

Focus on Extended Family of Origin for Children's Care

Associação Brasileira Terra dos Homens (ABTH), Brazil



THE LOCAL CONTEXT

Brazil is an advanced emerging economy in Latin America, yet it experiences high levels of income inequality. Chronic poverty, a lack of job opportunities, precarious housing and poor levels of education create a fragile environment for vulnerable families.

In underprivileged settings, teenage pregnancy is common and as such children circulate within the extended family and are raised by their grandmothers. In these contexts, it is common for women to have several children from different partners and for fathers to be absent. Children are often 'returned' to their mothers during adolescence and dysfunctional family patterns cause them to leave home to live on the streets, or they are placed in shelters.

ABOUT ASSOCIACAO BRASILEIRA TERRA DOS HOMENS

ABTH works with children and families in violent situations, to prevent separation. They also reintegrate children who have been separated from their families and are living on the streets or in shelters, and they facilitate temporary foster care. They provide psychosocial support to families in violent communities.

ABTH has advocated for change to local, national and international legal and social welfare systems. They work with extended families and believe that kinship care should be prioritised.

Find out more: www.terradoshomens.org.br/ or contact Claudia Cabral, Executive Director: claudiacabral@terradoshomens.org.br

THE MODEL

Associação Brasileira Terra dos Homens (ABTH) works on both prevention of children's separation from families, and reintegration of children back into families from life on the street, in shelters or foster care. Working with extended families is crucial for ABTH. It believes that kinship care should be the first, second and third option before a foster or adoptive family is considered for a child. ABTH believes this provides the best chance of strengthening families, avoiding family breakdown and promoting successful reintegration.

ABTH takes a network approach to its work with families, always engaging three generations. It recognises the need to work with the extended family to inform its understanding of how the nuclear family functions. The maternal grandmother is often the main focus, but siblings, aunts and cousins on both sides of the family also play important roles. ABTH believes that the family network is its most important tool for reinforcing family protection.

The genogram and ecomap are essential visual family mapping tools for ABTH in this process. These tools provide a graphic representation of the networks of the nuclear and extended families, as well as community links; they display relationships between individuals as well as hereditary patterns and psychological factors. Use of these tools enables ABTH to better understand the whole family system at an intergenerational level.

Furthermore, since the 1990s ABTH has conducted impactful advocacy work which has led to national systems change around inclusion of extended families at the levels of both law and social welfare.

IMPLEMENTATION

ABTH uses the **genogram** to depict complex family patterns across generations. Through analysing the structure of at least three generations of a family, incorporating all family members, ABTH gains a strong understanding of the family system as a whole. The genogram sheds light on issues that are often unknown to the family. It is a tool which can enhance opportunities for supporting and protecting children within the family of origin.

The **ecomap** portrays the interdependent relationships of an individual to his or her environment and society. This tool is used to present the exchange between both family members and the systems outside of the family such as schools, churches, neighbours, work and so on. It displays all the resources in the family network and thus provides important guidance for practitioners in planning interventions.

ABTH finds that both the genogram and the ecomap are most effective when family members contribute to their creation. The family is a living system undergoing constant change and these tools can adapt to the different stages of a family's life cycle.

STATISTICAL OUTCOMES

Prevention: ABTH works with 100 families in the community each month. From a sample of 40 families in 2020:

- 1 Children were living with grandparents in 35% of cases.
- 2 Of those cases, 71% of grandparents lived together with the mother.

Reintegration: ABTH has conducted reintegration work in Rio de Janeiro's favelas for over 20 years. The work has been shown to have a success rate of 80%. From a sample of 20 adolescents reintegrated into their families in 2017:

- 3 20% of adolescents were placed with extended family.
- 4 Of that group, 75% went to live with their grandmothers.

CHALLENGES FACED

- 1 There is a lack of investment in public policies, mainly in the areas of education, health and employment.
- 2 Communication between the various actors working with families is weak, which negatively impacts the success of the work. There is a need for greater intersectoral collaboration.
- 3 Limiting attitudes of social and legal professionals working with children and families represent a significant barrier; there is a culture of blaming the individual and a disregard for the role of the extended family.



Kinship care should be the first, second and third option before a foster or adoptive family is considered for a child.” Claudia Cabral, ABTH Executive Director

FURTHER INFORMATION

Family for Every Child is a diverse membership network of civil society organisations based around the world.

How We Care is an innovative platform for those working with children and families, across the globe, to share their practice. Our vision is that through the exchange and learning facilitated by How We Care, organisations' family care practice and programming will be strengthened, with improved outcomes for the children they support.

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