



STRENGTHENING FAMILIES

**How family strengthening can
help prevent the unnecessary
separation of children from
their families**

**CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE AND
CENTRAL ASIA**



**SOS CHILDREN'S
VILLAGES**

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*I am happy
because my
mother is with me.*

*10 year-old child
from Romania*

*The biggest
comfort are
the hugs of my
family.*

*14 year-old child from
North Macedonia*

*SOS Children's Villages (2020):
Consultation conducted with
children receiving family
strengthening services and
in residential care.
A summary of findings.*

INTRODUCTION

This document makes the case for the importance of investing in family strengthening in countries across Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia. It has a particular focus on support for families so that any unnecessary separation of children from their families and placement in alternative care can be prevented.

The UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children¹ provide recommendations regarding the prevention of unnecessary placement in care. This includes situations when the fully assessed circumstances of a child reveal there are no protection concerns but support is needed to address other vulnerabilities within the family to ensure the child does remain at home.

The information below has been developed with the aim of being helpful to policy-makers and practitioners from government and civil society, and others working in child protection, social protection, and social services.

1. What is family strengthening?

Family has a diverse meaning for children in different contexts, ranging from one or both parents, extended family members, sibling caregivers, community members, and other caregivers. Different circumstances can result in families facing a range of challenges that may render them particularly vulnerable at certain times. Family strengthening involves identifying and providing effective support to families - especially in times of difficulty. Such support includes access to a range of individualised and tailored services that help build on, and strengthen protective factors, resilience, and self-reliance within families.

In particular, family strengthening can help prevent the escalation of circumstances, which, if not addressed, may lead to children being separated from their families and placed in alternative care.

2. What places families at risk?

Families can become vulnerable due to a combination of risk factors that are direct and indirect consequences of the social, cultural, economic and physical environments in which they live. Examples are few opportunities to earn a living, no affordable housing, conflict and war. These situations are exacerbated when families have limited or no access to support services such as social security, inclusive education, health systems, adequate infrastructure, and supportive social networks. Factors increasing the risk of family breakdown and separation of children from their families vary from one community setting to another. These risk factors may include:



FIGURE 1: Factors increasing the risk of child-family separation

This means, as illustrated in figure 2, family strengthening initiatives should consider and address the impact of micro and macro environments and address factors at an individual, family, community, societal and political level.

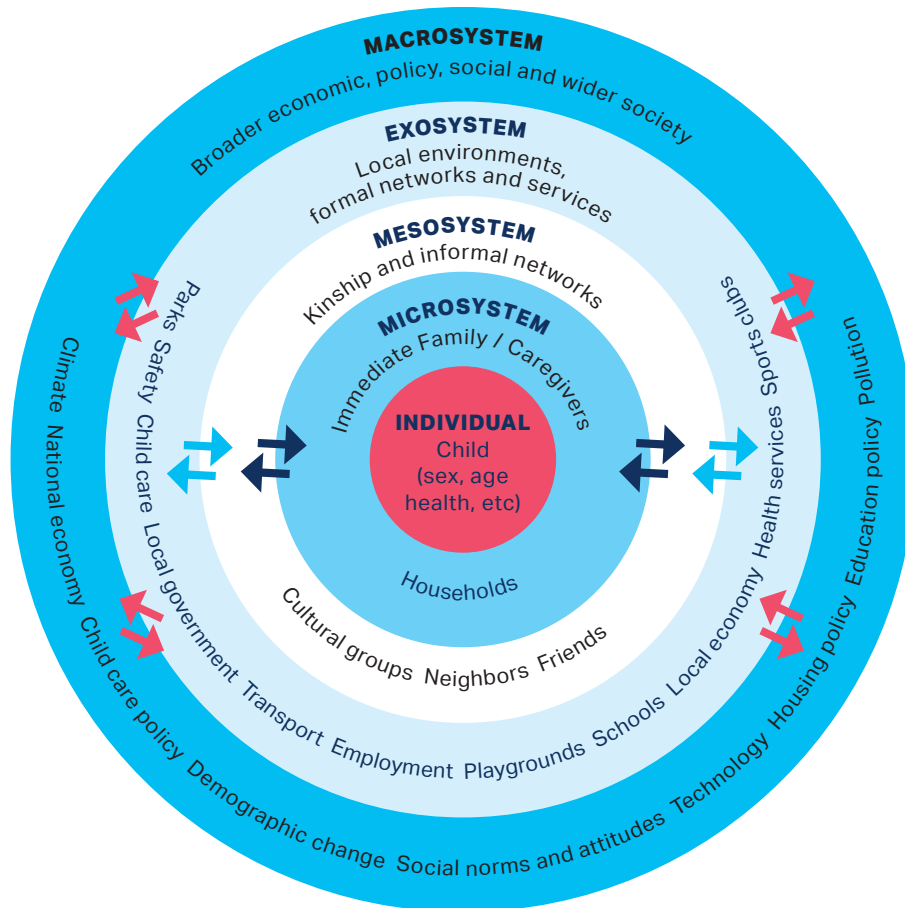


FIGURE 2: Adaptation of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Addressing the environment in which children and their families live might for example, require actions to address:

- Wider contextual factors - including poverty, conflict and war, migration, climate change and natural disasters or, social exclusion, stigma and discrimination as for example, against those with a disability, of a different ethnicity, or having been born out of wedlock.
- Internal family dynamics and circumstances –including physical or mental health of caregivers or children, death of a caregiver, divorce, disability, remarriage, domestic violence, or drug and alcohol abuse.

3. Why is family strengthening important?

Growing up in a safe and caring family environment that provides love, identity, belonging, protection, and stability is essential for the development and well-being of children. For example, research has shown that exposure to abuse and neglect can negatively affect a child's development and that positive attachment relationships within families are crucial for the resilience of children and their positive social, cognitive, emotional and intellectual development. It is widely recognised that children are far more likely to thrive in consistent and protective family and community environments than in any other care setting.

