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IN FOCUS: KEEPING FAMILIES TOGETHER

Supporting the right of every child to grow up in a nurturing family environment

UNICEF works to prevent the placement of children in institutions in Europe and Central Asia. No child should ever be placed in a large institution. No child should be placed in any alternative care setting simply because the family is poor or finds it difficult to access basic health services, social protection or education.

Given the devastating and potentially life-long impact of institutionalization at an early age, UNICEF advocates for an immediate end to the institutionalization of all children. We also promote and support the development of effective child-care systems that keep families together wherever possible.

As institutional care for children is replaced by community based services, the work to keep families safe and together can be seen as a gateway to the transformation of government social welfare systems across Europe and Central Asia. This will benefit every citizen, but particularly the most vulnerable children and their families.

In Romania, brothers Alex and Emi have been given a second chance at family life. When their mother died, rather than being shut away from society in a large-scale institution, the boys were placed with foster parents Valerica and her husband Gheorghita.

“While, we are being cared for and educated by Uncle Gheorghe and Aunt Valerica, I am happy with how things are,” says 10-year-old Alex.

Across Romania, around 18,500 children now live in 12,000 foster families. This is in marked contrast to the situation in the early 1990s, when most children who were separated from their families were placed in large institutions.

Toward 2030



Target 16.2: End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children.

Challenges

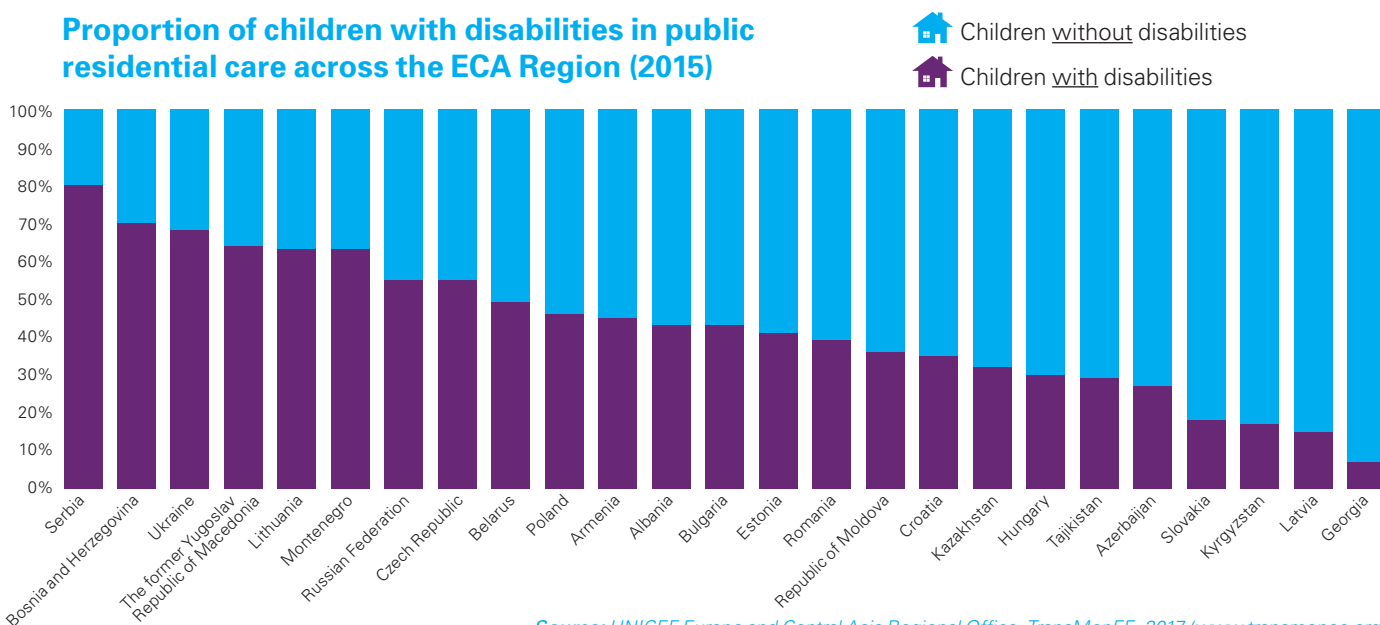
All children have the right to grow up in a supportive and caring family environment. But Europe and Central Asia still has, by far, the highest proportion of children separated from their families worldwide, with 666 children per 100,000 living in residential care – more than five times higher than the global average of 120 children per 100,000. In all, around 664,000 children in this Region are growing up in residential care.

