



A spotlight on foster care

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This paper is part of a series of spotlight papers developed by Family for Every Child, a global alliance of national civil society organisations working together to improve the care of children around the world.

In recent years, there has been a rapid expansion in foster care programmes in low and middle-income countries, often in an attempt to develop more appropriate alternatives to the use of large-scale institutional care for children who cannot be cared for by their own families. Yet research, knowledge and understanding on how to deliver effective, safe foster care programmes in such contexts is often missing (Family for Every Child, 2015a). Concerns have also been raised that, while foster care can benefit many children, it is in some cases being used when family separation is avoidable or when it is not the most appropriate form of alternative care for the individual child (Family for Every Child, 2015b). To help fill this gap in understanding and to ensure that foster care is safe, effective, and only used when necessary and appropriate, Family for Every Child has developed two reports on foster care:

- The place of foster care in the continuum of care choices for children: A review of the evidence for policy makers
- Strategies for delivering safe and effective foster care: A review of the evidence for those designing and delivering foster care programmes.

The reports are based on a literature review and interviews with experts. The reports are available on the Family for Every Child website from, with this short paper summarising key findings.¹

In this paper, the following definition of foster care is used:

“Situations where children are placed by a competent authority for the purpose of alternative care in the domestic environment of a family other than the children’s own family that has been selected, qualified, approved and supervised for providing such care.”
(UN 2010 Art. 28)

Foster care is an important part of the continuum of care choices for children

When foster care is administered appropriately, with effective mechanisms, structures and resources, it allows children to live in a loving and caring family while authorities work towards family reintegration or seek to find new permanent homes for children. It enables children to form the consistent and trusting relationships with caregivers, vital for enabling children to grow to their full potential and become more resilient. Foster care is highly preferable to the large-scale institutions proven to be deeply damaging to children’s well-being and development (Nelson et al 2007; Williamson and Greenberg 2010 and UN 2010). In cases where neither return to family or adoption are in children’s best interests, foster care may also provide some children with a longer-term home (Biehal 2011; EveryChild 2011). However, foster care should only be used when separation from families is in the child’s best interest, and when foster care is deemed to be the most appropriate form of alternative care.² Foster care must only ever be one part of the continuum of care choices for children. Priority should be given to supporting children’s own families to care for them, and other care options, such as small group homes and adoption, should be made available (UN 2010).

No one size fits all

There is no one blueprint for successful foster care programmes, and those developing and delivering foster care must carefully examine context and adapt programmes accordingly. Consideration should be given to the types of foster care that should be offered, which may range from short-break foster care aimed at preventing longer term separation, to long-term placements which support young people through to adulthood (EveryChild 2011). Consideration must also be given to who is best placed to deliver and support foster care in a particular context, with such actors commonly including governments, civil society and communities. In many



contexts, the lack of an effective child welfare workforce means that communities play a vital role in overcoming cultural resistance to foster care, identifying potential foster carers and monitoring foster care placements. However, many argue that foster care cannot be delivered safely without some form of trained child welfare workforce in place (Gale 2008; Family for Every Child 2015a; Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare 2009 a/b; World Vision 2009). In determining the best approach, it can often be valuable to start with small scale foster care programmes and to scale up. Successful, larger scale foster care provision often hinges on effective awareness-raising around the benefits (and challenges) of foster care, and although there is resistance to foster care in some contexts, experience has shown that this can be overcome when the benefits to the child can be clearly seen and communicated (Forber Pratt et al 2013; Human Rights Watch 2014; Mackenzie et al 2014; Save the Children and Centre for Education Research and Consulting 2013).