Family strengthening is therefore important in preventing, and addressing, risk factors that may adversely affect a family whilst promoting stability and protection of well-being and the rights of children and other family members. In this manner, strengthening the functioning of families as well as parenting skills can help prevent unnecessary separation of children from their families or, enable their return from alternative care.

In global consultations², when asked what makes them happy, children consistently reiterate the importance of family.

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‘My family makes me happy whenever I am with them, whenever we are together.’

‘My relationship with my family.’

‘What makes me feel happy is that me and my family have survived this far no matter how much we struggle.’

‘I am happy because I am staying with my parents, and they provide almost all the basics needs.’

‘Having a complete family that is healthy and full of love.’

‘The love is in our family and how my mother takes care of me.’

‘One of the things that makes me happy is the family moments with my family.’

SOS Children’s Villages (2020):
Consultation conducted with children
receiving family strengthening services and
in residential care. A summary of findings.

However, if risk factors that threaten family life are not addressed, children will continue to be unnecessarily separated from their families. While up-to-date statistics are hard to come by for most Central Asian countries, latest figures published in 2021 suggest that just over 270,000 children are in formal alternative care across twelve Central and Eastern European Union countries alone.³ Estimates from 2012⁴, put the number of children in formal alternative care across Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia at 1,3 million children. The vast majority of children in alternative care have one or two living parents and it is believed that in many cases, the placement may have been avoidable.⁵ Data from SOS Children’s Villages’ Programme Database (PDB 2)⁶ of 15 countries in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, showed that 7% of children were referred to alternative care due to their family households being severely under-resourced and approximately 15% had been referred because of parent’s alcohol and substance abuse. A further study published by the European Commission in 2020⁷, found that ‘income poverty and other social stress factors remain a major reason for alternative care placements’ and, that children from ‘socially disadvantaged families are seriously overrepresented among those in residential care.’

Issues such as discrimination and stigmatisation also result in children, including those with disabilities or those from ethnic minorities, becoming overrepresented in alternative care in some countries. The previously mentioned 2020 European Commission study⁸, found ‘disproportionate numbers of Roma children in institutions across Europe compared with their share of the population. In Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania for example, 60% of children in institutions are of Roma origin, whereas Roma represent 10% of the total population.’

Additional data from the same study illustrates how children with disabilities are also overrepresented in care in some countries. For example, at the end of 2014, of all those in alternative care in Romania, 30% were children with disabilities. This is in comparison to an average of 6% of all children in Europe with a disability.⁹

Of most concern is the detrimental impact of family separation and placement in care on the development and well-being of children - something that may alter their lives irreparably. Research tells us that care-experienced young people are one

of the most vulnerable groups in society.¹⁰ Many suffer from stigma and discrimination, instability, fear and loneliness. They are highly disadvantaged in comparison to their peers and more likely to experience:

- worse mental health and physical well-being and higher rates of early death
- poorer education qualifications
- higher levels of unemployment
- financial and material poverty
- homelessness
- higher rates of teenage pregnancy
- an increased likelihood of involvement in, or exposure to, criminal activity



In order to help prevent children and young people facing such challenging circumstances and, provide the best possible opportunities for happy, safe and productive lives, it is important that family strengthening helps to achieve the following:¹¹

FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

- Their rights are realised and their well-being and best interests are met
- They are well supported by their caregivers, families and communities
- They have safe, stable and nurturing relationships and are integrated in the community

FOR THE FAMILY

- Caregivers are able to provide quality care to children and young people
- Families have access to essential support services that help meet their children's development needs
- Families have, or are able to access, the financial and material resources required to address their children's needs

FOR THE COMMUNITY

- Communities can provide a protective environment for children and recognise and actively support children and families especially where there is a risk of children losing parental care and/or that of their wider family
- The national child protection system works with other sectors to provide quality family support and, when truly necessary, suitable alternative care services for children at risk of harm