Across the Region, the number of children growing up in large residential institutions has fallen over recent decades. This is a positive shift, but it masks the fact that

too many children remain separated from their families, with the numbers of children in other forms of care, such as foster care, on the rise.

The most vulnerable children are the most likely to be separated from their families, particularly children with disabilities (Figure 1 below). Children from ethnic minorities, refugee and migrant children, and those from the poorest families are vulnerable to the risk of separation from their families. Across the Region, social benefits often miss these children, who are from families most in need.

Proportion of children with disabilities in public residential care across the ECA Region (2015)



Source: UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Regional Office, TransMonEE, 2017 (www.transmonee.org)
*Data for Albania are from 2014; Montenegro, Slovenia from 2013; Lithuania from 2011

The impact of family separation and institutionalization is severe and can last a lifetime. Children placed in institutions are deprived of the social, emotional and intellectual stimulation that are critical for the healthy development of a child's brain. Shut away from mainstream society, children in institutions are particularly vulnerable to violence, neglect and abuse.

In later life, children who have grown up in institutional care are more likely to be excluded from society, more likely to struggle with alcohol and drug abuse, and more likely to experience violence, arrest and imprisonment. So damaging is the long-term impact, that it is often harder to place children who have been institutionalized for long periods of time in family-based alternatives or reunite them with relatives.

There are four key reasons for child institutionalization.

- Deep-rooted social norms fuel institutionalization, particularly for children with disabilities. The persistent stigma around disability reflects public attitudes that may hamper both the return of children to their families and efforts to recruit suitable foster parents.
- Social norms also support a 'medical model' of

disability across the region, with children who have disabilities viewed as 'medically defective.' This feeds into a view that institutions – rather than families – are the best option for them, a view reinforced by a lack of family and community based services for families that include children with disabilities.

- The placement of children in institutions is also linked to economic and social inequality, and a lack of social protection that can help keep families together such as child benefits, community-based family support services, adequate housing, and inclusive education and health care. Institutional care – as well as the possible over-use of alternative care – is often a form of discrimination against minority groups such as Roma children, families caring for children with disabilities, and poor and single parents, whose children are more likely to be removed. Some parents who have no option but to migrate to find work may also rely on institutional care for their children while they are away.
- Child institutionalization signals the lack of support for parents during a child's earliest months of life, with the youngest children far more likely to be removed from families than older children. And the younger the age of the child removed from their family, the greater the potential damage to the child.

Our Aim

From our earliest days in Europe and Central Asia, UNICEF has worked to keep children with their families, starting with intensive work to remove children from large institutions back in the early 1990s.

Today, we push for effective child-care systems that keep families together wherever possible. We focus on ending the institutionalization of all children. We advocate for child care reform that moves from large-scale institutional care towards family and community based alternatives. We also advocate that these reforms are inclusive – that the most vulnerable and hardest-to-reach children are not excluded from positive child care reforms simply because they live with a disability, or hail from a marginalized community, or are affected by migration.

Our Actions

We focus on five key areas, working closely with governments and local organizations to create a positive and enduring impact for children. Throughout all of this work, we ensure children have a voice in decisions that affect their lives. This includes providing adolescents who have experienced different forms of care with opportunities to voice their opinions, concerns, and solutions.

