations to ensure basic living standards and social inclusion

4. Develop inclusive social protection systems

- Governments should develop **inclusive labour market policies** that promote equitable employment, particularly for women, young people, people with disabilities, and high-unemployment communities. Ensuring access to decent work – offering fair income and safe conditions – is crucial. Measures include job creation, vocational training, support for entrepreneurship, affordable day-care, and policies that help parents balance work and caregiving.

- Governments should build **comprehensive social protection systems** aimed at universal coverage, including a social protection floor that guarantees basic income security for children, working-age individuals, and older persons, along with access to essential healthcare.

- **Social protection for children** is vital. Governments should offer programmes supporting children's development, such as child allowances, school feeding programmes, parental leave, and subsidies for health and education. Conditional cash transfers linked to school attendance and medical check-ups can improve children's well-being.

- In **humanitarian emergencies**, governments must ensure flexible, shock-responsive social protection systems. Expanding cash transfers, food aid, and other essential services during crises will support families in maintaining care for their children, protecting them from separation.
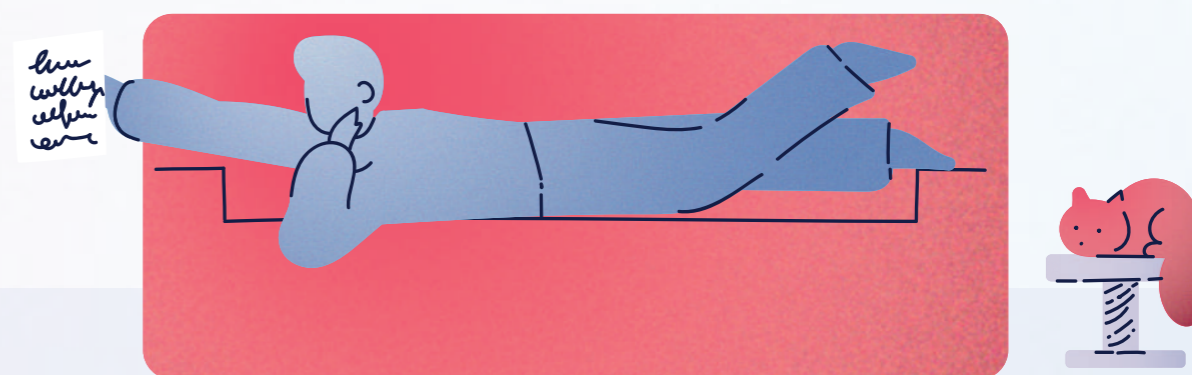
5. Ensure universal access to support services

- Governments should ensure all families can **access basic social services**, including healthcare, education, housing, and transportation.

- Families in vulnerable situations must have **access to specialized services**, such as family counselling, substance abuse treatment, mental health services, psychosocial support, and support for families returning to care after separation.

- Governments must **remove social, economic, and physical barriers to accessing services**, especially for marginalized groups, such as people with disabilities, those from rural areas, and minority communities. Measures should include simplifying service eligibility criteria and improving public awareness about available services.

6. Promote gender, disability, and age inclusion

- Governments must promote **gender equality in caregiving** by challenging stereotypes that caregiving is solely a female role. Legal frameworks should support shared caregiving responsibilities, such as gender-neutral parental leave policies and incentives for shared caregiving. Public education campaigns can promote the value of care work and further encourage equal caregiving responsibilities.

- Policymakers must **confront patriarchal norms** that perpetuate gender-based violence and inequality, ensuring survivors have access to justice, safe spaces, and comprehensive support. Legal and educational interventions should target harmful cultural norms.

- Governments should also **address intersectional discrimination** related to gender, disability, and age, enforcing anti-discrimination laws and ending the institutionalization of children with disabilities by providing inclusive family support.

- **Services must be gender-responsive, disability-inclusive, and age-sensitive**, addressing the specific needs of children and caregivers at different stages of life.

- Community initiatives should **foster a culture of respect and inclusion**, promoting dialogue to address caregiving challenges while combating stigma, violence, and discrimination.

Recommendations to implement people-centred policies and services

7. Improve evidence-driven system design and delivery

- States should ensure that official data includes **detailed, disaggregated information on children and families at risk of separation** or already separated, including data on gender, disability, and other key factors. This data is essential for evidence-based decision-making and effective care planning.

- Governments should collaborate with multilateral agencies, NGOs, and research institutions to **close data gaps**, improve data collection, and consolidate existing information to better understand the drivers of separation and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions.

- Policymakers and researchers require **transparent, standardized, and accessible data** to effectively address the root causes of family separation and ensure accountability in care and support systems.

- Further **investments in research** on child-family separation are necessary to develop better interventions and improve care outcomes. Regular monitoring and transparent reporting on children's care and well-being will help increase accountability and improve policy outcomes.

- International forums and conferences should be supported to encourage **global knowledge-sharing and innovation** on preventing and addressing child-family separation.

8. Foster multi-sector collaboration and coordination

- Governments should foster **partnerships between various sectors and stakeholders**, including social services, health, education, justice, and civil society, to deliver coordinated support to children and families. Creating formal governance structures that clearly define the roles of each sector will promote integrated service delivery and improve accessibility.

- Policymakers should also develop legal, funding, and monitoring **frameworks to support multi-sector collaboration**. At the global level, national progress towards integrated care and support systems should be incorporated into the Sustainable Development Goals framework to encourage greater accountability.

9. Promote the participation of children and families

- Governments should embed **participatory approaches** in care and support systems by developing capacity through clear guidelines, safe and accessible platforms, and training tools such as child-friendly participation methods and feedback mechanisms.

- National **legislation** must mandate the participation of children and families in decisions about their care, in line with international standards.

- **Advocacy and self-representation** should be encouraged, especially for marginalized groups, ensuring their voices are heard in policy discussions.

The art works on this page were made by children and young people in the research.

SOS CHILDREN'S VILLAGES