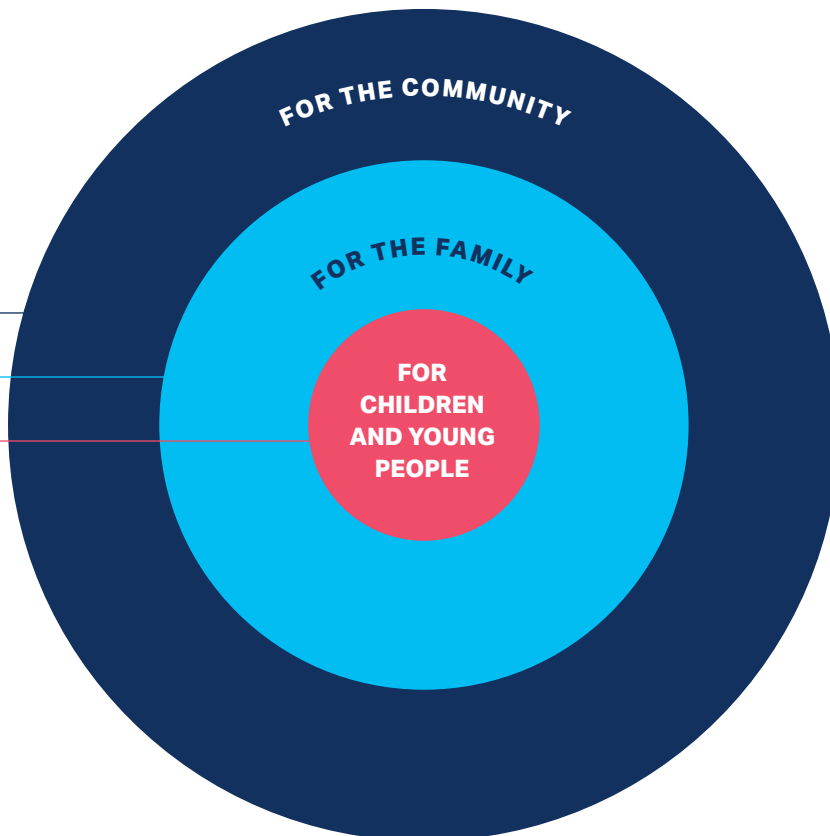


FIGURE 3.
Desired results of family strengthening

4. What are the obligations to support families and prevent family separation?

The importance and role of a family environment in relation to children's development and well-being is enshrined in international human rights law, most notably the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC). The Convention states every child 'should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding' (preamble). In ratifying the Convention, States have not only committed to supporting children in all aspects of their lives, but also their families (Articles 18 and 27). Furthermore, under the 2019 UNGA Resolution, 'the promotion and protection of the rights of children', unanimously adopted by State parties of the UN, it is incumbent on States to put measures in place that prevent unnecessary child-family separation (Article 34).

5. Family strengthening works

Several studies commissioned by SOS Children's Villages¹² that included countries of Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, illustrate the way in which family strengthening can be instrumental in tackling complex problems within families and addressing multidimensional challenges like poverty or social inequality and exclusion. Such interventions have contributed to preventing harm, minimising social isolation, and ultimately preventing the separation of children from their families. SOS Children's Villages' study illustrated the manner in which, between 1 and 5 years after family strengthening interventions had ended, a significant proportion of families were still doing well across a wide range of well-being areas: especially in relation to parent and child relationships, education, health, and social and emotional well-being. SOS Children's Villages' Programme Database (PDB2)¹³ from 16 Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia countries, indicate that only 1% of children whose families received family strengthening services provided by SOS Children's Villages, lost the care of their family.

A further benefit of family strengthening is the potential positive outcome for society as a whole. For example, it can help reduce future government spending in the long-term. This is because family strengthening interventions can not only result in positive social returns for individuals but can increase employment prospects and earnings of families and reduce risk-taking behaviours. In turn, this can save government expenditure on service provision such as social security, justice and health programmes. An analysis¹⁴ of investment of SOS Children's Villages' family strengthening interventions in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kyrgyzstan highlighted a return ranging from 6-9 Euros on top of every Euro invested, thanks to increases in the income of participating families, as well as comparably low costs of the service provision. Furthermore, the need, and thereby cost, of alternative care placements can also be reduced.

6. What are the principles that underpin family strengthening?

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Family strengthening services should be underpinned by principles that are shared by all those working to provide such support. These include being:

- **CHILD CENTRED:** family strengthening requires a clear focus on the wishes, feelings, protection and well-being of children.
- **APPROPRIATE AND TAILORED:** family strengthening services should consider and address the individual needs of each family.
- **RESPONSIVE AND FLEXIBLE:** family strengthening is responsive and flexible in respect of changing needs of children and families, timing of support and context.
- **STRENGTH-BASED:** family strengthening services reflect a strengths-based perspective that is mindful of resilience as a characteristic of many children and families' lives. Programmes aim to strengthen existing abilities and other resources within a family, as opposed to a focus on 'problems' or 'deficits.'
- **RESPECTFUL:** staff and families work together through relationships based on equality and respect and trust.
- **SOCIALLY INCLUSIVE:** services aim to promote social inclusion by addressing such concerns as discrimination due to ethnicity, disability and socio-economic background, etc.
- **INFORMAL NETWORK-FOCUSED:** family strengthening promotes the view that effective interventions are those that strengthen informal support networks, while also strengthening access to formal support.¹⁵

Full and meaningful participation of all family members in decisions that affect their lives is a particularly important principle. Most especially, it is important to recognise children and young people as being experts in their own lives and, the duty to support and facilitate their participation. In this respect, Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child requires State Parties to:

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Assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

Meaningful participation of children and young people means:

- Their individual views and wishes must be carefully listened to and fully taken into account when decisions are being made about their lives.
- They are able to make informed decisions, by receiving information that is appropriate to their age and abilities, and clearly explains all the options available to them. This includes taking specific actions to support the participation of vulnerable, marginalised, and/or disadvantaged groups such as children with disabilities, asylum-seeking and refugee children, and children from ethnic minorities, who may have more restricted opportunities to participate than other children.
- Their participation is not a one-off event, but should be an ongoing process.
- They are given the opportunity to influence decisions about wider policies and practices that may affect them and their peers.

7. What range of services help to strengthen families and prevent separation?

Family strengthening means offering a range of services that help prevent the separation of children from their families. The Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (2009) lay out three levels of prevention in any child welfare system. Family strengthening services can operate on all levels of prevention, but are frequently more focused on levels two and three in a given child welfare system.