Core components of safe, quality foster care programmes

Despite the need to adapt foster care to context, there are some core components that all foster care programmes must have to ensure that they are safe and effective in meeting children's needs.³

- **Careful decision making about placement into foster care.** Children should only ever be placed in foster care when separation from families is necessary and in the child's best interest,⁴ and when foster care is deemed to be the most appropriate form of alternative care for the child. Decisions about placing children in foster care should be made carefully, in full consultation with children, families, social workers and other stakeholders. Additionally, all children should have care plans in place which are frequently reviewed and clearly state the purpose of their foster care placement.
- **Help for children and families to support reintegration** back into families where appropriate by maintaining safe contact with and support to families of origin. Foster carers can play a key role in providing this support.
- **The proper recruitment, careful assessment and on-going support of foster carers.** Support mechanisms may include associations of foster carers, access to specialist help and advice, as well as financial support.
- **On-going efforts to build the capacity of foster carers** and those supporting foster care through training, supervision and mentorship.
- **Appropriate matching of children to foster carers** based on a consideration of the capacities of foster carers to meet the individual needs of each particular child.

- **Support for children in foster care**, including efforts to respond to the damaging effects of separation from family. Support services may include associations of children in foster care, complaint mechanisms, specialised therapeutic and counselling services and having an appointed social worker.
- **Monitoring foster care placements** carefully through frequent visits, and using the support of communities to ensure the placement is working for all parties.
- **Support to children and young adults leaving foster care.**

Foster care in a wider system of child protection and care

In order to deliver the above components of effective and safe foster care, certain mechanisms and structures need to be in place. These include:⁵

- Strong legal and policy frameworks rooted in the Guidelines for the Alternative Care for Children (UN 2010) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN 1989), and with the best interest of the child as the primary consideration;
- Sufficient financing of foster care, and of other child welfare services, including support to families of origin and a range of care choices for children;
- Coordinated and collaborative efforts by a range of stakeholders;
- Adequate numbers of trained child welfare workers who are appropriately supported in their efforts to manage foster care programmes and provide support to families of origin;
- Quality data and information management systems, and research and public debate around the issue.

Ultimately the foster care needs to be rooted in a holistic child protection system that delivers these mechanisms and structures and prioritises prevention and family-support services.

Inclusive foster care

All children should have the same range of alternative care options open to them. Yet, in many contexts some groups of children, including those with disabilities and other special needs, children under three and children from the streets, are less likely to be placed in foster care than their peers (Anghel et al 2013; Better Care Network and EveryChild 2012; Palayret et al 2012). Evidence suggests that such groups can benefit greatly from foster care placements and that, with the right support in place for children and foster carers, it is possible to establish more inclusive foster care programmes (Family for Every Child, 2015b).



The status of foster care around the world

An overview of the global evidence suggests that over the last decade, impressive efforts have been made to establish new foster care programmes, benefiting many children who would have otherwise grown up in institutional care or outside of a family setting. However, insufficient resourcing of foster care and/or a lack of effort to create appropriate, context-specific foster care programmes has also led to problems with foster care programmes in both richer and more resource-constrained contexts. These include:⁶

- A lack of support to families leading to children being placed in foster care unnecessarily;
- A lack of adequate financing for foster care;

- A lack coordination and state oversight and monitoring of foster care services;
- Policy frameworks that do not provide sufficient support to foster care and often mirror western approaches which may not be appropriate to the context;
- A lack of effective implementation and enforcement of the law;
- Not enough trained social workers to implement foster care;
- A lack of properly trained and supported foster carers and insufficient attention paid to properly matching children with foster carers;
- Inadequate support for children in and leaving foster care, including vital psycho-social support;
- A lack of information, research and evaluation of foster care, especially in low and middle income countries.

Recommendations

These findings suggest the following key recommendations for donors and policy makers:

1. Invest in foster care as part of a holistic national child care system which prioritises efforts to prevent family separation, and also provides a range of other alternative care choices for children. This system should include an effectively trained child welfare workforce.
2. Invest in a range of different types of foster care to ensure that children can be placed in the form of foster care most suitable to their individual needs.
3. Develop and implement locally-appropriate legal and policy frameworks to support foster care and the wider child care and protection systems and involve children and other stakeholders in the design of policies and procedures.
4. Ensure that there are appropriate coordination mechanisms between stakeholders involved in foster care and recognise and support the vital role played by communities and civil society in the delivery of quality, safe foster care services.
5. Ensure that all foster care provision is properly regulated and monitored, and evaluate foster care programmes, including understanding children's perspectives, to identify examples of promising practice and areas of improvement.