First, we work to prevent family separation through outreach programmes to the most vulnerable families to catch any problems before they escalate, and the development of community-based services to help families stay together. This includes the promotion of home-visiting programmes – an approach that spans child protection, health and nutrition and early childhood development, to give families advice and support and connect them to services where needed. It also includes early intervention to protect children from violence. We aim to ensure that no child is placed in any kind of care - foster family or institutional - simply because their family is poor, or because they cannot access basic services.

Second, we work to ensure that alternative care is as family-based or as family-like as possible. This includes guarding against the unnecessary separation of siblings.

Third, we work to ensure the best interests of every child is met by improving the protection of children who are already in care to protect them against violence, neglect and abuse, getting children back to their families or finding other permanent family-based solutions.

Fourth, our work on child care reform includes advocacy to bring national laws and policies in line with international commitments to keep children with their families, wherever possible. We work with governments to plan the closure of institutions, and scale up inclusive social welfare and family-based care services that reach the most vulnerable children and their families. We also help governments mobilize donor funds to cover the costs of moving children from institutional to family-based care. This includes increasing the number of qualified social workers, expanding services such as day care, training foster parents and setting up small family-style group homes.

Fifth, we work to raise the awareness of policymakers and the general public, on the benefits of keeping families together and prioritizing family-based care.

Fast Facts

Eastern and Central Europe and Central Asia has the world's highest proportion of children separated from their families:

Approximately 664,000 children live in residential care across the Region.

This is 666 children per 100,000 - over 5 times the global average of 120 children per 100,000 - living in residential care.

Child care reforms are having an impact, with marked falls in the rate of children in institutional care in 11 countries in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia between 2005 and 2012 (more than 50 per cent in Moldova; more than 40 per cent in Bulgaria).

Commitments made by every country in Europe and Central Asia to keep families together

Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989

- Article 7: The child has the right, as far as possible, to know and be cared for by his or her parents.
- Article 8: Children have the right to preserve their identities, including family relations.
- Article 9: Children cannot be separated from their parents against their will, unless this is in the best interests of the child.

UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (64/142), 2010

- General principles: The family being the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth, well-being and protection of children, efforts should primarily be directed to enabling the child to remain in or return to the care of his/her parents, or when appropriate, other close family members.

Unfinished Agenda

In addition to foster care, smaller, residential group homes are being established in countries across the Region that are closing large institutions. In these countries, another wave of reform is now needed, focused more firmly on keeping families together or, where this is not possible, on family-based alternatives. In other countries, the priority remains on ending the placement of children in large-scale institutions.

Keeping families together is a chance to build social services that meet the needs of vulnerable children and their families. It is also a shift towards approaches based on empathy and outreach to the most vulnerable. At the heart of reform lies the way in which governments support the most vulnerable families and children.

UNICEF is the leading international organization in the Region with a decades-long experience of working on this issue. With the right resources, we can continue to advocate with policy makers and the general public for the better protection of children, accelerate reforms that keep families together, and ensure the very best standards of care for children within the care system across the region.

“The importance of community-based support cannot be emphasized enough as it is key to keeping families together in a part of the world where, we know all too well, so many children continue to live in institutional care – and often experience multiple deprivations.”

*Afshan Khan, Regional Director,
UNICEF Europe and Central Asia*



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Djordjica and her husband Branislav, wash their three year old daughter and one year old son at their home in Serbia.

The family, who faces a number of challenges, including mild intellectual disabilities in both parents, came to the attention of social services when a doctor noticed that Marko was underweight for his age and Nina had not been bathed in a week. The doctor referred the family to social services, who connected them with Nikica, a family outreach worker, to provide advice on good parenting skills and to help connect the family with social services.

Now Nikolina comes to her mother with a bucket every the morning, wanting to be washed. The family remains together and is receiving the services they need due to the ongoing support of NIKICA.

unicef 
for every child

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