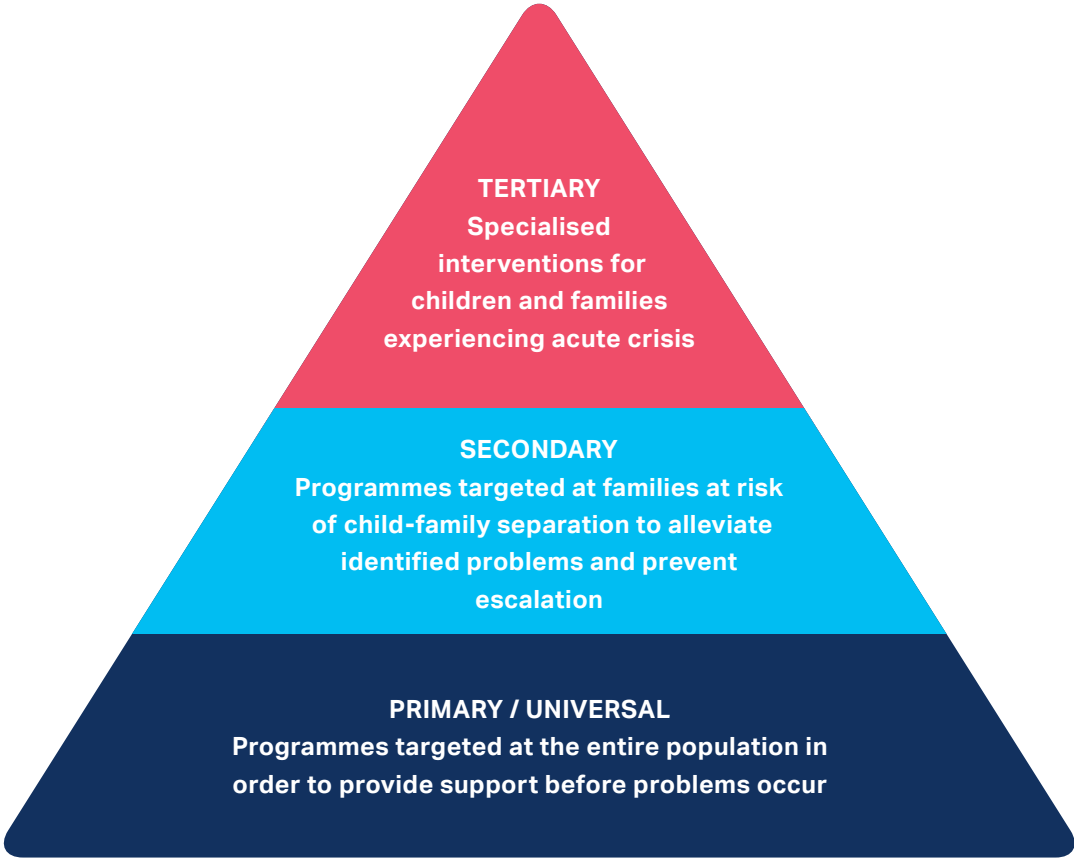


FIGURE 4: The three levels of prevention

The primary/universal level includes general services that are accessible for all children and families, as for example, health and education. These universal social protection services can also help in identifying high-risk families.

LEVEL	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLES
<p>Primary level</p>	<p>Universal services available to all children and their families. Ensuring the populations' access to child-sensitive social protection services, including social assistance, social insurance, as well as services to secure human and child rights more broadly</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maternity grants, child grants • Family allowances, e.g. cash transfers • Universally available parenting and early intervention programmes (e.g., Triple P, Sure Start) • Day care • Universal access to education • Food support, e.g. school feeding programmes • Social housing • Disability grants • Unemployment benefits • Pensions • Health insurance

Families with higher vulnerability require additional support, for example, respite care that gives caregivers of children with disabilities a planned short-term and time-limited break from caring, which can help prevent a crisis situation in the family. Examples of secondary level support can be seen in the table on the next page.



LEVEL	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLES
Secondary level	<p>Families at risk for whom the primary level of prevention has not proved sufficient are provided with targeted family support services. These tailored services can include a range of specialised support services and support to access essential services. These services are often accompanied by home visits carried out by social workers or paraprofessionals</p>	<p>Specialised support services:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Psychological support e.g., psychotherapy, art therapy, speech therapy, counselling, coaching, etc. • Education and training for parents on child development and promoting positive parent-child relationships and child rights • Substance abuse treatment for adults or young people • Mediation and conciliation for situations of conflict in the family e.g. divorce <p>Facilitate access to essential services:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunities for employment and income-generation where required • Access to social assistance and social insurance where required e.g., access to legal identity documents, education, family allowances, social housing
	<p>Support services accessed through community-based centres offering targeted information, referral and specialised services to families at risk</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family counselling centres • One stop shops – where multiple services can be found using a multi-sectoral approach
	<p>Support services offering targeted information, referral and specialised services to a sub-group of families with individual needs such as families with children with disabilities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community-based services for children with disabilities • Respite care, e.g. temporary short-term care perhaps for a week at a time to provide relief for primary caregivers, e.g. when a parent or a child has a disability or mental health difficulties
	<p>Parenting support services aimed at improving how caregivers' approach and execute their role as parents, specifically their parenting knowledge, attitudes, skills, behaviours, and practices</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence-based parenting programmes • Peer-to-peer parental support groups • Individual parenting support

High-risk families need specific and targeted support when their situation has become critical to a child's wellbeing, as for example, addressing a domestic abuse situation. The below table outlines examples of the tertiary level.

LEVEL	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLES
Tertiary level	Specialised services and interventions for children and families experiencing acute crisis. Ensuring that families in acute crisis situations receive specialised and intensive support	Reintegration services for children and families A child's removal from a family was unavoidable in terms of the child's safety and best interest, and specialised support services are offered to promote the return to the family of the child, i.e., their reintegration. Reintegration support services of children in alternative care to their families of origin should be offered as soon as a child is placed in alternative care and include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tailored and specialised support services to the family (see services under secondary level) • Support services to prepare children for their return to their family of origin, e.g., counselling, mentoring, etc.
		Emergency housing and support services for families in various types of crisis situations, e.g. for victims of abuse and violence, (e.g. domestic violence), families at acute risk of separation, homeless families, young parents with and without care experience, mother and baby units, etc.