These findings suggest the following key recommendations for foster care programme designers:

1. Adapt foster care programmes to the specific context.
2. Build effective, participatory decision-making systems to ensure that children are only in foster care when it is necessary and appropriate. All children in foster care should have an individual care plan with a clear purpose that is regularly reviewed.
3. Ensure that foster care programmes are safe and effective through: recruitment, assessment and support of foster carers; effective matching of children to carers; proper support to children in foster care; careful monitoring and regular review of placements; support to reintegration with families (including contact with families of origin where appropriate) and support to care leavers.
4. Make efforts to support children with special needs and their carers to ensure that foster care is inclusive.

Overall, it is important that foster care is not viewed as the only solution to family separation, nor seen as a 'quick fix' option. However, with the right support mechanisms in place, foster care offers a valuable care option for children, enabling them to be cared for in a family environment and to form the bonds that are vital to development and growth. Sadly, in many contexts support to foster is inadequate and far more must be urgently done to ensure that foster care is more widely available, safe and effective.



Endnotes

- 1 This paper was written by Emily Delap, Family for Every Child's Head of Technical Support. It is based on findings from two longer reports to be published by Family for Every Child: The place of foster care in the continuum of care choices for children: A review of the evidence for policy makers and Strategies for delivering safe and effective foster care: A review of the evidence for those designing and delivering foster care programmes researched and written by Ghazal Keshavarzian, an independent consultant.
- 2 Other forms of alternative care choices that can be available include: kinship care, residential care in small group homes, supported independent living among others.
- 3 Taken from Family for Every Child, forthcoming (b) drawing on evidence from various sources including: Bostock 2014; Cantwell et al 2012; EveryChild 2011; EveryChild Georgia 2011; Hojer et al 2013; Human Rights Watch 2010/ 2014; Manitoba Foster Family Network 2011; Martinez 2014; Scottish Government 2013a; Sherwin 2011 a/b/c; UN 2010; UNICEF Croatia 2012
- 4 The Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (UN 2010) suggest that a range of factors should be considered in determining best interest, including: meeting universal child rights; balancing children's immediate safety and well-being with their medium and longer-term care and development needs; recognising the problems associated with frequent placement changes, and the importance of achieving permanency in care relationships and a consideration of children's attachments to family and communities, including the importance of keeping siblings together (though this can be complex, especially if this joint placement is deemed to be appropriate for one and not both siblings).
- 5 Taken from Family for Every Child, forthcoming (a), drawing on evidence from a range of sources including: Anghel et al 2013; Human Rights Watch 2014; Davis and Padley 2013; Sherwin 2011 a/b/c; Palayret et al 2012; Parry-Williams and Dunn 2009.
- 6 Taken from Family for Every Child, forthcoming (a), drawing on evidence from a range of sources including: Centre for Law and Policy Research and Foster Care, India 2013; DCS and UNICEF 2012; DCS 2008; EveryChild 2011; EveryChild and HelpAge International 2012; EveryChild Georgia 2011; Human Rights Watch 2014; NPR 2013; Palayret et al 2012; Parry-Williams and Dunn, 2009; Petrova-Dimtrova 2009; Perry et al 2012; Tapsfield and Collier 2005; Save the Children and Center for Educational Research and Consulting 2013; Sherwin 2011a/b/c; UNICEF Croatia 2012.

 info@familyforeverychild.org

 www.familyforeverychild.org

 [@familyforeveryc](https://twitter.com/familyforeveryc)

 www.linkedin.com/company/family-for-every-child

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