This multi-layered and tiered approach provides a safety net for families at risk. Family strengthening services, particularly level 2 and level 3, generally employ a case management approach, usually in the form of social work services for families by professionals or paraprofessionals. A case manager aims at building a strong personal relationship with a family, in order to jointly plan a package of responses. Depending on the child welfare system, the role of service providers, and the individual case, the services can be statutory or non-governmental, working in close collaboration with other local support structures, in order to support children and their families' needs. Examples of family strengthening services from level 2 and level 3 of the prevention pyramid in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia can be found on page 16.

8. What components of child protection and family welfare systems need to be in place?

A MULTI-SECTORAL APPROACH AND DELIVERY OF COORDINATED AND INTEGRATED SERVICES

As seen in previous sections, families may be facing multiple and inter-connected challenges. This situation cannot be solved by one department or organisation alone. It needs a multi-sectoral approach whereby different service providers and agencies work together in partnership (see Figure 5). To help achieve this, consideration, especially by governments, should be given to the following:

- Establishment of a **specific government-led working group or committee** with responsibility for **a coordinated approach** to the development and delivery of services for child protection and family welfare.
- Development of a comprehensive national framework of **legislation, policies, strategic plans, regulations and standards** that clearly define the rights of children and their family members and prioritise prevention of family separation and family strengthening. There should be access to services and support for children and families that all relevant stakeholders should abide by and implement.
- **Sufficient funding** and other resources that will guarantee access to, and quality of, family strengthening at a community level.

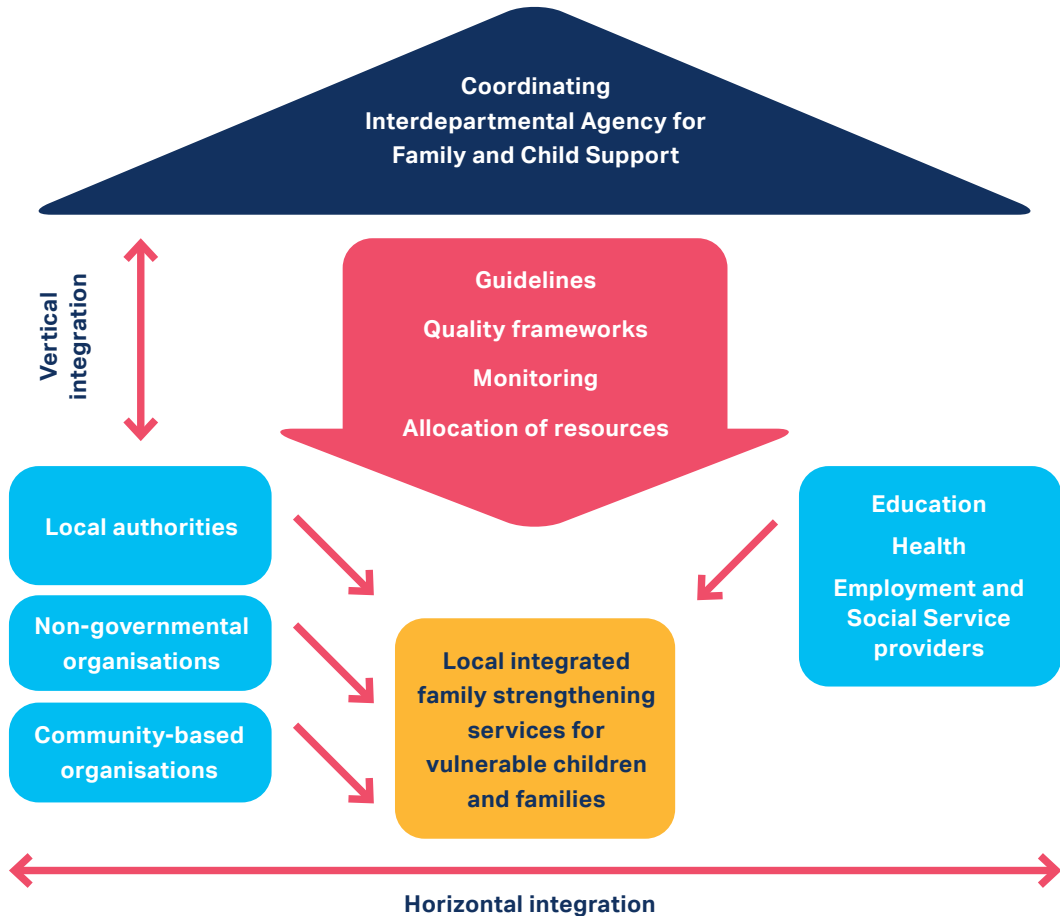


FIGURE 5: A whole-systems approach to integrated family services¹⁶

GATEKEEPING AND CASE MANAGEMENT

The use of an effective **case management system** includes careful decision-making so that only children assessed as being at risk of, or who have been exposed to, harm are placed in alternative care. This is also known as 'gatekeeping'.

Each child and their family should have a **case manager**, often a social worker, who should build a strong trusting relationship with them and have the responsibility to help address their particular situation. However, case management also needs different service providers to work together using shared case management procedures. This includes the shared use of the same tools to jointly **assess** the situation of children and their families. It also means working together to develop **case plans** detailing all the support each family will be offered. Case management requires ongoing **monitoring** to make sure the children and families receive that planned support. In addition, it should include all necessary actions that will allow children who are in alternative care to return to a safe and stable family environment.

As part of these procedures, a set of criteria - 'thresholds' - should be issued that guide social workers, and others, when deciding whether a child is at risk of serious harm or not. The use of these standards will help safeguard against decisions being influenced by any negative beliefs such as those of stigma and discrimination, as for example, against children with disabilities, or those from a different ethnicity.

INVESTING IN THE SOCIAL SERVICES WORKFORCE AND THEIR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The term 'social service workforce' refers to paid and unpaid, governmental and non-governmental professionals and para-professionals. In order to deliver family strengthening, it is necessary to have a well-trained and well-resourced social services workforce. To achieve this, it requires:

- A **national regulatory framework** that gives details of the role and responsibilities of the workforce as well as the competencies and qualifications they should have. It should include a national registration and accreditation process that social workers must participate in.
- Providing ongoing **opportunities for training** that build the necessary skills, knowledge and understanding to deliver family strengthening. This training should extend beyond the social services workforce to those working in health, education, housing, etc. Investment should also be made in higher education institutes so that sustainable improvements can be made by improving the curriculum and the knowledge and skills of trainers. **Volunteers and para-professionals** should also be well-trained, supported and supervised.
- Ensuring the workforce receive excellent support from **qualified supervisors**.
- Providing **adequate salaries and good working conditions** especially for those working in the social sector. This can help increase the social status of this profession, which in turn, can address possible staff shortages by making it a more appealing job.

DATA AND EVIDENCE-INFORMED PROGRAMMING

The design and implementation of family strengthening services and programmes should be based on information that accurately reflects the real challenges families are facing. In other words, it is essential to know who the children and families at risk are, where they are, and in what circumstances they are living. This means:

- **Strengthening national and local data collection systems** that bring together information from different ministries and agencies. This should include specific information about vulnerable children and families at risk such as those with disabilities, migrants and refugees, and children outside of family care.
- **Transparent data sharing** among governmental and non-governmental organisations in a safe, ethical and secure way.
- **Developing monitoring and evaluation systems** to measure the implementation and impact of family strengthening.

AWARENESS-RAISING

Successful family strengthening is not only dependent on the delivery of support services but also the changing of attitudes and customary beliefs that may contribute to families becoming particularly vulnerable. For example, awareness-raising campaigns should provide professionals and members of the public with an understanding of the following:

- Families may **not have control over circumstances** that make them vulnerable – as for example the onset of conflict or natural disasters.
- **Stigma, discrimination and social exclusion** are harmful and contribute to the vulnerability of families.
- Difficult family circumstances such as experiencing poverty, **does not automatically make parents bad or unsafe parents**. Some circumstances can place family members under a great deal of stress and, no matter how hard they try, they may struggle to adequately provide all the care they would want for their children.

- Even though families may be in difficulty, they should not be made to think their children will be better off in alternative care just because they might receive access to more food, clothing and better living conditions for example. **Children want and need the love and support of their own families.**



9. Examples of family strengthening services in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia

The case studies below provide examples of family strengthening services from level 2 and level 3 of the prevention pyramid.

PARENTING SUPPORT SERVICES IN NORTH MACEDONIA



SOS Children's Villages North Macedonia is a registered provider of counselling services for families at risk of child-family separation. This service operates in the municipalities of Shuto Orizari and Gazi Baba and is jointly financed by the municipality and SOS Children's Villages. The service offers support to self-referred families and families referred by the local authorities. As part of the service, the evidence-based parenting skills training; "**Strengthening Families Program (SFP)**" is delivered to caregivers and children with the aim to

improve family relations, parental skills for quality childcare, life skills, social competences, children/young people's behaviour and build a positive family climate.

Elmedina* is the mother of three children: 8-year-old Ramiz, 3-year-old Muhammad and 1-year-old Yulia. She sought help from SOS Children's Villages after the birth of her third child. She experienced severe mental health difficulties, limiting her ability to provide quality care to her children. Elmedina and the children lived with her partner Mehmed, who tried to care for the children but was overwhelmed by the family situation. After several meetings with the counselling team and additional support from other services in the community, the family participated in the Strengthening Families Programme. At the end of the programme, the team counsellors reported that Elmedina and her partner were able to recognize the

developmental needs of the children, respond warmly and affectionately, which was evident in the children's behaviour. "At SOS Children's Villages' Counselling Center, I learned how to be patient with my baby sister and not to fight with my little brother. It is always very important to love and help each other," said 8-year-old Ramiz. "The main aim of the programme was achieved – the children will grow and develop in their home, without fear of being separated. Preventive action is key in building healthy families!" Yelena, the counsellor of the service said. To date the service has contributed to improving parenting skills of 70% of participating families.

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* All names in the case studies have been changed for reasons of safeguarding and data protection.



HOLISTIC FAMILY STRENGTHENING SERVICES TAILORED TO THE SPECIFIC NEEDS OF FAMILIES AT RISK IN LATVIA



SOS Children's Villages Latvia is the only non-governmental organisation in the country with delegated case management responsibilities to support families at risk of child-family separation. Subsidised by the Riga City Council, SOS Children's Villages Latvia provides holistic family strengthening services tailored to the specific needs of families at risk. The intensity of support varies according to the families' needs, for example families living in acute crisis situations receive more specialised and intensive support. The duration of the support is based on the families' needs with an average duration of 2-3 years.

Katrina is the grandmother of 12-year-old Janis, 13-year-old Raymond, and 8-year-old Rudolf. Within a very short time, her two daughters passed away and she became the legal guardian of the three children. Overwhelmed with grief and her new role as a caregiver of three boys, including two teenagers, she sought support from the authorities. After being referred to SOS Children's Villages Latvia, the organisation conducted an assessment to identify the needs and strengths of the family. "Close collaboration with the family is essential" says Ingrid, Katrina's social worker. "Only through close cooperation are we able to empower caregivers and enable them to make choices to improve their life and that of their children". In close cooperation with a multidisciplinary

team of a psychologist and other experts, Katrina received parenting and psychological support and was referred to a health specialist to help her overcome ongoing health issues. Katrina received legal support that enabled her to access state financial support. Janis, Raymond and Rudolf attended psychosocial sessions which helped them to overcome symptoms of bereavement, grief and loss. They participated in recreational and summer activities that gave Katrina a much-needed break. "Thank you for all your help during the most difficult time in my life and for all your understanding and support", said Katrina. "Without your support I am not sure how I would have been able to cope". Since 2017, SOS Children's Villages Latvia has supported more than 400 families at risk of separation.

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SUPPORTING FAMILIES OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES IN RUSSIA



Children with disabilities are one of the groups of children with highest risk of abandonment and institutionalisation in Russia. This is especially the case for children with disabilities living in single-headed households and families experiencing both economic and social pressure, which could in turn decrease their ability to provide the necessary care and development opportunities for their children. Since 2015, SOS Children's Villages Russia has been offering family support services to families with children with disabilities in Moscow, St Petersburg, Orel, Pskov, Murmansk, Vologda, Kazan and Novgorod. Families accessing the services are referred by the local authorities, or are self-referred and receive individualised services through a case management approach. The support targets the entire family and includes facilitating access to community services, psychological, pedagogical, parental and legal support. Opportunities to take respite is also offered and this allows families time to rest, recuperate and self-care which in turn relieves stress and other situations that might lead to diminished care of their children.

Pavel is the father of 7-year-old Lidia and 4-year-old Marina. Marina has multiple disabilities. Prior to living with Pavel, 4-year-old Marina lived with her mother, but after her mother's death, she was placed in a residential infant home, as the authorities were unable to locate Pavel or any other family member. After Pavel was located, in cooperation with the authorities, SOS Children's Villages Russia supported the family during the reintegration process providing a number of support services. Julia, the social worker, put the family in contact with a kindergarten that offered inclusive education for Marina. Seven-year-old Lidia also participated in activities aimed for siblings of children with disabilities. Pavel received legal support

as well as intensive parenting counselling that helped him nurture the development of his two daughters. He also participated in a peer-to-peer support group for families experiencing similar life circumstances. As Pavel was a single father, respite support, i.e. a temporary caregiver for children, was organised so he could have a break from the daily responsibilities of caring for his two daughters. After leaving the programme, he continued attending the peer-to-peer support groups as he developed strong ties with other families facing similar difficulties. To date the programme has successfully supported 188 families who have 288 children with disabilities.

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INCOME-GENERATING ACTIVITIES FOR FAMILIES AT RISK IN KYRGYZSTAN



SOS Children's Villages Kyrgyzstan is an accredited service provider offering family strengthening services to families at risk of child-family separation. Services are offered in Cholponata on the northern coast of lake Issik Kul, in close partnership with the municipality. A multidisciplinary team of psychologist and social workers, in cooperation with community partners, support families to gain access to essential services (e.g. education, nutrition, health) and help caregivers to provide quality care to their children. A key feature of the service is the provision of income-generating activities with the aim of supporting families to secure an adequate income.

Salima is the mother of 4-year-old Amir and 5-year-old Amina. Two years ago she found herself alone and unable to care for her children: "My husband broke up with me over the phone. I was ashamed, did not want to leave the house"- she recalls. Salima's ex-husband moved to another city and did not provide any type of support. Salima found it difficult to care for her two young children and her only source of income, a basic state allowance, was not enough to cover the basic needs of the family. At the beginning of summer 2021, Salima was referred to SOS Children's Villages Family Strengthening Services. Following a comprehensive assessment, Salima and her two children were supported to access a local kindergarten and other community services. Salima received psychological support and participated in a parenting skills training programme. Initially, the service supported Salima by providing her with short-term financial support. In 2022, she received a grant from SOS Children's Village's to develop a small enterprise. Salima opened

a cafeteria and soon began to generate a small profit. Within a year she was able to cover the basic needs of her children and provide quality care to them. "I am so happy with the service and support I received," she said. "The service helped me to take control of my life. I am now a protective mother and a proud owner of a cafeteria!"

To date the service has supported 202 families at risk of child-family separation. 15 % of families supported through income generating projects are now able to generate sufficient income to support their children.

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SHELTERS FOR CAREGIVERS AND CHILDREN VICTIMS AND SURVIVORS OF VIOLENCE IN BELARUS



SOS Children's Villages Belarus, in partnership with the state, is the sole non-governmental organisation in the Republic of Belarus providing targeted shelter services for women and children victims and survivors of domestic violence. In accordance with national laws and bylaws, the shelter provides around-the-clock support and care to women and their children in situations of domestic violence in the districts of Mogilev and Minsk. The services include access to free and safe housing (up to 1 year), psychological, legal, medical, pedagogical support and referral to additional support services in the community. The local authorities refer most caregivers and their children; however, support is also provided to self-referred families. The shelters are situated in the community and offer private and secured rooms for each family with access to common living and kitchen areas. Individualised services through a case management approach are provided to all families with the ultimate objective that mothers are able to provide quality care, safety and love to their children.

Elena grew up with a foster family, where she met the future father of her three children. During her 15-year marriage, she tried to keep harmony in the family, but her partner experienced alcohol problems, was unemployed and was violent towards her. Elena as the sole bread-winner of the family did not have enough time to attend to the needs of the younger children, which led to serious behavioural issues. Unable to cope with the situation, she decided to leave her partner and seek support. SOS Children's Villages professionals conducted a multidisciplinary assessment to identify strengths and needs of the family. Elena and the children received psychological support, specialised developmental support for the younger children and legal counselling. Elena attended

a self-help group for victims and survivors of domestic violence, and the parental skills training programme "Strong parents - Strong children" to help her parenting skills. In cooperation with the local authorities, the family received substantial material support for the renovation of a flat. After six months in the shelter, Elena and her children moved to their restored flat. The youngest child started kindergarten, and the eldest continued his education in college. In time, Elena was able to find a better job. "SOS Children's Villages have been of great help to me and my children. We felt very safe and supported". To date, the shelters have supported 574 children and 336 women with 81% of them being able to resume an autonomous life with their children.

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MOTHER AND BABY UNIT FOR FAMILIES IN A CRISIS SITUATION IN BULGARIA



SOS Children's Villages Bulgaria is a licensed service provider for a mother and baby unit, offering 24-hour support and care to mothers with babies living in crisis situations with a risk of child-family separation. The service was established in close cooperation with the municipality of Gabrovo. Women are referred by the child-protection department or self-refer. The service includes safe accommodation for up to 6 months with the possibility of extension in severe cases. Mothers and their

babies have access to a private room, a dedicated area for babies, and common living and kitchen areas. The unit is well integrated in the community with a number of social services within easy reach. A multidisciplinary team of social workers, psychologist and medical specialist, in cooperation with community partners, provide individualised support including psychological, educational, parenting, legal, and employment support. Special attention is given to young girls who have decided to give birth without the support of their family environment. The service is partly subsidised by the municipality, with SOS Children's Villages Bulgaria covering 50% of the total costs to guarantee quality of the services.

Ivayla and her seven-day-old daughter Teodora were referred to the mother-baby unit by Gabrovo's Social Support Department at the beginning of December 2021. There was a concern about the inadequate living conditions and the quality of care and attention provided to Teodora. Miroslav, Teodora's father, lived in the same household but was usually not present. After referral to the unit and an assessment of the family's situation, individualised support was provided to the family. A multidisciplinary team of professionals supported Ivayla with regular consultations to build her knowledge and capacity on topics related to breastfeeding, diet and nutrition. Medical support and advice was provided to ensure Teodora was healthy and her vaccinations were up to date. Miroslav

visited the unit regularly and received support to build his relationship with Ivayla and Teodora. Parenting skills training was provided to both parents to strengthen existing parenting abilities. Renovation work was carried out on their flat in order to provide a safe home for Teodora and support was provided to Miroslav to find a better job. After 8 months, Ivayla and Teodora moved back to their apartment. To date Ivayla and Miroslav continue to provide quality care to Teodora. Until today the service has successfully supported 435 families at risk of child- family separation.

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SPECIALISED FAMILY STRENGTHENING SERVICES TO SUPPORT THE REINTEGRATION OF CHILDREN IN ALTERNATIVE CARE TO THEIR FAMILIES OF ORIGIN IN ARMENIA



SOS Children's Villages Armenia is providing specialised family strengthening services to support the reintegration of children in alternative care with their families of origin. These services are part of a wider government strategy to reduce the number of children who are unnecessarily placed in alternative care in the country and to de-institutionalise the child protection system. The local child protection department refers the cases for reintegration to the family strengthening service.

Support services are provided to the family of origin and children in alternative care prior to reintegration as well as for up to 5 years after the reintegration. Each case is accompanied using a case management approach, which involves an in-depth assessment of the family situation including the family's willingness, resources and ability to take the children back, and the development of a reunification plan, which is regularly monitored and adapted together with the children and the adult family members. A multidisciplinary team consisting of social workers, psychologists and other specialists provide a range of support services which are tailored to the individual situation of the family. This can range from relationship-building, mediation and conflict resolution, counselling, psychological support, parenting skills training, educational support, medical attention, to material support.

Following the divorce from her husband, Nune, a mother of two siblings - Anna and Michael - was going through a crisis situation. Nune had a difficult relationship with her children, which would often lead to psychological or physical abuse towards them. Nune was suffering from mental health problems and had a weak social support network. The precarious socio-economic condition of the family meant that she had to work and

leave her children unattended. The children, Anna and Michael, whose wellbeing was at acute risk, were placed in a short-term care service run by the state's child assistance centre. Nune's case was referred to the family strengthening service and she and her ex-husband received social work services and individual and group counselling, in order to overcome conflict situations and share childcare responsibilities. "I was



so immersed in financial and livelihood problems that I completely ignored the needs of my children”, confesses Nune. “During the group counselling I met parents facing similar problems. Together we discussed how to overcome them”. Close cooperation with the alternative care facility is of paramount importance to ensure successful reintegration of children with their families, as emphasised by family strengthening coordinator Anna Israelylian: “Specialists of the centre worked with siblings while we worked with the parents. We ensured Nune’s frequent visits to the centre to tighten the

bonds between her and her children.”

Today, Nune, Anna and Michael live together. The children frequently see their father. After school, they attend a local day care centre where they receive support with their homework. The family will continue to receive individual support by the family strengthening team, until their situation is fully stable.

To date, 95% of cases supported have been successful – meaning that most children were able to remain in their families of origin without being referred back into alternative care.

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10. Family strengthening for all

Family strengthening means offering a range of services that help prevent the separation of children from their families. This paper calls on states to put in place provisions for a range of family strengthening services to prevent unnecessary separation of children from their families or, enable their return from alternative care. Families may face multiple challenges due to a combination of risk factors that are direct and indirect consequences of the social, cultural, economic and physical environments in which they live. **These challenges cannot be solved alone by one department or organisation. It needs a multi-sectoral approach** whereby different service providers and agencies work together in partnership. To achieve this, considerations, especially by governments, should be given to:

- a. **Putting in place a coordinated approach** to the development and delivery of child protection and family welfare services (where necessary) across relevant actors;
- b. **The development of a comprehensive national framework of legislation, policies, strategic plans, regulations and standards** that clearly define the rights and services of children and their family members;
- c. **Allocating sufficient funding** and other resources that will guarantee access to, and quality of, basic/universal as well as specialist family strengthening services at the community level.

Family strengthening services are everyone's shared responsibility! As emphasised by children themselves: 'My family makes me happy whenever I am with them, whenever we are together.' Jointly, we can support children to grow up in their family environments and avoid unnecessary separation if we invest in and support family strengthening.



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